Introduction to Hosea to Micah

## Messages and Revelations from Yahweh

These six prophetic scrolls are “Yahweh’s message which became a reality” to Hosea, Joel, and Micah (Hos. 1:1; Joel 1:1; Mic. 1:1), “The words of Amos… which he saw” (Amos 1:1), “the vision of Obadiah” (Obad. 1), and a story about how “Yahweh’s message became a reality to Jonah.” They are messages and visions or revelations from Yahweh. Along with Nahum to Malachi, the six scrolls form “The Twelve,” a collection that are individually much shorter than Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, though together are of similar length to Ezekiel. In Latin they are the *Prophetes Minores* and thus in English the “Minor” Prophets, which could suggest that they are “lesser” prophets than Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. But more likely the Latin term simply designates them the “shorter” prophets; there is nothing “minor” about them. Together they have in common with the “Major Prophets” (the longer ones) that they

* speak in the name of Yahweh as the one God, the God of grace and truth
* presuppose that Israel is his special people
* challenge Israel about its commitment to him and to one another
* warn it that he intends to act against it (with a distinctive stress on “Yahweh’s Day”)
* make promises to it about its destiny
* set Yahweh’s involvement with Israel in the context of his lordship over all the nations.

Sometime in the Second Temple period The Twelve gained recognition by the Judahite community, along with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, as having ongoing significance for the people of God and as placing an ongoing demand upon it. The reference in Sirach which I quote in the epigraph to this book, which dates from soon after 200 BC, is the first extant reference to The Twelve as in effect authoritative scriptures; we have no information on the process whereby they came to have this position. Such a status is then presupposed by Qumran documents, which include copies of them and commentaries on some of them. The community of people who came to believe in Jesus also acknowledged the position of these twelve scrolls. They are among the Scriptures from before Jesus’s day that have an extraordinary capacity to instruct Jews and Gentiles about the faith in Jesus that brought us salvation, a capacity that issues from the fact that they were and are “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:14-17). These believers in Jesus recognized that “God spoke to our ancestors of old in many different ways through the prophets” (Heb. 1:1); Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah are part of what resulted from that speaking. We are not in a position to examine or evaluate the basis upon which they and the rest of the First Testament came to be the Scriptures. If we are people who believe in Jesus, we accept them because he did.

The six scrolls make some extraordinary statements. A couple from each:

Go, get yourself a whorish woman and whorish children (Hos. 1:2)

How can I give you over, Ephraim?[[1]](#footnote-1) (Hos. 11:8)

Yahweh your God is gracious and compassionate and relenting about anything bad (Joel 2:13)

Beat your hoes into swords (Joel 3:10)

Listen to this message, you cows of the Bashan (Amos 4:1)

Have recourse to me and live (Amos 5:4)

I’m making you little among the nations (Obad. 2)

The reign will be Yahweh’s (Obad. 21)

When I cried for help from She’ol’s belly, you listened to my voice (Jon. 3:2)

My dying is good, better than my life (Jon. 4:3)

“Don’t preach,” they preach (Mic. 2:6)

Be circumspect in walking with your God (Mic. 6:8)

Western Christians like some of these lines, and there are other lines from these Prophets that they like. There are also some that they don’t like, and way more that they’re not aware of, which is odd given that the New Testament recognizes that they are all words that God spoke or words that God thought it was a good idea to have in his book. “The claim to be the people of God today means to listen to these words… and to be willing to look at present moral conduct and attitudes from that perspective.”[[2]](#footnote-2) There are commentaries on these scrolls that are prejudiced in favor of accepting the perspective of their text and ones that are open to being critical of their text.[[3]](#footnote-3) I work with the first prejudice; readers who wish to see critique of the text will have to look elsewhere.

**Hosea to Micah and the New Testament**

The New Testament includes a number of direct quotations from Hosea to Micah and many other allusions or reflections of their language. The following are the quotations and the clearest allusions (as listed in the marginal notes of the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament).

Hosea 1:6, 9 1 Peter 2:10

1:10; 2:1, 23. Rom. 9:25-26.

6:6 Matt. 9:13; 12:7

9:7 Luke 21:22

10:8 Luke 23:30; Rev. 6:16

10:12 2 Cor. 9:10

11:1 Matt. 2:15

13:14 1 Cor. 15:55

14:2 Heb. 13:15

Joel 1:6; 2:4-5 Rev. 9:7-9

2:10-11 Rev. 6:17; 9:2

2:28-32 Acts 2:17-21; Rev. 6:12; Rom. 10:13

3:13 [4:13] Mark 14:29; Rev. 14:15, 18-19

3:18 [4:18] Rev. 22:1

Amos 3:7 Rev. 10:7

5:25-27 Acts 7:42-43

9:11-12 Acts 15:16-17

Jonah 1:17 Matt. 12:39-41; 16:1-4; Luke 11:29-32

Micah 5:2 [1] Matt. 2:6; John 7:42

7:6 Matt. 10:21, 35, 36; Mark 13:12; Luke 12:53

7:20 Luke 1:55

These quotations and allusions issue from the New Testament’s treating the Prophets as a resource in connection with questions it needs to think about. They thus reflect its agenda, and they often reflect the Holy Spirit’s inspiring its writers to find significance in the prophetic text that is different from what he was communicating to the people of God when he originally inspired the text . The first passages in the list, for instance, use Hosea’s declarations about Yahweh’s intentions for Ephraim to illumine God’s intentions regarding a people of God drawn from all the nations. In this commentary we will consider the quotations in the order they arise in the text of the six scrolls, but we will mostly focus on what the Holy Spirit was originally seeking to communicate to Israel and on the ongoing theological significance of that message for us. Related to this focus is the fact that I shall refer to the Jewish Scriptures as the First Testament rather than the Old Testament—since this latter title (which came into use some centuries after Jesus) can give the impression that these Scriptures are antiquated, out of date, and superseded.

