

Robert Vannoy, Foundations of Prophecy, Lecture 2

Prophetic Awareness and History of Prophets

C. 3. There is a Distinction between a Prophet's Own Word and the Word of God which They Spoke

I made a comment on C. 3. "There is a distinction between a prophet's own word and the word of God which they spoke." As I already have mentioned, the prophet was not to proclaim his own thoughts or ideas or insights, he was to proclaim God's word. What I am saying here is that the prophet could make the distinction between his own words and God's words. I think it's very important to be clear about that distinction as we go through this prophetic function. It's not valid to say that the prophets conveyed their own ideas and that those ideas then served as the word of God. That's quite a different construction. I think that becomes clear when we look at certain passages where a distinction is made between the prophet's own ideas and the message that God gave them. The prophet was aware of that distinction.

So, it's true that the divine word is given through the human instrument, through the prophet, and that God takes up into the proclamation of His Word the prophet's own personal characteristics, background, temperament, way of thinking, all those kinds of variation. While that is true, as part of an organic kind of view of the nature of divine inspiration that does not detract from or diminish the divine character of the message. God has so prepared these individuals with their personalities, gifts, and ways of thinking and so forth, that he takes that into the proclamation of his word, but it remains God's word.

a. Example: 2 Sam 7 – David and Nathan

Now let me give you a few illustrations of this that I think make that distinction clear. The first is in 2 Samuel 7 with some interaction between David and Nathan the prophet. In 2 Samuel 7:1, you read, "After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he

said to Nathan the prophet, ‘Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.’ Nathan replied to the king, ‘Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you.’” Put yourself in Nathan’s shoes. David comes to you and says I’ve wanted to build a temple for the ark. Why would you object? It’s a noble desire to honor the Lord. But I think that the danger here is in linking the Lord’s will with what might be our good ideas or noble desires.

And what do you read next? “That night, the word of the Lord came to Nathan saying, ‘Go and tell my servant David, this is what the Lord says.’” Now you don’t have Nathan’s ideas, but you have the word of the Lord. “Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?” I won’t take time to read through all of this because I already read the point I want to make. What follows is the message from the Lord by Nathan, which in essence says, “David you are not to build me a house,” that is, a temple; “I am going to build you a house” and in “house” there is a sense of dynasty. But there’s kind of a play on words as you go through this passage. And the Lord says, “My word is, I will build you a house. I will build you a dynasty. It will endure forever. Your son, Solomon, will build the house of the Lord, but not you. For it is not my will for you.”

So Nathan had to go back to David and correct his own words and replace them with the divine word. Instead then of saying, “Go ahead and do it, the Lord is with you,” he had to say, “no, don’t do it. This is for Solomon to do. It’s not for you to do.” The distinction here between the prophet’s word and the word of God is quite clear. Nathan was thoroughly conscience of the distinction. So there is no real confusion in Nathan’s life about what the word of God is and how it differed from his own view.

If you look at your citation page 1, first paragraph up at the top. This is an article out of the book of *The Law and the Prophets* and the article on 2 Samuel 7:1-5. “Do all that’s in your heart, that’s what Nathan says, he gives the king complete freedom. The prophet means here that David should execute all that he

thinks of, reflects, proposes about the ark. The reason Nathan did this is that Yahweh is with the king!" You see he says, "Go ahead and do it. The Lord is with you!" "That is really evident in his whole course of life. According to Nathan, this ground is sufficient for the execution of his plan and the advice he gives. In fact, "Yahweh is with you is absolutely true. But that Nathan makes a mistake about the consequences. He will soon find out... This does not imply that the king's intentions should be rejected, for in 1 Kings 8:18 (and this is interesting) Solomon says that the Lord said to his father David: that you had the intention to build the house in my name, you did well that you had this intention. But it's not my will, but the prophet should first have waited for God's revelation. His good intention was not always the same as God's word. That Nathan too desired a temple for the God of Israel was not wrong in itself. The mistake made here was that he spoke as a man and not as a prophet, while his opinion as a prophet had been specifically asked for." So I think here is a case where you see a clear distinction between Nathan's word and God's word.

