

## Robert Vannoy, Foundations of Biblical Prophecy, Lecture 3

### Companies of the Prophets

#### F. 2. Companies of Prophets called “Sons of the Prophets”

Last week we were discussing Roman numeral I and we were down to F. Roman numeral I was “General remarks about Prophetism in ancient Israel” and in section F. we were talking about “The Bands or Companies of Prophets” that are referred to in the Old Testament. We had looked at some of those references under F. 1. and I had just introduced that 2. members of these companies came to be called “sons of the prophets,” “*bene hanebiim*.” I think I mentioned right at the end of the hour that “sons” there certainly does not mean “children of the prophets.” The term “son,” *ben* in Hebrew, sometimes means “male descendant,” sometimes it means a longer term “descendant.” Jesus Christ is the son of David, the son of Abraham. But it also can mean “member of the group.” It’s under that last meaning that we should understand this expression “sons of the prophets”.

##### a. “Son” as a Member of a Group

###### 1. Example: Neh. 12:28

I want to give you a couple illustrations of that usage of the term “son.” If you looked at Nehemiah 12:28, you read there (I’m reading from the NIV), “The singers also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem—from the villages of the Netophathites” and so on. If you look at the Hebrew text, it’s *bene*. It’s “sons of the singers”. Now it seems in the context quite clear what it is. The reference there is to members of the choir. The people that belong to a certain group, the singers. So I think the NIV has translated that correctly—“the singers,” not “the sons of the singers.”

###### 2. Example: Psalm 18:44

If you look at Psalm 18:45, verse 44 in the English translation, the NIV says for Psalm 18:44, “As soon as they hear me, they obey me;” and then the next word, “foreigners cringe before me.” Foreigners are strangers. The Hebrew is *bene*—“sons of strangers.” It’s not the “children of the strangers” or “the children

of the foreigners” who cringe before me, it’s those who belong to that category or group. “Foreigners cringe before me. They all lose heart; they come trembling from their strongholds.” See in verse 43 it said, “People I did not know are subject to me. As soon as they hear me, they obey me; foreigners cringe before me.”

### 3. Example: Ps 72:4

Look at Psalm 72:4. Now here’s an interesting situation because you get into an interpretive question. NIV here translates Psalm 72:4, “He (that is, the king) will defend the afflicted among the people.” The king would maintain justice. He would judge the people and so forth. “He will defend the afflicted among the people.” But then the next phrase in the NIV says, “and save the children of the needy.” The Hebrew there is *bene* the “children” of the needy. Now NIV here has translated it “children of the needy.” In other words, the king “will defend the afflicted among the people, he will save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor.” What is the proper translation there? Is the king going to save “the children of the needy,” or is he going to save the needy? Are the children of the needy the people who belong to that category of people: the needy.

If you look at the parallelism, you see the first phrase is “he will defend the afflicted among the people.” It seems to me on the basis of parallelism it would be justified here to conclude “he will defend the afflicted among the people and save the needy.” Not the “children of the needy,” but the needy themselves. But you could debate that. The NIV, New American Standard, and King James all translate “children of the needy.” The Revised Standard Version translates it “needy.” “He will save the needy.” The Jewish Publication Society Version (JPS version) says, “Let him champion the lowly among the people, deliver the needy folk”—not “the children of the needy folk” but “the needy folk”—“and crush those who wrong them.” Now I’m inclined to take this as another illustration of that use of *bene* as a “member of a group.”

### 4. Example: 2 Chr. 25:13

I have one other reference I want to give you. It's 2 Chronicles 25:13. There you read in the NIV, "Meanwhile the troops that Amaziah had sent back and had not allowed to take part in the war raided Judean towns from Samaria to Beth Horon." The translation "troops" if you look at the Hebrew there it's *ubene*. It's "the sons of the troop," or "the sons of the band, band or troop." Now, I don't think that Amaziah sent their children or sons of the soldiers back, he sent the troops back, people that were in that category identified with that group.

So there are a fair number of examples of that kind of a use of "son," and I think then by analogy when you come across this expression "sons of the prophets," *bene hanebiim*, that we should understand the reference to be to those people who belong to the category or class of people known as prophets. Not children of the prophets; they are prophets but they're identified as a group of prophets. It's for that reason the NIV, when it comes to that expression "sons of the prophets," often translates it as "a company of prophets."