Christians often assume that the key to understanding the relationship of the First Testament to Jesus and to the New Testament is that the First Testament makes promises that are fulfilled in Jesus, and our six Prophets do include one promise of a coming ruler for the throne of David (Micah 5:2 [1]). But the fact that the Hebrew word *māšîaḥ* doesn’t appear in the six scrolls is a sign that their focus lies elsewhere. The promise of the Messiah is not the key to understanding their relationship with Jesus and with the New Testament.

Their own focus lies on a declaration that God is going to bring catastrophic disaster upon the people of God because of its wrongdoing, and upon the nations as a whole. There are two crucial qualifications to this declaration. On one hand, whereas one can sometimes get the impression that the disaster means the actual end of the people of God, this impression is evidently false, in that they also talk about disaster not being total and not being final. And on the other hand, whereas one can sometimes get the impression that the disaster is inevitable, this impression is also evidently false, in that they also indicate that a nation or city that turns back to God will find that God relents of the intention to bring calamity.

The theological background to the declaration and to its qualifications lies in the fact that Yahweh is on one hand the God of grace and truth, of compassion and forgiveness, but also on the other hand is the God who attends to wrongdoing and does not simply remit punishment. Those descriptions go back to Exodus 34:6-7. Our prophets reflect them, while adding that he can relent of bringing disaster (Hos. 2:19-20 [21-22]; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Mic. 7:18-20), as Exodus 32:1-14 also declared. The New Testament presupposes this theology and has nothing new to add to it, but in telling the story of Jesus it reports an epoch-making embodiment of it. The many and varied ways in which God spoke through the Prophets are now complemented, not by some new truths but by a new embodiment of the truth in his Son (Heb. 1:1).

The New Testament presupposes that God indeed brought calamity on his people, and that it still lives with the aftermath. But it declares that he is now restoring it, bringing about the fulfilment of the promises of restoration that the Prophets proclaim. Yet it also declares that the pattern whereby God also acts in judgment upon his people is by no means finished, either for the Jewish people or for the expanded version of the people of God comprised by Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus. The New Testament further indicates that the catastrophe the Prophets announce for worldly powers is also the designated fate of the superpower of its day, which will fall as did preceding superpowers in fulfillment of the Prophets’ warnings.

## The Focus and the Setting

Individual Prophets among our six may overtly focus on Ephraim (Hosea, Amos) or on Judah (Joel, Micah) or on the other nations in Israel’s world (Obadiah, Jonah). But they may also relate to one of those other foci: Hosea and Amos begin with references to Judah’s kings and subsequently say something about Judah, Micah says something about Ephraim, Obadiah and Jonah bring a message to Judah, and Joel and Amos say something about other nations.

One might see The Twelve as snapshots or collections of snapshots from a family album, which later members of the family have put in a roughly chronological order and in three groups.

* To start from the end, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi come from the Second Temple period, when Babylon has fallen to Persia; the Haggai and Zechariah scrolls incorporate dates in the Persian era.
* Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah seem all to come from the seventh century, when Assyria is about to fall to Babylon.
* Of the first six, Hosea, Amos, and Micah begin with references to eighth-century kings; all three prophets thus belong to the period of Assyrian strength. Their scrolls come in an order that links with their respective introductory notes (the actual chronological questions are more complicated, and chronologically Amos comes first). Hosea 1:1 gives Hosea the widest time frame, the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah in Judah. Amos 1:1 refers only to Uzziah, while Micah 1:1 refers only to Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. These introductory notes also connect Hosea and Amos with the time of Jeroboam II as king of Ephraim; Jonah, too, lived in his reign (see 2 Kings 14:25), which puts him chronologically before Amos and Hosea.
* Neither Joel nor Obadiah provide dates; perhaps (like Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi) they lived in a time when there were no Judahite kings to date by. Joel may have found a place between Hosea and Amos on the assumption that it belongs in the eighth century and/or to give prominence to its stress on Yahweh’s Day and/or because of its closing reference to Yahweh dwelling in Zion, which is where Amos starts. Obadiah’s preoccupation with Edom fits the context of the Babylonian or Persian period when Edom was a special problem for Judah, but it may follow Amos because Amos almost closes with a promise that David’s nation is going to possess Edom.[[4]](#footnote-4)
* The Septuagint’s order puts the three dated scrolls (Hosea, Amos, Micah) together, then the three undated ones (Joel, Obadiah, Jonah).[[5]](#footnote-5)
* It has been argued that the Qumran manuscript of the Twelve Prophets locates Jonah at the end, after Malachi.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Not being given the date of Joel and Jonah doesn’t hinder our understanding of them, and Obadiah provides as much indication of its background as we need to understand it. With Hosea, Amos, and Micah, things are different. After declaring that they are messages from Yahweh, these three scrolls locate their prophets historically during the time of a sequence of Judahite and Ephraimite kings in the eighth century, the time from Uzziah to Hezekiah in Judah and from Jeroboam ben Joash to the fall of Samaria in Ephraim. Their locating them in this way implies that their messages need to be understood against these backgrounds, on which we gain further information from the contents of the scrolls themselves, from 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, from Assyrian records, and from archeological discoveries in Canaan. Both 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles report the reigns of the four Judahite kings. Second Kings also reports the long and successful reign of Jeroboam II, while noting that he continued in the wrong ways of Jeroboam I. It goes on to report the reigns of Zekariah, Shallum, Menakem, Peqahiah, Peqah, and Ephraim’s last king, Hoshea. These kings are not named in our prophets, but Hosea refers to events involving them. Second Chronicles ignores Ephraim and its kings but Ezra-Nehemiah, which in some sense continues the story in Chronicles, gives us information about the early Persian period which provides background to Joel, Obadiah, and Jonah.