b. Example: 1 Sam. 16 – Samuel's anointing of David

I said I wanted to come back to 1 Samuel 16. In 16:1 the Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul?" He has his own private message to confront Saul with. But then the Lord says, "I'm going to send you to Jesse and I want you to anoint his son." And Samuel, in 1 Samuel 16 goes to Bethlehem to the house of Jesse and then you see in verse 6, "When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought (here's Samuel's thoughts, his idea), "Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord." That's his opinion. But in verse 7 we read that, "The Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'" Then he says, Eliab's not the one. I have rejected the Eliab. He calls all his other sons and still they are not the Lord's choice. You get down to verse 12 where they bring David in and you

read in the latter part of verse 12, “Then the Lord said, ‘Rise and anoint him. He is the one.’” So you can see in that passage, Samuel had certain thoughts, certain feelings, but he was wrong. He doesn’t know the proper person the Lord is choosing whom Samuel is to anoint. So you see again the distinction between Samuel and the word of God.

c. Example: Jonah

I also mentioned Jonah as another illustration. If Jonah had brought his own message to Nineveh, that would have been quite a different word than the word of God that was laid upon him. Because his ideas didn’t coincide with the word of the Lord, he tried to avoid the task, but the Lord called him back and he did speak the word of the Lord.

d. Jeremiah 27-28 – Jeremiah and Hananiah Conflict

Let’s go to another illustration in Jeremiah. This is in Jeremiah 27:28. This is the controversy between the false prophet named Hananiah and the true prophet Jeremiah. In chapter 27 Jeremiah gives a word from the Lord, a prophetic word. Basically what that word is is that Judah is to serve Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler. If you look in 27:12 Jeremiah says, “I gave the same message to Zedekiah king of Judah. I said, ‘Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people, and you will live. Why will you and your people die by the sword, famine and plague with which the LORD has threatened any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon?’” It’s God’s will for these nations, including Judah, to serve the king of Babylon.

Well, then he says in verse 14, “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who say to you, ‘You will not serve the king of Babylon,’ for they are prophesying lies to you. ‘I have not sent them,’ declares the LORD. ‘They are prophesying lies in my name. Therefore, I will banish you and you will perish, both you and the prophets who prophesy to you.’ Then I said to the priests and all these people,

‘This is what the LORD says:’” – and here’s the Lord’s message – “Do not listen to the prophets who say, ‘Very soon now the articles from the Lord's house will be brought back from Babylon.’ They are prophesying lies to you. Do not listen to them. Serve the king of Babylon, and you will live. Why should this city become a ruin? If they are prophets and have the word of the Lord, let them plead with the Lord Almighty that the furnishings remaining in the house of the LORD and in the palace of the king of Judah and in Jerusalem not be taken to Babylon. For this is what the LORD Almighty says.” That’s Jeremiah’s message. It’s the word from the Lord.

You get down to chapter 28 and you read about a false prophet who comes up and says they should not listen to what Jeremiah says. “In the fifth month of that same year, the fourth year, early in the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur, who was from Gibeon, said to me in the house of the LORD in the presence of the priests and all the people: ‘This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the articles of the Lord's house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here and took to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah.’” If you compare that verse 2 and 3 with verse 16 of the preceding chapter you see it’s diametrically the opposite. As in 27:16 Jeremiah says, “Do not listen to the prophets who say, ‘Very soon now the articles from the LORD's house will be brought back from Babylon.’ They are prophesying lies.” Hananiah says he figures God will bring back all the articles, “‘Jehoiachin, king of Judah, and all the other exiles from Judah who went to Babylon,’ declares the LORD, ‘for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.’” Well that message of Hananiah was contradictory to the message of Jeremiah.