#### F. 3. The Term or Expression "School of the Prophets"

##### a. No support for "school"

Let's go on to 3. The term or expression "school of the prophets"—we're talking now about these groups of prophets. It used to be advocated—much more so than it is today, although the idea is still around today—that the groups of prophets should be understood as something like an educational institution, where you had this group of people who were identified as prophets come to be taught various subjects, probably in connection with understanding their role and how that should be interpreted and propagated. People could be instructed by one of the great teachers like Samuel, Elijah, or Elisha, and then go out and teach other people what they had learned. So you had a school of the prophets. That's a very old idea in connection with these groups of the prophets. It appears in the Targums which were Aramaic translations that were more paraphrases than translations of the Hebrew of the Old Testament.

But I don't think there's any really clear basis or evidence that these groups

were some sort of educational kind of a situation. The term itself “school of the prophets” is not a biblical expression. It occurs nowhere in the Old Testament. I don’t think there’s anything to indicate that prophets received some kind of special training or education in order to perform their task or function. Certainly that’s true with respect to the great writing prophets or canonical prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, etc. We never read that any kind of special instruction or education was necessary in order for those great prophets to perform their tasks.

It seems much more the case that these were people who were called out of their normal work by God—Amos was a herdsman, a gatherer of sycamore figs—called out of that normal profession and commissioned by the Lord to give His message to the people. As we noted last week the Lord said, “I will put my word in your mouth. You go; proclaim all that I give you to say to the people.”

b. Samuel as Leader – 1 Sam. 19

Now I think the closest you can get to some sort of evidence for the companies of prophets to have been some kind of an educational grouping is 1 Samuel 19:20 and 2 Kings 4:38. 1 Samuel 19:20 is the passage where Saul sent his messengers to try to capture David when he had taken refuge with Samuel in a place called Naioth of Ramah, and in verse 20 it says, “When they saw a group of prophets prophesying, with Samuel standing there as their leader, the Spirit of God came upon Saul's men and they prophesied also.” Do you remember we talked about that passage last week—what’s the meaning of the word “prophesy”? It’s seen as some kind of abnormal behavior. The Holy Spirit came on those men and they were unable to capture David. But in the context of that situation it says, “Samuel was standing as their leader.” Then we wonder what exactly does that mean? What was Samuel doing—was he instructing? Well, perhaps. It doesn’t say so. It’s hard to know without further information.

c. Elisha as Leader – 2 Kgs 4

2 Kings 4:38—you have that with Elisha. In 2 Kings 4:38 you read, “Elisha returned to Gilgal and there was a famine in that region. While the

company of the prophets was meeting with him”—I’m quite sure “company” there is *bene hanebiim*—“He said to his servant, ‘Put on the large pot and cook some stew for these men.’” It appears that Elisha is the leader there: he’s giving the command; he is providing food for the larger group. Now again it doesn’t say anything about instruction. So Elisha actually is a leader, Samuel stands as a leader but it’s hard to know how much to make of that and exactly what that function was.

#### d. Not Ancient seminary-like training

I don’t think the prophets themselves—whether Samuel or Elisha or even these companies of prophets are some ancient equivalent to present day seminary students who need a theological education in order to perform their task. The prophets were people who received their message directly from God and proclaimed it to the people. So those comments about the school of the prophets or the companies of the prophets apparently lived in their own communities.

#### e. Places of the Companies of the Prophets

We noted last week there were groups of prophets at various places in those earliest chapters of 2 Kings—in Bethel, in Jericho and in Gilgal. If you go back to 1 Samuel 10 when Saul encountered that company of prophets with the musical instruments who were prophesying and he became one of them and he prophesied—that’s at Gibeah. Then 1 Samuel 19 we just looked at a minute ago—Naioth at Ramah—it was a company of prophets. We get these companies scattered around in different localities and some have suggested that they lived communally in some sort of a cloister. Much like a monastery in much later times. Evidence for that again is meager.

### F. 4. Companies of the Prophets Apparently Lived in Their Own Communities

#### Communal Housing & eating

But 2 Kings 4:38 says that they ate together. Now that’s that passage we looked at just a minute ago—“Elisha returned to Gilgal and there was a famine in that region. While the company of the prophets was meeting with him, he said to

his servant, ‘Put on the large pot and cook some stew for these men.’” They were given food there by Elisha and it seems like they were eating together. However, this is a time of famine, that doesn’t necessarily mean that was a customary way in which they ate.