## Messages from God in a Political Context

The Hosea, Amos, and Micah scrolls follow declarations that their words come from Yahweh with lists of the kings in their day. Part of the background to the prophets’ work lies in its political context. An outline of the history at the background of Hosea, Amos, and Micah is as follows (though there are varying opinions about the dates).[[7]](#footnote-7)

In 825 BC, the Assyrian king Shalmanezer III erected an inscription with bas-relief images (the “Black Obelisk”) which portrays an Ephraimite king paying homage to him and listing the things he brought to Shalmanezer.[[8]](#footnote-8) But subsequently, the reign of Jeroboam II (about 790 to 750) experienced freedom from international pressure, national strength, and internal political stability. It would thus also be a time of prosperity. It was the last such period in Ephraim. The next thirty years saw weakness and invasion as Assyria took increasing interest in the Levant and specifically in Ephraim with its location on the trade routes from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean and Egypt. Internally, they saw instability and turbulence that can be indicated simply by listing the kings:

* Zechariah ben Jeroboam (750, assassinated)
* Shallum ben Jabesh, the assassin (750, assassinated)
* Menahem ben Gadi, the assassin (750-740)

In his time Tiglath-pileser intervened in Ephraim and imposed tribute in return for supporting Menahem

* Pekahiah ben Menahem (740-738, assassinated)
* Pekah ben Remaliah, the assassin, supported by fifty people from Gilead in Transjordan (738-732, assassinated)

He allied with Aram (Syria) against Assyria and tried to force Judah to join the alliance, but Assyria under Tiglath-pileser invaded Ephraim, annexed much of northern Ephraim and Gilead, and transported many of their people.

* Hoshea ben Elah, the assassin (732-723, deposed)

He stopped paying Assyria tribute and sought alliance with Egypt; the next Assyrian king, Shalmanezer, invaded Ephraim, and he or his successor Sargon II took Samaria and transported many Ephraimites.

Judah had an easier time through this period, particularly during the reigns of Uzziah and Jotham. Jerusalem was off the main trade routes in the mountains. But in Ahaz’s reign Assyrian pressure on Ephraim brought trouble to Judah as a side effect. Rather than join Ephraim and Aram in resisting Assyria, Judah sought Assyrian support in resisting Ephraim and Aram and thus became an Assyrian minion, which saved it from Ephraim’s fate.

Archeological discoveries indicate that the late eighth century saw Jerusalem grow considerably in population, apparently through the arrival of refugees from the conflicts and invasions of Ephraim’s last years.[[9]](#footnote-9) But in Hezekiah’s reign Judah reneged on its subordination to Assyria and sought Egyptian support as it asserted its independence. This encouraged rather than held back Assyrian intervention in Judah, which issued in terrible devastation in the Judahite lowlands, documented by Sennacherib’s bas-reliefs of the capture of Lakish. But Sennacherib did not take Jerusalem itself.

Over the next two or three centuries in Judah, during the periods of Assyrian supremacy and decline, of Babylonian power, and of Persian control, the messages of Hosea, Amos, and Micah were no doubt being studied and perhaps amplified, but the scrolls make no concrete reference to events during those periods. Likewise, the messages in Joel were being proclaimed and the story of Jonah was being told in Judah, in at least the latter part of this period. Only Obadiah makes something like definite reference to the situation in Judah as it alludes to the occupation of much Judahite territory by Edom from the sixth century onwards (see the introduction to Obadiah below).

## Messages from God in a Religious and Societal Context

Hosea, Amos, and Micah also presuppose religious and societal contexts, which are interwoven with each other and with the political contexts. While the Prophets are committed to the fact that Yahweh is the only God and that Israel should be committed to acknowledging him as such, the prophetic scrolls, works such as 1 and 2 Kings, and archeological discoveries make clear that Ephraim in particular is not so committed. Perhaps it would be news to many people that they were supposed to be committed to Yahweh as the only God. On one hand, the traditional religions of the region assumed that there were a number of gods. No doubt some Ephraimite prophets, priests, kings, and other political leaders did accept an exclusive commitment to Yahweh, but the interweaving of politics and religion likely made it hard for Ephraim to enter into political alliances with other nations without engaging in rites that involved formal acknowledgment of their gods (see further the introduction to Hosea below).

Even insofar as Ephraim made that formal acknowledgment, the Prophets critiqued another aspect of its worship, which involved the use of aids to worship such as images of Yahweh. To put it in terms of the Decalogue, even if they kept the first commandment, they failed to keep the second. The use of actual images of Yahweh, especially at the sanctuaries at Beth-el and Dan, was accompanied by the use of other aids to worship of the kind that the Torah declares they should have destroyed on entering the country and not imitated. Such aids to worship easily encouraged a view of Yahweh that made him only too like other deities.

Worship in Ephraim was necessarily not confined to the two sanctuaries in the far north and the deep south, which people could not easily visit more than once or twice a year. In or near their towns and villages they had shrines which constituted more practicable sites for worship—the *bamot*, traditionally “high places.” In Judah, there is less indication of people seeking the help of other deities, but some indication of worship that contravened the second commandment. And the problem with the existence of the shrines in Ephraim and in Judah is that they could easily become hard to distinguish from a Canaanite shrine with regard to whose help people sought there, and how they did so.

