

7. Shaping the Message

Anyone with an important message to communicate must be concerned with the 'form' in which he expresses himself. A sermon is different from a lecture, though sometimes the two may overlap. A political speech is different again while a 'call to the nation' in time of emergency will take yet another form. Within each kind of address we use certain well established forms. 'We must ...' or 'Let us ...' introduce the exhortation which is in frequent use in sermons or in calls to action. 'I quote ...' would be out of place in such addresses and clearly belongs to the lecture. 'The ... party want to do so-and-so, but if they do then ...' betrays the Aunt Sally technique of the political speech. 'Have you heard the one about ...' belongs not so much to public address as to private small talk and conversation. So oral communication tends to have set forms and this is true of prophecy. If we are not to misunderstand the prophet's words we need to recognize what form he is using and what effect this has on the meaning of the words. To take more modern examples again, 'Queen Anne's dead' means one thing if spoken in a history lesson and quite another if used in conversation or small talk. Or take a phrase like, 'I hate you'; its meaning will vary according to whether it is being used in the course of an argument – 'quarrel form' – or as a statement of fact – 'narrative form' – or in fun – 'teasing form'.

Perhaps the most important thing that can be said about the prophets in this respect is that they spoke in a kind of rhythmic speech which is best categorized as poetry. True, it is not poetry in the strictly formal sense in which we understand the term; it is not composed poetry with strict metre and it has no rhyme. Yet the form is poetic⁴⁸ and therefore to understand the message of the prophets properly we have to pay attention to the characteristics of poetry.⁴⁹ First of all poetry is not concerned with precision of meaning in the way that a

philosophical treatise is. It seeks to present issues sharply in black and white rather than argue a case and allow for a grey area somewhere between the two. Consequently its language is often vivid and unrestrained, making much use of metaphor and vivid imagery of various kinds. Further it seeks a personal reaction from the reader or hearer, a response not only in terms of emotion but also in terms of action. All these factors have to be borne in mind when interpreting Hebrew prophecy.

To help to achieve these aims Hebrew poetry very often uses 'parallelism'.⁵⁰ By this is meant that the poet, or prophet, expresses what he wants to say in one line of speech and then reinforces it with another. The second line may simply repeat in a different way the idea of the first, the two lines being wholly synonymous.

Israel does not know,
my people does not understand. (Is. 1:3)

Alternatively the second may in some way extend the meaning of the first

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son (Hos. 11:1)

Such parallelism is by no means always used, but when it is the form adds something almost indefinable to the saying. We may say it lends to it a greater intensity. Certainly to omit one member in translation is to reduce the impact of the saying.

Several 'forms' can be distinguished in the prophetic books. First there are songs. A good example of this may be found in Isaiah 5:1-7, which is a wedding song. During the wedding celebration period it was customary for the 'best man' or bridegroom's friend to convey messages between the bride and the groom. This, then, is a bridegroom's song sung by the best man. It is a song about a husbandman and his vineyard and these are frequently metaphors for bridegroom and bride. Towards the end of the poem the husbandman/bridegroom is identified with Yahweh and the vineyard/bride is identified with Israel. How telling this song would be. Perhaps Isaiah sang it at the time of the Feast of Ingathering when the grapes were gathered from the vine. His hearers would under-

stand the first metaphor. They would recognize it as a song about a bridegroom who prepared his bride for love in every way possible and the bride who still, in spite of all, remained frigid. What they would not be prepared for would be the further meaning explained by the prophet in v. 7. That would soon turn their joyful appreciation into angry opposition. On top of that there is a fine example of word play in v. 7 which cannot adequately be brought out in translation. The words for 'justice' and 'bloodshed' are almost identical (*mišpaṭ* and *mišpaḥ*); so are the words for 'righteousness' and 'cry' (*šedakah* and *še'akah*). Some fine examples of mocking songs are also found in Isaiah 14:4ff. and Isaiah 47.

In the earlier days of Israel her struggles against the Canaanites and other surrounding peoples was regarded as a kind of holy war and certain phrases became 'war cries', to be used as Israel prepared for battle. The prophets sometimes use these, but with a somewhat different meaning. The war cries are used ironically, as if to say let Israel prepare for battle, but the victory will not be hers. Yahweh has decreed that defeat is certain. So Jeremiah 4:5, Hosea 5:8, 8:1. Let the trumpet call bring Israel together but this time for defeat.