The other reference that is sometimes appealed to to support the communal housing idea is 2 Kings 6:2. You read, “The company of the prophets said to Elisha, ‘Look, the place where we meet with you is too small for us. Let us go to the Jordan, where each of us can get a pole; and let us build a place there for us to live.’” Now if you look at the Hebrew of that, you take that last phrase “let us make for us” a *maqom* “a place” *sham* “there”. Now you see *leshevet* can mean “to sit” or “to dwell.” Is that a place to sit and to gather or is it a place to dwell—a house, of some sort? I think you could understand the term “place” as a place where various dwellings could be built, not necessarily one dwelling. But the phrase could also be translated a place for us “to sit.” Some sort of assembly hall. You see the preceding verse said, “Look, the place where we meet with you is too small for us.” So again I don’t think that this is a reference that establishes incontrovertibly that this is a communal dwelling of some sort.

If you go to 2 Kings 4—a few chapters earlier—it seems like these members of the company of the prophets had their own separate dwelling places rather than one communal dwelling place. In 2 Kings 4:1-7 you have that story of the wife of a member of the company of the prophets called on Elisha and said, “My husband is dead and these creditors are coming to take my two boys as their slaves.” She had debts to pay and nothing to pay the debts with. So in 4:2 Elisha says, “‘How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?’” Sounds like she had her own dwelling place—“What do you have in your house?” “‘Your servant has nothing there at all,’ she said, ‘except a little oil.’ Elisha said, ‘Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don’t ask for just a few. Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side’” and so forth. She does that and of course her jars

are filled and she sells them and she's able to pay her debt. But the point of bringing that up here is it doesn't look like a communal living situation for this wife of one of the members of the group or company of prophets. It seems like she may have lived in a prophetic neighborhood of some sort but had her own house.

I think that fits with a kind of incidental feature of 1 Samuel 19. If you go back to that passage that's about Naioth of Ramah. That expression "Naioth of Ramah" is in 1 Samuel 19:19 where King Saul is told that David is in Naioth at Ramah. Well Ramah's a city; what's Naioth in Ramah? The Hebrew word is "habitation" or "dwelling." Naioth appears to be a plural form of that. So it's possible that Naioth means "habitations," plural. If that's the way to understand Naioth I think you could understand it as a neighborhood you might say of Ramah where there was a complex of houses that these prophets lived in—the members of the group or company of prophets. So Samuel brought David to that section of town in Ramah where the members of the company of prophets had their dwelling places—but that's in the plural it wouldn't be a single communal dwelling.

So number 4.: "Companies of the prophets apparently lived in their own communities." I think that's to be preferred over the idea that they had some sort of abbey or cloister.

#### F. 5. The Degeneration of the Prophetic Function within the Companies

##### a. Elisha – 2 Kgs 4

Number 5.: "The degeneration of the prophetic function within the companies." When you read references to these companies of prophets it seems like over time degeneration sets in. This is reading between the lines. We don't know a whole lot about these companies, but it's possible that over time people began to associate with the companies for material advantage. In other words, for what benefits they might derive from that. We read in 2 Kings 4:42 about that. In 4:42 Elijah receives food for the company that was given for their sustenance. "A man came from Baal Shalishah, bringing the man of God twenty loaves of barley

bread baked from the first ripe grain, along with some heads of new grain. ‘Give it to the people to eat.’” The people here are the company of the prophets. “‘How can I set this before a hundred men?’ his servant asked. But Elisha answered, ‘Give it to the people to eat. For this is what the LORD says: ‘They will eat and have some left over.’” It’s kind of like the 5,000 of Jesus but here on a smaller scale but a multiplication of food for the benefit of these members of the company of the prophets. It’s quite possible that the groups of prophets lived from gifts of that sort.

#### b. Royal Court Prophets

As you go further in the OT you find that a number of the kings had groups of prophets associated with the court on which they would call particularly if they wanted a favorable message. In other words, these were not necessarily true prophets—they were people who presented themselves as prophets but who told the king what he wanted to hear. Ahab had prophets of that sort associated with his court. If you look at 1 Kings 22:4 when Ahab had asked Jehoshaphat to join him in fighting against Ramah at Gilead. “Jehoshaphat replied to the king of Israel, ‘I am as you are, my people as your people, my horses as your horses.’ But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, “First seek the counsel of the Lord.” So what’s Ahab do? “The king of Israel brought together the prophets—about four hundred men—and asked them, ‘Shall I go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall I refrain?’ ‘Go,’ they answered, ‘for the Lord will give it into the king's hand.’” That’s what they assumed Ahab wanted them to say. He encouraged Jehoshaphat to go with him. But what’s Jehoshaphat’s response? Jehoshaphat says, “Is there not a prophet of the LORD here whom we can inquire of?” In other words, he did not believe that these people were speaking for the Lord. Ahab replies, “There is still one man through whom we can inquire of the Lord, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but always bad. He is Micaiah son of Imlah.” My point here in calling your attention to this is that there were companies of prophets associated with the courts of the kings and not always



speaking the word of the Lord.