The societal context lying behind much of the polemic in Hosea, Amos, and Micah implies a parallel clash between the kind of society the Torah envisages and the kind that has come to exist in Ephraim and in Judah. The Torah’s ideal is a society that is village-based, with clans and extended families possessing the land and farming it, largely on a subsistence basis but with the implicit hope that they will produce enough surplus to barter for needs that they cannot fulfill for themselves, such as the acquisition of iron tools and jewelry.

Two related factors lie behind the malfunctioning of this system which the Prophets presuppose. One is the development of the state and the need to fund its life, its administration, its infrastructure projects, and its defense budget, with the associated need to pay imperial taxes when the Assyrians become overlords of Ephraim and then of Judah. The development of the state sees much land come under state control with ordinary people working as the administration’s servants. It also issues in the need to collect taxes and thus trim off some of the production of family farms, whether or not it is actually a surplus.

The other factor is that some families manage to get control of the land of other families and thus to become large-scale landowners. At best, the people who had formerly possessed their allocation of land become servants on what was once their own farm. One factor in this development will be the economic failure of a family’s farm, through its inefficiency or laziness or bad luck. Another will be fraud on the part of the more astute landowners. The large-scale landowners thus get themselves into a position whereby they can live well, while their servants end up living poorly.

## How a Prophet’s Words Got Known

In a modern Western context, Jews and Christians get to know the messages of the Prophets in at least two ways. Many may hear parts of the scrolls read out in worship; a few read them and study them as written texts. In the Second Temple period, something similar would be true. On one hand, synagogue lectionaries developed during this era, and the second reading in synagogue worship came from the Prophets. On the other, references from Qumran and from the New Testament indicate the practice of scholarly study. Convenient evidence surfaces in connection with Micah in the form of the Micah expositions (“pesharim”) from Qumran (1QpMic and 4QpMic) and in the way Jewish scholars respond to Herod’s question about where the Messiah would be born (Matt. 2:6).

The two dynamics (hearing and studying) correspond to data within the scrolls themselves. On one hand, the prophets are portrayed as something like preachers: see e.g., Amos 7:10-17; Jonah; the frequent exhortation to “listen”; and the prophets’ attention to rhetoric. Such data within these six scrolls corresponds to the picture one gets extensively from Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and also from Isaiah, Haggai, and Zechariah. The scrolls hint at three places where the prophets might seek to gain a hearing for these messages. Hosea and Amos refer a number of times to the Ephraimite capital, Samaria, and refer also to Beth-el, the sanctuary-town nearer Samaria, to which Amos makes more reference and which was where he got into trouble (Amos 7:1-17). One can picture Hosea preaching in the square in front of the town gate in Samaria when people were gathering there, and Amos preaching in the sanctuary courtyard in Beth-el when people were assembled for a festival there. One can similarly imagine Joel, Obadiah, and Micah preaching in Jerusalem in the square or in the temple courtyards on such occasions—and one can imagine a storyteller telling Jonah’s story there.

On the other hand, the scrolls manifest logical structuring, and the messages they preserve are mostly expressed in poetry, much of whose effect would not come across in a one-time oral presentation in the midst of the crowd in the temple courtyards or the city square. These characteristics imply the expectation of study. Jeremiah 26:17-19 suggests that at least some of the contents of the Micah scroll were available for study to “the elders of the country” in Jeremiah’s day and/or that the notion of appealing to them would make sense to people listening to this story about Jeremiah when it was being told a few decades later. Likewise 1 Kings 22:28 has Micah’s near-namesake Micaiah “quoting” Micah’s opening words as they appear in the scroll, “Listen, you peoples, all of them” (Mic. 1:2).

Another passage within Micah points in a different but complementary direction. While we have no accounts of prophets writing down individual messages, Micah 4:1-3 may imply that they did. The verses are a variant of a message that also comes in Isaiah 2:2-4; it may have derived from Micah or from Isaiah or from another prophet. It anyway apparently existed in a form that was stable enough to have found its way into both the Micah and the Isaiah scrolls, though malleable enough to be adapted by both—either in writing or in oral form. It wouldn’t be surprising if many individual messages from prophets such as Micah, Hosea, Amos, and Joel, messages of varying lengths and in stable but adaptable form, were in circulation in Ephraim and Judah.

## How Prophets Spoke

One might then imagine the generation of the scrolls issuing from a four-stage process.

First, the prophets delivered oral messages of varying length, from a couple of lines to the extensive dimensions of the pronouncement beginning in Amos 1:3 and stretching well into chapter 2.

The bulk of this preaching by the prophets took poetic form. Prophetic poetry is less regular in form than the poetry of Proverbs and Job, while the Psalms come in between. Perhaps it was more orally-composed and less deliberate. Most of the material in the six scrolls divides naturally into lines averaging about six words, though the difference between the way Hebrew and English work means that they involve more words in English: “A lion has roared” (Amos 3:8), for instance, is only two words in Hebrew. A poetic line then commonly divides into two halves or cola; along with the characteristic length of lines, this arrangement is a further formal sign that the material is verse rather than prose. Many such “bicola” manifest “synthetic parallelism” whereby the second colon restates the first in some way while also nuancing it or adding to it. In other bicola the second colon expands on or completes the first. Hebrew syntax in poetry also differs from syntax in prose. It makes less use of the little words that facilitate immediate communication in prose, such as the object marker, the relative particle, and the definite article; and it makes less use of *waw*-consecutive.