In chapter 28 verses 5 to 11, Jeremiah really doesn’t have much of a response. Look at what he says in verse 5-11. “Then the prophet Jeremiah replied to the prophet Hananiah before the priests and all the people who were standing in

the house of the Lord. He said, ‘Amen! May the LORD do so!’” In other words, I think at this point, what he’s saying is “Hananiah, I hope you’re right. I hope we are delivered from Nebuchadnezzar and the articles of the Lord’s temple are returned. He says “May the LORD fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the Lord’s house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon.” So I hope you’re right. “Nevertheless, listen to what I have to say in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people: From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms. But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord” – how? – “only if his prediction comes true.” In other words, what you’re saying runs counter to the grain of the messages of judgment that the prophets have been proclaiming. So he says, well I hope you’re right, but we’ll have to see what happens and it’s only if this comes true that we can recognize this as a message from the Lord. “Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah and broke it.” Jeremiah had been symbolizing the yoke of Babylonian captivity by wearing the yoke himself. “And he [Hananiah] said before all the people, ‘This is what the LORD says: “In the same way I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon off the neck of all the nations within two years.”’” So there’s that flash of messages. What do you read then? At this point the prophet Jeremiah went on his way. So he says I hope you’re right. I don’t think you are. We’ll have to wait and see. That’s basically what he says.

But then what happens in verses 12 to 16? Here’s where the distinction is found. “Shortly after the prophet Hananiah” – verse 12 – “had broken the yoke off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah” – something happened – “the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah” and what’s the word of the Lord? – The Lord says, “Go and tell Hananiah, ‘This is what the Lord says: You have broken a wooden yoke, but in its place you will get a yoke of iron.’ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘I will put an iron yoke on the necks of all these nations to make them

serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and they will serve him. I will even give him control over the wild animals.'" Then the prophet Jeremiah said to Hananiah the prophet, "Listen, Hananiah! The LORD has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies. Therefore, this is what the Lord says: I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die," – why? – "because you have preached rebellion against the Lord." In the seventh month of that same year, Hananiah the prophet died." It was now the seventh month but back in verse one it mentions that it was the fifth month of that year he gave this message. In other words, two months later he was dead. But you see, here's a false prophet. Jeremiah received the word of the Lord, and the false prophet comes, gives an opposite message. Jeremiah's response is, I don't think you're right. I hope you are but I don't think you are. But we'll have to see. Then the word of the Lord comes to Jeremiah and he has a new message, a new word. It's very precise. It condemns Hananiah as a false prophet and says, "I hear you're going to die," and in two months he's dead. So I think you can see, again, a distinction between Jeremiah's word, and his initial response.

The prophets were godly and pious people who just like any other human being has a certain opinion and expresses it, but it wasn't the word of the Lord, it was just an opinion. Now, there are comments about true and false prophets in other places in Jeremiah and we're going to be back to the Law of the prophets in Deuteronomy 18 that talks about the prophets who were not speaking the word of the Lord, how they were to distinguished between them. They both claim to be prophets and they both come to the people and say, "Thus saith the Lord". They claim to be doing that, so it seems to be up to the people to sort out which one was the true prophet and which one was the false prophet.

e. Example: 1 Kings 13 The Old Prophet and the Man of God out of Judah

1 Kings 13, is the story of the old prophet at Bethel. You're probably familiar with this story. This man of God out of Judah goes up to Bethel, much

like Amos against Jeroboam II, and this unnamed prophet out of Judah proclaims the message to Jeroboam I about the altar that had been built there in Bethel after the division of the kingdom. You notice in verse 2 this man of God out of Judah cried out against the altar by the word of the LORD, "O altar, altar! This is what the LORD says: 'A son named Josiah will be born to the house of David. On you he will sacrifice the priests of the high places who now make offerings here, and human bones will be burned on you.' " That same day the man of God gave a sign: "This is the sign the LORD has declared: The altar will be split apart and the ashes on it will be poured out." When the King hears about this message you see in verse 4, "He stretched out his hand from the altar and said, 'Seize him!' But the hand he stretched out toward the man shriveled up, so that he could not pull it back. And the altar was split apart and its ashes poured out." So the king, Jeroboam, in verse 6, says to the man of God, "'Intercede with the Lord your God and pray for me that my hand may be restored.' So the man of God interceded with the Lord, and the king's hand was restored and became as it was before.