If you look at Micah 3:5, Micah says, “As for the prophets who lead my people astray, if one feeds them, they proclaim 'peace'; if he does not, they prepare to wage war against him.” In other words, you know the hand that feeds you and you say what you think that person wants to hear rather than proclaiming the word from the Lord. So it seems like among the groups of the prophets gradually deterioration set in.

#### 6. The Canonical Prophets are Distinguished from these Companies

Number 6.: “The canonical prophets are distinguished from these companies.” I don’t think there’s any evidence that any of the writing prophets, that is, canonical prophets, who produced one of the prophetic books that’s contained in the canon of the Old Testament belonged to a company or a guild of prophets. We also don’t read of any of the canonical prophets receiving money or support or livelihood from performing the prophetic tasks. There’s one text where it seems like one of the canonical prophets explicitly rejects the idea that he should be considered a part of a prophetic group. In Amos 7: 14, Amos says, "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son." Now you see the question is what does he mean by “prophet’s son” there? Does he mean member of a group? It is quite possible he does, given the use of that expression so many times. It seems like he’s saying, “I was not a prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a shepherd.” Now I want to look at this in a little bit more detail, and to do that I think we need to go back and get the whole context. Amos had gone up from Judah to the northern kingdom to the city of Bethel. Remember King Jeroboam I had established altars at Bethel and Dan. At that time the man of God out of Judah went up and cried out against that altar at Bethel. Now at much later times under Jeroboam II Amos does the same thing and he goes to Bethel and Amaziah you read in verse 10, “The priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: ‘Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying: ‘Jeroboam will die by the sword, and

Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.” That’s not something Jeroboam wanted to hear. “Then Amaziah said to Amos, ‘Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah.’” Then here is this next phrase which I think is significant and an important part of the conflict. “‘Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there.’” See he puts a connection between prophesying and livelihood. “‘Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there.’” It’s as if the two were connected. “‘Don’t prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king’s sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom.’” That’s what Amos responds to. He says to Amaziah, “I was neither a prophet nor a prophet’s son, but I was a shepherd, and I took care of sycamore-fig trees.”

That raises a translation question. The question has to do with what Amos is saying here and how are we to understand what he is saying, which brings up an ambiguity in the Hebrew text. There’s no verb there. Amos “answered and said to Amaziah, ‘lo’ nabi anni”. Literally, “Not prophet I.” “Not prophet I and not son of a prophet I.” Now if you look at translations of that, you have to supply the verb “to be”. Do you supply the verb “to be” in the present tense or the past tense? The New American Standard is present tense. “I am no prophet, neither am I a prophet’s son, but I am a herdsman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit.” But if you look at the King James and the NIV they translate it past tense with the verb “to be.” For the supplied verb “I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman, a gatherer of sycamore fruit.” The Berkley Version has both there. “I am neither a prophet nor a son of a prophet but I was a herdsman, a gatherer of a sycamore tree.” What’s the difference in meaning in what Amos is saying if you translate it with the present tense or the past tense? That may appear to be inconsequential in what they were saying. I think it makes a significant difference in meaning. Those who suggest a past tense like King James and NIV understand Amos to be saying he has not made himself a prophet, but God called him to the task. “I was not a prophet, I wasn’t a prophet’s son, I was a herdsman,” and then you go down to verse 15, “But the LORD took me from tending the flock

and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy.’” So I wasn’t a prophet but the Lord called me and I became a prophet. That’s basically what he says. So Amos is not denying he’s a prophet, he’s only saying “I wasn’t that originally. Originally I was a farmer.”