These characteristics apply less to Hosea, Amos, and Micah than to the other three scrolls. Indeed, the prophets themselves may not have thought thus in terms of a difference between what we call poetry and what we call prose, which might link with the way it’s sometimes hard to be sure whether to lay out the material as prose or as poetry; there is prosaic poetry and poetic prose. And Hebrew manuscripts do not make such a distinction. While the average length of a line may be about six words, each colon can be two, three, or four words—or rather, two, three, or four stresses, because the Masoretic Hebrew text can hyphenate two words so that between them they have only one stress. So a line can comprise between four and eight Hebrew words or stresses. Very occasionally a colon may comprise only one stress or as many as five stresses, which is then also a mark of emphasis (or a point at which I am tempted to rework MT’s punctuation). Lines with short (two-stress) cola, especially in their second half, often suggest anguish or “agitation”[[10]](#footnote-10) rather than joy. Phrases such as “(Yahweh has said this” commonly don’t count within the meter.

Some lines divide into three cola (they are tricola); such lines characteristically come at significant points in the text such as the beginning and end of subsections or other points of emphasis. MT’s verse divisions imply the existence of many other tricola, but my suspicious hermeneutic questions many of them and I look to see whether the verse division is open to being reworked (see e.g., Hos. 2:10-11 [12-13]). Some lines are not self-contained and/or their cola do not really relate to each other because the line’s main relationship is with the previous line (e.g., Joel 1:11, 18): in other words, the two lines form a quadricolon—or more than four lines may belong together in this way (e.g., Hos. 2:2-3 [4-5]; and a number of times in Amos). And sometimes parallelism works between lines rather than between cola.

Positive features of the prophets’ diction are their fondness for paronomasia, which suggests links between things that might not seem to be linked, and their concentrated use of imagery (see further the section on “Poetry and Rhetoric in Hosea,” below), on which they focus more than they do on formal features such as rhythm and the syntactical features we have noted. Prophets can speak as Yahweh’s mouthpiece and therefore speak in the first person as people uttering what “I,” Yahweh, say—because their words are Yahweh’s. But they also know that they stand between Yahweh and their people and they can thus speak of Yahweh in the third person, as “he,” and they can move easily between the two ways of speaking. It might also be natural to speak of Yahweh as “he” when the prophet is consciously formulating something, rather than having a sense of receiving actual words from Yahweh. Conversely, prophets move easily between addressing Ephraim or Judah as “you” and speaking about Ephraim or Judah in the third person (e.g., Hos. 2:6 [8]), and move easily between speaking of (e.g.) Ephraim or Samaria in the singular (as he, it, or she), and in the plural (as they). Yet further, like other First Testament characters they can refer to themselves in the third person, which allows some distancing and a broader angle of perception than obtains when one speaks in the first person.[[11]](#footnote-11) It is particularly common for kings to speak in this way, as an aspect of royal style, and it is thus natural for Yahweh to do so (e.g., Hos. 2:20 [22]; 3:1; 4:10). All these different ways of speaking have different rhetorical effects. Ancient and modern translations often rework the text to make the prophets more consistent, but another significance of the differences is that they are also an example of the way “fractures of syntax… are metaphors for the disintegration of the order of the world.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

## How Words Spoken Became a Message Written

Stage one in the generation of a prophetic scroll, then, is that prophets speak and they or their disciples remember their individual messages and/or put individual messages into writing. Stage two is that the prophet’s collected words find their way into writing.

The Latter Prophets are often called the Writing Prophets, but they were preachers and they do not refer to writing. Our six scrolls do not tell us how and why they came into being, but Isaiah 8:16 and Jeremiah 36 describe how Isaiah and Jeremiah took action to have their messages transcribed by secretaries. Like Jeremiah 26 with its mention of Micah, the enthralling and entertaining story in Jeremiah 36 may not be a simple transcript of an event, but as a story it provided an account that apparently would not seem historically outrageous. It provides a way of thinking about how Amos, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Micah could have commissioned the compilation of a scroll containing their messages; the eighth century may have been the time when writing scrolls as resources for teaching (as opposed to writing inscriptions or letters or records) began in Israel.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Further, it wouldn’t be surprising if this process involved some structuring, rethinking, reformulation, and expansion of the prophets’ messages (as opposed to a simple transcription in random or in chronological order), and that this is what we have in Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Micah. All five manifest some structure and some correlation of sayings that might originally have been separate. We can picture Hosea and Amos reaching a point where (not least in light of the rejection of their preaching) they dictated a collection of their messages in a coherent order to a friendly Ephraimite scribe. Like Isaiah and Jeremiah, they would take their action in order to get their message into writing against the day when Yahweh did what they had said (whereby it and they would be vindicated), and/or in order to fix it in writing and thereby make its fulfillment even more certain, and/or in order to allow the written form of the message to confront the people it concerned. Such a move would make it possible for a record of their message to reach Jerusalem, the fall of Samaria having vindicated much of their message.

The nearest we get to an explicit indication of a prophet’s involvement in bringing one of these six scrolls into being is the resumptive one-word expression “so I said” in Micah 3:1. The Micah scroll gives the impression that much of Micah’s messages comprised a smallish number of the “verses” into which they were eventually divided, but that they were then assembled not in random order but in related sequences. Micah 3 links onto Micah 2 and Micah’s “so I said” looks like his link between these two chapters in the scroll.[[14]](#footnote-14) The process whereby spoken words became a written message dictated to disciples could provide a further aspect of the explanation for some of the scrolls’ jerkiness in moving between first, second, and third person, and between singular and plural, between a manner of speech when addressing Ephraim or Judah and a different manner of speech when speaking about Ephraim or Judah to disciples and potential readers.