The king said to the man of God, 'Come home with me and have something to eat, and I will give you a gift.' But the man of God out of Judah answered the king, "Even if you were to give me half your possessions, I would not go with you, nor would I eat bread or drink water here." – why? – "For I was commanded by the word of the Lord: 'You must not eat bread or drink water or return by the way you came.'" Those were the instructions that he received when he went up there: Don't eat bread. Don't drink water. "So he took another road and did not return by the way he had come to Bethel."

But as he is on his way further, he meets this old prophet. Down in verse 18 this old prophet says, "I too am a prophet, as you are. And an angel said to me by the word of the Lord, 'Bring him back with you to your house so that he may eat bread and drink water.'" But we see that the writer of this narrative wrote a parenthetical statement – "For he was lying to him. So the man of God returned with him and ate and drank in his house." He knew what the word of the Lord

was; the word of the Lord had been specific. He prayed. He was obedient to that word initially.

Now when this old prophet comes, he gives in and he goes in and he eats with him. Verse 20 says, “When he was sitting at the table,” what happens? “The word of the Lord came to the old prophet. He cried out to the man of God who had come from Judah, ‘This is what the Lord says: You have defied the word of the Lord and have not kept the command the Lord your God gave you. You came back and ate bread and drank water in the place where he told you not to eat or drink. Therefore your body will not be buried in the tomb of your fathers.’”

And if you read further in the chapter, you can surely see the difference between the word of the Lord of that old prophet and his own word. His word was the lying word. He knew the difference between his word and the word of the Lord.

f. Conclusion

So the point I’m trying to make is, in the mind and conscience of the prophet, the prophet does know when he was speaking the word of the Lord and when he was speaking his own words. There’s a clear distinction there. So to say that the prophets spoke their own word in the form of God’s word, I think is in conflict with the data that we find in Scripture about the way in which this works. There’s a clear demarcation or line of difference in the mind of the prophet who formed his own words in Scripture.

D. The Phenomenon of Israel’s Prophets is as Old as the History of Israel Itself

1. History of Israel and History of Prophets are coextensive

Let’s move on to D. “The phenomenon of Israel’s prophets is as old as the history of Israel itself.”

a. Prophets of Old

I'm not going to do much with this point other than to say the history of Israel and the history of the prophets are pretty much coextensive. Jeremiah 7:25, I think we already read that, says, "From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants." The time you left Egypt is the time of Moses until the time of Jeremiah, Jeremiah was just before the Babylonian exile of 586 B.C. But even prior to Moses, Noah is called a prophet in Genesis 9:25-27 and Abraham was called a prophet in Genesis 20:7. So there are prophets back even before and in the patriarchal period.

b. Prophetesses

Besides male prophets, Israel also had prophetesses, that is, female prophets. These references are few, and in some cases it is not totally clear what is meant. Miriam, the sister of Moses, is called a prophetess in Exodus 15:20. Exactly what she's doing there is not so clear. You read, "then Miriam, the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women followed her, with tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.'" Now the context here is saying, she's praising the Lord with music. And the question is what's the meaning of the word 'prophetess'? Is it that she is leading the worship that was going on or that Miriam was speaking the word of the Lord? I'll get back to that later. But she turns up as a prophetess.

Deborah is a prophetess in Judges 4:4. "Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time." She's also a judge.

Huldah is called a prophetess in 2 Kings 22:14. This was the time of the finding of the Law Book of the Temple when Josiah was the king, when the book of the law was found, as you read in verse 14, "Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Acbor, Shaphan and Asaiah went to speak to the prophetess Huldah, who was the wife of

Shallum son of Tikvah, the son of Harhas, keeper of the wardrobe. She lived in Jerusalem, in the Second District. She said to them, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says.’” And here’s the message; a word from the Lord. The wife of Isaiah also was a prophetess. In Isaiah 8:3, Isaiah says, “Then I went to the prophetess, and she conceived and gave birth to a son,” that’s Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz. The question is, is Isaiah’s wife a prophetess because she’s the wife of a prophet or because she performed prophetic functions? It’s not clear. So just a comment, there are these examples of prophetesses.

c. Companies of the Prophets

Besides the individual prophets, there are also references to bands or companies of prophets. Such references were not numerous, but we come across them in various places particularly in Samuel and Kings. I want to look at some of those references with you.