But if you translate it present tense that puts a different meaning on what Amos is saying. Remember, Amos is really responding to that statement of the priest in verse 12: “Earn your bread there. Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there.” Amos isn’t receiving anything, and he’s responding to that. If you translate it in the present tense sense, “I am not a prophet, I am not a prophet’s son” I think then what Amos is saying to Amaziah is, “I am not a prophet in the sense that you understand.” That is “I am not a prophet in the sense that I am somebody who prophesies in order to earn my livelihood.” As far as Amaziah is concerned, that’s what a prophet is: somebody who’s in it for what he can get from it. But Amos responds I think by saying, “I am not that kind of, “prophet,” and I’m not the son of a prophet. I’m not the member of one of these prophetic companies. Because I don’t need to do that for my livelihood. I am a herdsman. I’m a gatherer or grower of sycamore figs; I can sustain myself. I don’t prophesy for material advantage. But the Lord came to me and said, ‘Go take this message up there, go prophesy.’” Now if you translate it like that then in that present tense I think what is going on here is Amaziah has made this statement that clearly presupposes that prophets are in the business for money. “Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there.” And Amos responds, “I’m not that. I’m a herdsman, I don’t need to earn my living by prophesying. I don’t prophesy for monetary gain.”

Now if that’s the way you read this it suggests a couple of things. I think it suggests that in those days prophesying had come to be understood as a certain type of profession or livelihood—seems to me that’s what Amaziah understood there. Secondly, I think it’s suggesting that Amos wanted to make it very clear: “I’m not that kind of a prophet.” Amos is not denying he’s a prophet in the proper

sense of the word, but what he is saying is, “I have nothing to do with the prophets with which both he and Amaziah were familiar with: these kinds of people that prophesied what the king or somebody else wanted to hear in order to get whatever benefit they could derive from that.”

Here the NIV uses the past tense. There is what’s called the TNIV out now if any of you are familiar with that—that is a revision of the NIV. It still is past, but the TNIV reads, “I was neither a prophet, nor the disciple of a prophet.” In other words “I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, the prophet’s son.” It now says, “I was neither a prophet nor the disciple of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I took care of sycamore fig trees.” So they’re still in the past tense with the TNIV.

The Jewish Publication Society version is present tense. It’s like the NASB. And I think that’s to be preferred. It says, “I am not a prophet and I am not a prophet’s disciple”—they use that same expression, “prophet’s disciple.” “I am a cattle breeder.” There is—have any of you ever come across the Oxford University Press Jewish Study Bible? There’s a Jewish Study Bible out much like the NIV Study Bible but from a Jewish perspective published by Oxford Press. The note in the Jewish Study Bible which uses the Jewish Publication Society Version for the translation says, “Amos maintains he is not a professional prophet that he may be hired for his services and thus bought.” Now I think they got it right. In verse 12 when he says, “I am not a prophet nor the son of a prophet,” Amos maintains he is not a professional prophet who may be hired for his services and thus bought. So the canonical prophets are distinguished from these companies. You have no reference of any of the canonical prophets being a part of one of these companies and it seems to me that Amos is making this explicit. He does not want to be a family with the company of the prophets or with a kind of prophet who was in it for profit.

Again it seems like there were companies with Elisha, Elijah and Samuel and all of them. It seems like Samuel, Elisha, and Elijah were leaders of

companies. So whether you make them part of companies it seems to me the companies were some sort of group of—the Jewish Publication Society says “disciples”—maybe that’s a good term. I think that you would look at Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha, though, as above the company, rather than part of it.

You know, some people like to use the expression “office of prophet.” I try to avoid it. I prefer the expression “the prophetic function,” because it seems to me a priest had an office, a king had an office. A king was a king and he was anointed to be that. He was a king and he had official roles and duties. Priests had official roles and duties. It seems that these prophets did something more sporadically. When the Spirit came on them they spoke and so they performed that prophetic function but I’m not sure I want to call it an office as if this was all that they ever did. We get back to that thing of the prophets themselves knowing in their own heart and mind when they were speaking the word of the Lord as compared to their own word. Somebody like Nathan, who was a prophet frequently to David where he gave him the Lord’s message and asked him where the thing he told David was his personal opinion was wrong. So every word they spoke was not an inspired word.

#### G. The Canonical Prophets were Writing Prophets

Now G.: “The canonical prophets are writing prophets.” I just want to make a couple of comments here on the labels. You’ll find both of these labels in the literature.