There’s no reason to think that the scrolls include all the messages that each of these six prophets ever delivered or all the messages God ever gave them. It seems unlikely that (say) Obadiah simply delivered his one message and that was it. Nor is there any reason to think that the preaching that lies behind these short scrolls took place over only a short period, whereas the preaching of the “Major Prophets” extended over decades. Maybe (say) Micah preached more than Isaiah. What we have in each prophetic scroll is a collection of the material that this prophet and/or his disciples thought was really important for the future and not just for the moment, and that the community recognized as such.

## How Words Written Became a Message Affirmed

The opening words in this commentary are not mine; they are a preface by its editors, the same preface will appear in all the volumes in the series to which my book belongs. In Hosea, the opening words are, “Yahweh’s message that came to Hosea son of Be’eri in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam son of Joash king of Israel.” Prefaces expressed in similar words come at the beginning of Amos and Micah (and Isaiah and Jeremiah). The similarity plus the third-person form of the prefaces suggest they are like the preface to my book, the work of the people who “published” the scrolls, who had a set way of introducing one.

In scholarly parlance these people are known as the Deuteronomists, but that’s just a way of saying we don’t know who they were. One could call them the scrolls’ editors, but editors may not care much about or to agree with what they edit, and these were people who believed that the prophets’ words were important, not just for their own day but for the people of God in the future. They wanted to make sure that their message didn’t get lost. They were more like these prophets’ disciples (Isa. 8:16 uses that word), even if they didn’t live in the prophets’ own day. In the prefaces they give guidance to the scrolls’ potential readers about how to read them, guidance about hermeneutics. To call them “disciples” is to give a name to a role rather than to identify a group of people.

It was presumably through the taking of the collected messages of Hosea and Amos to Jerusalem that they gained prefaces beginning with references to *Judahite* kings. Taking the messages to Judah implies the awareness that they were of significance beyond the particular context of their delivery in Ephraim, and it evidently carried conviction in Judah. The process whereby the Holy Spirit inspired the scrolls then included enabling the prophets or their disciples to see the implications of their message for Judah and to incorporate some references to those implications. That awareness of their significance received further expression in the scrolls’ finding a place in Judah’s collection of materials that it hung onto as messages from Yahweh that were of continuing importance—in other words, the collection that came to be called the Scriptures.

In Hosea 1, Amos 7, and Jonah (and in Isaiah, and much more extensively in Jeremiah) the scrolls speak at some length in the third person about their prophets. Such passages indicate a more substantial way in which their disciples were involved in the generation of the scrolls. My working hypothesis is that Hosea 1—3 as a unit issued from the work of Hosea’s disciples and were designed to introduce the main body of Hosea’s own message in a way that highlighted and developed its promissory aspect, perhaps in light of the message’s vindication by the fall of Samaria, while chapters 4—14 are more or less the result of Hosea’s own having his work put into writing. Amos 7 includes a story about Amos apparently told by a disciple, as well as Amos’s own accounts of dealings Yahweh had with him, both of which complement the messages that his scroll also preserves. Jonah simply comprises a story about the prophet, though it is paradoxical to call its author a disciple of the prophet.

While Hosea, Amos, Jonah, and Micah themselves belong to the eighth century, this fact carries no necessary implications regarding the time when the scrolls bearing their names came into existence. The Isaiah scroll indicates that a prophet’s disciples could continue a process of reformulation and expansion over several centuries; the original compiling of a prophet’s work might be only the beginning of such a process. I would see (some of) Isaiah’s disciples also as prophets, extending his message by adding further prophecies inspired by his as well as providing information about him. One function of such prophetic work would be to make more explicit that the broadly threatening nature of the prophet’s words was not the end of what Yahweh had to say; the fulfillment of the threats opened up the possibility of Yahweh acting to restore his people. Something similar might be true about the shorter prophets, though there are not the concrete indications of it that appear in the Isaiah scroll.

## How Messages Affirmed Became the Scrolls We Know

Western scholarship over the past century and a half has put much energy into seeking to trace the process whereby the scrolls developed. In the case of Hosea, Amos, and Micah this might involve the expansion of the original collection of their work in the time of Josiah at the end of the seventh century, after the fall of Jerusalem in the sixth century, and then in the Persian period. Different processes (perhaps less complex) can be envisaged for Joel, Obadiah, and Jonah. But one scholar has commented that the “ongoing scholarly debate on the emergence and composition of the book of Micah… has not yet reached a consensus,”[[15]](#footnote-15) and that comment could also be made about the other scrolls. Further, the word “yet” is a giveaway. There is no reason to think there ever will be a consensus.

One reason is that the focus on tracing the development of the material and linking it with different historical contexts comes from an agenda that emerged from modernity. That fact in itself is not a fault; agenda from readers’ contexts can be a way in to a text’s own agenda. But in this case the modern agenda obscures as much as it illumines. These six scrolls do not overtly draw attention to contexts other than those of the prophet whose name appears in them. Whereas the Isaiah scroll incorporates messages referring to the fall of Jerusalem as an event long past and to the Medo-Persian king Cyrus as a figure of the present and thus more or less explicitly declaring that they come from a time later than Isaiah ben Amoz, there are no comparable data in our six scrolls. Scholarly study has often focused on discovering which parts of the scrolls are “authentic,”[[16]](#footnote-16) by which it means do they go back to the prophet whose name appears at the beginning of the book. And if it were possible, discovering the answer to that question would be an interesting exercise. It is not possible; but it is the scroll as a whole that is authentic.

If our own context gives us a primary concern with historical questions, we are free to search the text for answers to those questions, but we then resemble people reading Shakespeare for information on English history, who miss the plays’ own agenda. And focusing on questions about the process seems to have issued only in academic debate and in conclusions that do not carry conviction with other people, not in answers; the scholar who makes that observation about Micah continues, “I therefore feel free to offer my personal view.” The differences of opinion about the process reflect differences in personality and faith on the part of scholars (e.g., a more conservative or a more adventurous instinct), and changes in scholarly fashion, more than hard evidence within the scrolls.