Many of the prophetic sayings are borrowed from the sphere of worship. For instance Amos 4:4 begins with the invitation 'come!' We should imagine the prophet at the sanctuary at Bethel calling the people to worship as the priests or other members of the cultic staff used to do, 'Come to Bethel'. But then, with astonishing daring, he adds 'and transgress!' Seen like this there could be no more telling condemnation of the worship which was being offered at Bethel. Cf. also Amos 5:4. In the anonymous prophet of the exile similar forms are used more positively, as we might expect of one whose task is to promise restoration and not destruction. 'Sing to the LORD a new song' (Is. 42:10) reminds us at once of some of the psalms, especially Psalms 96 and 98. In worship sometimes lamentation was made about the circumstances in which the psalmist stood. Frequently these begin with 'How . . .' or 'How long . . .?' Examples of this form may be found in Isaiah 1:21, Amos 5:2f., Micah 1:8, 7:1ff., Jeremiah 8:18.

Again language from the law courts is also borrowed and used by the prophets, their prophecies being set out in the

form of legal disputations. In Isaiah 3:13 Yahweh the judge is issuing his verdict against the elders and princes of his people, while in Hosea 12:2 he brings his indictment against Israel, the grounds on which he will punish her. Recognition of this form in Isaiah 1:18 helps to elucidate the meaning. Again Yahweh is the judge, but in this case he does not simply dispense judgement. Instead he invites the defendants to a discussion to see whether a way can be found to avoid punishing them. So he offers them the opportunity of forgiveness. Though their sins are like scarlet they may (better than 'shall' as in RSV) become white as snow, they may become like wool. Then in the following verses he sets out the options which are before the people, obedience or rebellion and their consequences.

From time to time the whole assembly of Israel met together. Deuteronomy gives us a picture of such a gathering in chapter 4 when the leader of the people 'calls upon heaven and earth to witness' against their behaviour (v. 26). In the same way the prophet can take up this form of speech and address Israel or Judah calling upon heaven and earth, that is, upon everything, to bear witness to the sin of the people (Is. 1:3, Jer. 6:19).

Already in chapter 4 we have mentioned the 'messenger formula' *This is what the Lord has said*, and its significance. Von Rad,⁵¹ quoting Köhler's figures, says that the phrase occurs 14 times in Amos, 44 in Isaiah, 157 in Jeremiah, 125 in Ezekiel, once in Obadiah, Micah and Nahum, three times in Haggai and nine times in Zechariah. The only books in which it is not found are those of Hosea, Joel, Habakkuk and Zephaniah. So it can be seen how prevalent this form is. Sometimes, though by no means always, the message is closed by the phrase 'says Yahweh'. The form indicates the relationship which the prophet understood himself to have with Yahweh. He was his messenger entrusted with his word. Numbers 22:15f. illustrates exactly how this form was used. Balak the king of Moab sent his princes as messengers to Balaam. When they arrived they did not transpose Balak's words into reported speech but, beginning with the messenger formula, 'This is what Balak said', they went on to report the exact words he had spoken to them. So, as we have seen, the

prophet's words, when introduced in this way, are the very words he believed Yahweh had spoken to him.

On many occasions the message introduced by the messenger formula begins with 'Therefore ...' and so becomes the second half of a larger unit of speech, the first part being the prophet's own assessment of the situation and the second the word of Yahweh which is now dropped like a stone into a pond, setting up ripples which will affect those to whom it is addressed. (Is. 1:21-26, Amos 1:1-3, Jer. 23:1-2, Mic. 2:1-3.) But this combination of a description of the situation by the prophet followed by a threat from Yahweh is often found without the messenger formula as well, the first part being introduced by 'Woe ...' and the second by 'therefore'. These two parts are known as the 'diatribe' and the 'threat' (Is. 5:11-13, Amos 6:4-7, Micah 2:1-3).⁵² The form is not absolutely rigid and fixed but can be varied if the prophet so wishes. Sometimes there is no 'Woe' at the beginning of the diatribe (Is. 9:13). The threat may be introduced by a strong oath instead of 'therefore' (Is. 5:8-10) or by 'Behold ...' (Nahum 3:5) or by a simple 'because ...' (Hab. 2:6ff.). Nor should we be justified in thinking that if one part occurs without the other something has been lost from the text. Certainly the prophets used these various existing forms of speech, but they were not rigidly bound by them and we must always leave room for their own oratorical skill to modify and even break down the forms they use.

This analysis of forms is not simply a sterile academic exercise; it is an important tool for the understanding of the prophets' message. Once it is recognized that the message is in poetry or that it owes its form to various cultural and religious contexts, the danger of a too superficial interpretation is avoided. It involves a much deeper search for the meaning but this is rewarded by a fuller and more profound understanding of the prophets and their message.