##### 1. Writing Prophets

“Writing prophets” is a designation for those prophets who have given us a writing bearing their name in the Old Testament canon. In other words, the writing prophets are the 4 major and 12 minor prophets of the canon of the Old Testament. So in that sense, writing prophets and canonical prophets are synonymous—we’re referring to the same people. I think those labels are useful but they can be misunderstood. With respect to “writing prophets”—we know that there were prophets who wrote whose writings have not been preserved for us in the canon of

Scripture. In other words, if you really want to push it, the expression “writing prophets” is larger than “the canonical prophets.” Chronicles speaks of the writing of a number of individuals whose writings—we’ll term prophets—whose writings have not been preserved for us and included in the canon. We’ll look at a couple of references. 2 Chronicles 9:29, where you read, “As for the other events of Solomon's reign, from beginning to end, are they not written in the records of Nathan the prophet, in the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite and in the visions of Iddo the seer.” So there’s Nathan, Ahijah, and Iddo, who wrote, and wrote as prophets of God, but those writings for whatever reason, were not preserved and included in the canon of the Old Testament. There are some other references—2 Chronicles 13:22 and 21:12—I won’t take the time to look at them.

## 2. “Canonical Prophets”

You can also say that even the term “canonical prophets” also is somewhat deficient because it separates the prophetic books from the historical books. In Jewish tradition, we don’t have that separation between prophetic books and historical books. In Jewish tradition we have reference to what you call the “former prophets” and the “latter prophets.” The former prophets are what we call the historical books: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Those are the former prophets. The latter prophets are what we call the prophetic books. So I think the Jewish tradition is much more accurate. All of those books are prophetic books. Historical books are a divinely inspired record and interpretation of what was going on with those people in the Old Testament period. They are prophetic just as much as the books that we call prophetic.

Student Question: “Now would Elisha and Elijah be considered canonical prophets?”

No, because they don’t have the full canonization of Scripture. They don’t have a canonical book written by them. They wouldn’t be considered canonical prophets or writing prophets—either one of them.

## II. The Prophetic Nomenclature

Let's go on to Roman numeral II, "The prophetic nomenclature." I want to go down to some of the words and phrases used in the Old Testament to designate the prophets. I think through looking at the nomenclature we get some insight into the nature of the prophetic function. From the outset let me make this comment. Most people when they hear the word "prophet" immediately think that there was this group of people in the Old Testament who foretold the future. In other words, a prophet is someone who predicts the future. I think that really misses the point. Yes, it's true that in many of the prophetic books you do have predictions about things that would come to pass in the future, but that was not the essence of what it meant to be a prophet—predicting the future. The prophets were basically preachers. They spoke to the needs of God's people in the Old Testament period and much of what they had to say was a call to repentance, a call to return to the covenant, a call to be obedient to the Lord, and to put away false worship. So the essence of prophetic ministry lies elsewhere than in prediction. The two are not synonymous. To be a prophet is not necessarily to always tell about what will happen in the future. I think that comes out in some of the nomenclature with which the prophets are identified.

### A. Man of God

A. under II. is the most general name: "man of God." That expression is used 76 times in the Old Testament. About half of them are used in connection with Elisha, who often is just termed "the man of God." There are a number in 1 Kings 13 where you have that man of God who went out and prophesied against the altar of Jeroboam I. But a lot of the others are widely scattered. Moses is called "a man of God," so is Samuel, Elijah, and Shemiah. So, it is widely used. What it suggests is: the prophet is a person who stands in a relationship with God. If you are a man of God you are in some sort of relationship with God—exactly what the relationship is, is not defined. But here are people who are men of God.

## B. Servant of the Lord

B. is: “Servant of the Lord.” We talked last week about “My servants the prophets”. Here the relationship is more clearly indicated. These prophets were servants of God. The relationship is one of service. But again that’s still rather general. It’s used with many of the prophets but it’s also used more widely because people other than prophets are called servants of God. One interesting reference is to King Nebuchadnezzar in Jeremiah 27:6 and 43:10. He is called “the servant of the Lord.” He wasn’t a prophet, he wasn’t even a believing child of God, but he was an instrument in the hand of God who accomplished God’s purposes and plans in connection with the punishment coming on Judah so he’s called “a servant of the Lord.”

## C. The Messenger of the Lord

C. is “The messenger of the Lord.” Now here you get more explicit. The prophet is a person who brings the message of God to men. You might think that would be used extensively because that is the essence of what the prophet does, but it’s not. Interestingly enough it’s very infrequent. It’s used only of Haggai. In Haggai 1:13 it says, “Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people.” I say it’s used only of Haggai. That is, it’s used only of Haggai unless you take Malachi 1:1 where it says, “An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.” But if you look at that in Hebrew it is “An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through *Maliachi*. *Maliachi* if you translate it is “My Messenger.” And there are some people who think we don’t know the name of this prophet—that that is just a generic designation of a messenger for the Lord. “An oracle: the word of the LORD to Israel through *Maliachi*, My Messenger.” I’m inclined to think it is a proper name because that introductory line is so very close to role of prophetic messengers. You do have the name of the prophet given in other works, so it seems to me that it’s most likely his name. But that’s C., “messenger of the Lord.”