Further, while some references to Judah in Hosea and Amos may be glosses to an earlier version of these scrolls, there seems no advantage in hypothesizing a more thoroughgoing process of redaction. In this commentary, then, I submit such theories to Occam’s Razor and deal with the text as we have it. Which is not so different from the stance implicitly commended by a scholar who especially emphasizes the creative work on the scrolls undertaken in the Persian period but who nevertheless observes that Micah 1:1, in introducing its scroll to its readers, “asks them to associate the entire book with the figure of Micah the Morashtite.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Micah 1:1 “places *readers* of the entire book in the reigns of the kings that are cited therein.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The point can be extended to the other five scrolls. The Hosea, Amos, and Micah scrolls invite their readers to imagine themselves hearing their messages as the preaching of these prophets in Ephraim in the time of Jeroboam or in Judah in the time of Uzziah, a little in the way in which a movie such as *Bridge of Spies* invites moviegoers to imagine themselves in the United States and in Germany during the Cold War. While I shall occasionally note points where the prophets’ disciples may have been inspired to expand on or reapply their master’s work, I shall mostly follow that invitation.

A related consideration applies to the Twelve Prophets as a collection. The heading “The Twelve” both holds these shorter prophets together and recognizes that they are distinct entities, each with its own preface. Possibly the expanding of the words of the prophets who are named in the prefaces has generated further links between the scrolls and contributed to the Twelve becoming one unit. But here, too, tracing the process involves building hypotheses on limited data, and the eventual compilers of each scroll (e.g., of Hosea or Joel) have presented it as a discrete unit over against the material out of which it was compiled and over against the other scrolls with which it came to be associated.[[19]](#footnote-19) I shall pay more attention to the individual scrolls than to possible links between them.

**The Text[[20]](#footnote-20)**

The oldest complete or nearly-complete Hebrew manuscripts of the Twelve Prophets are the three Masoretic manuscripts from about the tenth century A.D., the Cairo, Aleppo, and Leningrad Codices (but Aleppo lacks Amos 8:12—Micah 5:1), which are named after the cities where they were long kept. I refer to them as MT (C), MT (A), and MT (L). There are much earlier fragments of these Prophets among the Qumran scrolls, 4QXII or 4QMinor Prophets,[[21]](#footnote-21) and a fragmentary manuscript of the Twelve Prophets (including much of Joel to Micah) dating from the Second Jewish Revolt in 132-35, found among discoveries from Wadi Murabba‘at, ten miles south of Qumran, and known as Mur88.[[22]](#footnote-22) From the same period as the Qumran scrolls there is also a fragmentary manuscript of a Greek translation of the Twelve, found a little further south again in Nahal (Wadi) Hever, and known as 8HevXIIgr.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Oddly, we have manuscripts of the Septuagint translation of the Twelve Prophets into Greek that are older than the Masoretic Hebrew codices. From about 350 come the Sinai Codex (so named because it was long kept in St Catherine’s Monastery in Sinai) and the Vatican Codex (so called because it is in the Vatican Library), and from about 450 the Alexandrian Codex (so called because it was long kept in Alexandria, traditionally the location where the translation was made). We also have a manuscript of Jerome’s translation into Latin, the Vulgate, which is older than the Masoretic manuscripts. The oldest manuscripts of Targum Jonathan, the Aramaic translation of the Prophets, are not as old as the Masoretic manuscripts.

It is customary to treat the Masoretic Text as the starting point for translating and studying the First Testament, and I have followed that custom, though sometimes it is hard to make sense of the Masoretic Text, especially in Hosea, also in Micah. Jerome comments that you need the Holy Spirit’s aid in interpreting all the prophets, but especially Hosea.[[24]](#footnote-24) Possibly its text has suffered more from accidental alteration, or possibly its difficulties reflect its background in Ephraim with its distinctive dialect rather than in Judah,[[25]](#footnote-25) or possibly they indicate that the prophet-poet Hosea spoke more allusively than (say) his contemporary Amos who also worked in Ephraim but was himself a Judahite.

It seems hazardous to assume both that the difficulties in the text do result from accidental alteration but also that we are in a position not only to identify such alterations but also to correct them. I remind my students that ten percent of what I say is wrong; the trouble is, I don't know which ten percent—but that it's likely not to be the ten percent that they think. Perhaps ten percent (or more likely one per cent) of the Masoretes’ work is wrong, but I don’t think we can be confident about identifying it correctly, and putting right what we think is wrong is likely to generate a text that is further away from (say) Hosea than the one we start with.[[26]](#footnote-26) I therefore nearly always work with the text as it appears in MT, though I note many interesting renderings in the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and the Targum.

## Resources for Text and Interpretation

I like the account J. Gerald Janzen once gave of how he goes about interpretation, formulated in connection with Hosea:

I characteristically try to approach a text with no specific posture or strategy, but with a sort of general alert emptiness… in which the sum total of what I know about things sleeps in readiness within me. The general intention is to allow the text to set the agenda by raising questions or posing issues or opening perspectives through the specific elements of the text which claim my special interest. When such interest has been awakened, I pursue it in whatever fashion, or with whatever combination of resources of understanding, seems to offer promise of illuminating the text. The control on such a pursuit is, of course, the text itself.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Our resources for understanding how Jews interpreted the Prophets begin with references in the Qumran documents and in the New Testament, and then with the interpretive translation in the Targum of the Prophets, which comes from sometime after the fall of Jerusalem—though its origins “remain shrouded in heavy mist.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

The period during which the Septuagint codices were copied was also the era of the first surviving Christian commentaries, and I have used the commentaries on the Twelve Prophets by Jerome the great translator,[[29]](#footnote-29) Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrus, and Cyril of Alexandria, who were all born in the fourth century and died in the fifth, as well as occasionally noting references to the six prophets in other church fathers. Their writings are also significant for their quotations from the other Greek translations of the First Testament dating from the second century, Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus, which (like the Septuagint) are interesting for the way they interpret passages as well as for text-critical purposes.

The period during which the Masoretic codices were copied is also the era from which come the commentaries by Jewish scholars such as Rashi (R. Shlomo Yitzhaki), Abraham Ibn Ezra, and David Qimchi (Radak), which were immortalized through being included in *Miqrā’ôt gədôlôt*, the “Rabbinic Bible”—the Hebrew Bible plus the Targum and such classic commentaries.

The sixteenth-century Reformation was a next creative era of commentary-making, and I have consulted the works of Martin Luther and John Calvin on the six prophets as well as some of the Puritans. I also refer to the work of some modern commentators, to some modern translations (especially NRSV, JPSV, TNIV), and to the treatment of the six prophets in Karl Barth.

Books commonly refer to the difference between the chapter divisions in the Hebrew Bible and in English Bibles, by which they mean the chapter divisions in printed Hebrew Bibles which are a variant on the system in printed English Bibles and do not go back to the Masoretes. The Masoretes themselves divide the text by adding P or S at the end of what we might call sections and subsections, and I have paid attention to these markers in seeking to discern divisions in the text. The Masoretic divisions are much older than the Masoretes’ own work; equivalent markers appear in Qumran manuscripts in the form of a space left open at the end of a line followed by a new line (hence P stands for petuhah, “open”) and a space in the middle of a line followed by the continuing text (hence S stands for setumah, “closed”).

1. Both the Prophets and modern writers often refer to the northern kingdom as “Israel,” which is correct as it was its regular designation as a nation but confusing because that name also applies to the people of God as a whole and is sometimes used this way in Hosea to Micah. But in this passage and elsewhere, Hosea also refers to the northern kingdom as “Ephraim,” which balances the name “Judah” for the southern kingdom; in both cases the name of a dominant clan out of the twelve clans became the name for the nation as a whole. I shall follow Hosea’s example here, and keep the name “Israel” for the people of God as a whole. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A comment about Amos by Carroll, *Contexts for Amos*, 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. the discussion in David Clines, “Metacommentating Amos,” in *Interested Parties* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 76-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. James D. Nogalski suggests many more links between Amos 9 and Obadiah (“Not Just Another Nation,” in Albertz and others (eds.), *Perspectives on the Formation of the Book of the Twelve*, 89-107. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See further e.g., Marvin A. Sweeney, “Sequence and Interpretation in the Book of the Twelve,” in Nogalski/Sweeney (eds.), *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*, 49-64; “Synchronic and Diachronic Concerns in Reading the Book of the Twelve Prophets,” in Albertz and others (eds.), *Perspectives on the Formation of the Book of the Twelve*, 21-34 (25-30). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For discussion of this possibility, see e.g., Philippe Guillaume, “The Unlikely Malachi-Jonah Sequence (4QXIIa),” *JHS* 7/15 (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See e.g., Finkelstein, *Forgotten Kingdom*, 129-39. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *ANET*, 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See e.g., Finkelstein, *Forgotten Kingdom*, 154-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Andersen/Freedman, *Micah*, 564. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. Barbara Leung Lai, *Through the “I”-Window* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Landy, *Beauty and the Enigma*, 281. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See e.g., Finkelstein, *Forgotten Kingdom*, 162-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. Wolff, *Micah*, 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Bob Becking, “Micah in Neo-Assyrian Light,” in Gordon/Barstad (eds.), *“Thus Speaks Ishtar of Arbela,”*  111-28 (111). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See e.g., Soggin’s comment on Amos 3:1b (*Amos*, 55) and Andersen/Freedman’s comment on Micah 2:12-13 (*Micah*, 332). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ben Zvi, *Micah*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Fretheim, *Reading Hosea-Micah*, 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See e.g. the arguments of Ehud Ben Zvi, “Twelve Prophetic Books or ‘The Twelve,’” in J. W. Watts and P. R. House (eds.), *Forming Prophetic Literature* (John D. W. Watts Festschrift; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, )125-56, and Francis Landy, “Three Sides of a Coin,” *JHS* 10/11 (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (3rd ed., revised and expanded by A. A. Fischer; Grand Rapids/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Fuller, “The Twelve.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See J. T. Milik, “Rouleau des Douze Prophètes,” in Benoit and others, *Les Grottes de Murabba‘ât*, 181-205; Russell, “The Twelve.” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Tov and others, *The Greek Minor Prophets Scroll from Nahal Hever (8HevXIIgr)*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *In Osee prophetam*, PL 25, column 815a (cf. Jeremias, *Hosea*, 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See e.g., Macintosh*, Hosea*, liii-lxi, 585-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Thomas E. McComiskey, “Hos 9:13 and the Integrity of the Masoretic Tradition in the Prophecy of Hosea,” *JETS* 33 (1990): 155-60 (155-56). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. “Metaphor and Reality in Hosea 11,” *Semeia* 24 (1982): 7-44 (7-8). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cathcart/Gordon, *Targum of the Minor Prophets*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The first half of these have now been translated into English (*Commentary on the Twelve Prophets Volume 1* [Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 2016]). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)