#### D. The Hebrew Term Nabi [prophet]

D. is the Hebrew word *nabi*. That is the word that most often is used to designate a prophet. When you come across the word prophet in your English translations of the Hebrew Old Testament it is a translation of this word. In the Septuagint that Hebrew word is translated by the Greek word *prophetes*. That's where we get our English word "prophet." The English word "prophet" is taken from the Greek word *prophetes*. It is the Greek Septuagint translation of *nabi*. So then the question becomes: what did *nabi* mean to someone particularly in the Old Testament period who heard that word? What was the connotation then of this word? And that brings up a lot of questions where there's a lot of disagreement as far as origin, etymology, and so forth. But I think what is clear is, *nabi* did not mean some sort of soothsayer, diviner, reader of omens, somebody that did that sort of thing. *Prophetes* is the Greek translation of *nabi*. For the practice of divination, soothsayer, that sort of thing, Greek used the term *mantis*. So in both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and in the Greek you have a distinction there between a soothsayer and diviner and the prophets.

In classical Greek literature, *prophetes* was understood as someone who interpreted the messages of the gods to men. One place where that becomes particularly clear is in the temple of Apollo at Delphi. There was a priestess who was called the Pythia. This priestess gave messages from the deity in a frenzied sort of trance while sitting on a golden tripod. So here is this Pythia who is giving this kind of unintelligible revelation from the deity Apollo. But then you see what happened, there was the *prophetes* who came along and interpreted those unintelligible sounds of the Pythia into understandable language. So the *prophetes* interpreted the disclosures of the gods for the people. If you look at your citations page 2 down at the bottom of the page there's a paragraph from your favorite writer on Old Testament subjects, Gerhard Vos, from his biblical theology where he's talking about *nabi*. And he says, "With this inquiry into the meaning of *nabi*, we may combine a brief discussion of its brief equivalent *prophetes*—from which

our word ‘prophet’ is come. We associate with this mostly the idea of foreteller or predictor. This is not in accord with the original Greek etymology. The preposition ‘pro-’ in the composition does not express the time sense of beforehand. It has local significance. The *prophetes* is a forth-teller. The Greek term, however, has religious associations no less than the Hebrew term. *Prophetes* is the one who speaks for the oracle. Thus it might seem that with the *pro-* correctly understood the Hebrew *nabi* and the Greek *prophetes* were practically synonyms. This however would be misleading. The Greek *prophetes* does not stand in the same direct relation to the deity as the Hebrew *nabi* does. In reality he is the interpreter of the oracular dark utterances of the Pythia, or some other inspired person whom from the depth underneath the god had a shrine inspired by it. The Pythia would thus stand at the same place near the deity as the *nabi* but the *prophetes* is separated from the deity by this intermediate person. *Prophetes* is therefore rather an interpreter than a mouthpiece of what the god speaks through the one he directly inspired. (In other words the Pythia was the one to whom the gods spoke but when the gods spoke to the Pythia it was in unintelligible sounds.) So the *prophetes* takes those unintelligible sounds and makes them understandable. So he’s the interpreter rather than the mouthpiece. He adds his own not merely the illumination of the oracle but also the form with which he clothes the human that perceives. There’s no wonder then that the word *prophetes*, taken into the service of biblical religion, had to undergo a baptism of regeneration before it could be used.” In other words, what he’s saying is if you were a Greek translator of the Hebrew of the Old Testament, and you’re looking for a word to properly represent *nabi* in Hebrew you take the Greek word that’s closest to that function, and that happens to be the word *prophetes*. But it has a different background. When it is brought into use in the biblical context you have to be aware of that difference.

#### D. 1. Etymology of Nabi

Now to get back to this word *nabi*—what does it mean? There’s been a lot

of discussion about the etymology of *nabi*. Take out your outline. I have two subpoints under D. 1. is “Etymology” and 2. is “Usage.” When you ask the question of etymology, you find very quickly you get into disputes. Some have said *nabi* is a derivative of another Hebrew root, “*nb*,” the derivative of which means “bubble forth.” This suggestion was from the great Hebrew scholar Gesenius. He said the prophet was called by this name because of the impression his speaking made; the flow of words “bubble forth” from the mouth of a prophet. Others see it as derived from an Akkadian root, *nabu*. *Nabu* in Akkadian means “to speak.” The word *nabu* comes from the Babylonian deity *Nabu* which is the god of wisdom and science, the god of word and writing. You get that same component in later names like Nebuchadnezzar and Nabopolassar. So if it comes from *nabu* then the *nabi* would be a speaker, and more specifically, someone who spoke for God.

Look at your citations page 3 under T.J. Meek and the volume on *Hebrew Origins*. He says, “The third word for prophet is the one that has become the most popular of all, almost solely replaced the older term *roeh*.” I’m going to come back to *roeh* later. “It is *nabi* from a root not found in Hebrew but found in Akkadian as *nabu* ‘to call, to call out, to speak.’ It accordingly means speaker, spokesman of God and it is correctly translated in the Septuagint by the Greek *prophetes*. A noun derived from a preposition *pro*—for, in behalf of and the verb, *phemi*, ‘to speak.’” To speak for, or on behalf of. *Prophetes. Pro-phemi*. “Hence the prophet of the *nabi* type was strictly not a ‘foreteller’ as was formerly supposed, but a ‘forth-teller, preacher.’ This was the meaning of ‘prophet’ in English until after the time of Queen Elizabeth when for some reason the term came to be equated with foretelling and predicting. For example a book by Jeremy Taylor published in 1647, entitled *The Liberty of Prophesying*, is not what the present connotation of the word would lead one to think. It is a book on freedom of speech. In modern language: the freedom of preaching. Accordingly, the strict meaning of the word “prophet” in English in its meaning in the original

Greek and Hebrew is speaker or spokesman.” So that’s the idea that comes from *nabu* it means “to speak.”

There are others who say yes it comes from *nabu* but rather than being from the active voice of that Akkadian word it’s a passive one. Then it would have the meaning “someone called by God.” If you look above that paragraph by Meek on page 3 of your citations there are some statements by William F. Albright. He says, “The current explanation of the word *nabi*, prophet, as ‘speaker’ is almost certainly false. The correct etymological meaning of the word is rather ‘one who is called by God who has a vocation from God,’ as appears from the fact that this is almost always the sense.” From the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> line to the middle of the last. He discusses that further—he says, down a few lines, “The interpretation of the word suits its meaning exactly; the prophet or the man who felt himself called by God for a special mission in which his will was subordinated to the will of God.” So there are some other viewpoints under etymology. I think the etymology remains uncertain. But I think these ideas “to speak,” or “someone called by God,” are consistent with what we find in biblical usage. More important than etymology for the meaning of any word is its meaning in the context of specific passages and its meaning as derived from how it’s used.

## 2 Usage of Nabi

So that brings us to 2. “The Usage of Nabi.” Let me just get started on that. We did a little bit with the way it was used last week and I did refer you to Deuteronomy 18:18 as a key verse where the prophetic function is described in very explicit language. You have in 18:18 of Deuteronomy the statement, “I will raise up for them a prophet,” a *nabi*, “like you,” Moses, “from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.” Now as I mentioned last week that’s the same thing that is said in Jeremiah 1:9 where the Lord says, “Jeremiah, I will put my words in your mouth.”

Now interesting in connection with that is Exodus 7:1. There you read, “The LORD said to Moses, ‘See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your

brother Aaron will be your *nabi*.” I think that verse gives us some insight into what a prophet is and what the relationship of the prophet is to God. The relationship of Aaron to Moses will be like that of the prophet to God. In other words, Moses will stand in relation to Pharaoh as God does to His people. But Moses will not speak himself to the Pharaoh. That’s going to be done by Aaron. Aaron will convey the message of Moses to Pharaoh, just as the prophet conveys the message of God to the people. So you remember Moses said, “I can’t speak” and the Lord said, “Aaron will speak for you” and here it says, “I made you like God to Pharaoh. Your brother Aaron will be your prophet.” If you go to Exodus 4:15, where that discussion took place about Moses speaking, you’ll notice God says to Moses, “You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you, and it will be”—now listen—“as if he were your mouth. It will be as if he were your mouth, and as if you were God to him. But take this staff in your hand so you can perform miraculous signs with it.” Aaron is spoken of as the mouth of Moses, and a prophet is the mouth of God by the analogy. So I think when you get to usage of *nabi*, those texts give us a pretty clear insight into what the meaning of the word is.

The next designation is *roeh* often translated “seer.” We’ll look at that next time.

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