1. 1 Sam. 10 – Saul and the Company of the Prophets

The first one is 1 Samuel 10:5-6. This takes place in the process of selecting Saul as king. Saul was out looking for his father’s cattle, and he goes to Samuel to seek information and the Lord told Samuel, “The man who comes to you is the man I have chosen king, anoint him. He is to be king of all the people.” So Samuel does that. Then in 10:1 you read the book of 1 Samuel “the Lord anointed you.” But further down in chapter 10 Samuel tells Saul certain things are going to happen at this time that the Lord has chosen him to be king. In verse 5 you read, “After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets.” The Hebrew there is the word that the NIV translates “procession” of prophets. Really it means “a company” or “a band of prophets”. So “you will meet a band of prophets coming from the high court with lyres, tambourines, flutes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying.” So here’s a company of

prophets prophesying. “The Spirit of the Lord will come on you in power and you will prophesy with them and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.” So there were several of these signs. This was the last of them. You read that that’s the way it works out. You read in verse 9, “Saul turned to leave Samuel and God changed Saul’s heart and all these signs were fulfilled that day. When they arrived in Gibeah, a procession of prophets met them. The Spirit of God came on them in power and he joined in their prophesying.” So here is reference to a procession or a band of prophets prophesying.

Now at this point – we’re going to come back to this later – but at this point I want to make just a brief comment about what’s going on here with respect to the word “prophesy.” What were these prophets, this company of prophets, what were these prophets doing? *Naba*, the word for “prophesying,” the verb, has a variety of meanings. Normally we’d say that that man was a prophet, *nabi*, or the man prophesied some time ago and he died. We think of him as someone who proclaimed the word of the Lord. But if you looked at usage, there seems to be or if you looked up the root *naba* in Brown, Driver and Briggs one meaning is “prophesy in an ecstatic state.” In 1 Samuel 10:5, the last phrase, the NIV says, “They will be prophesying.” The NRSV says, “They will be in a prophetic frenzy.” The Berkley translation says, “They will be in ecstasy.” So you get into this question of what is the meaning of this root *naba* that means to speak the word of God in a normal state or so that they would go into an ecstatic condition and to say something or sing something in that kind of a frame of mind.

If you look at your citations, page 2, E. J. Young discusses this in his book *My Servants, the Prophets*. He’s talking about this 1 Samuel 10 passage. He said “you should be very careful to note, however, there’s not a hint in this text to suggest that the prophesying was brought on by the music as though the music were a stimulant. The musical instruments were carried before the prophets. The implication given is they were employed merely by way of accompanying, hence

the prophesying engaged was not a meaningless raving, but rather a devout praising of God through the accompaniment of music.” That’s Young’s interpretation. What was going on here was the devout praising of God, through the accompaniment of music, which is described by using a verbal form of this word *naba* “to prophesy.” He says that, “if we employ the word ecstasy to describe the prophets” – there are a lot of people who do, he is commenting on this – “we must use the word with care. That they were under the compelling influence of God there can be no doubt, for it is said to Saul, for when he meets the prophets the Spirit of Jehovah will rush upon him and he will prophesy with them. The fulfillment of this prediction is related as follows – when the spirit rushed upon them, he prophesied, in their midst. Then 10b, unless it appears that the acts of prophesying in this particular instance was a result of the rushing upon of the Spirit, God’s Spirit came upon the prophet, and the result was he prophesied. The source of the ecstatic condition therefore is not to be found in the presence of music, nor in voluntary association, nor in contagion, nor for that matter any self-imposed or induced stimuli, but only in a rushing upon of the Spirit of God.”

So it’s the Spirit of God coming on Saul that causes him to join in with this band or company of prophets, do what they were doing, which Young sees as an enthusiastic praising of God. Or which this word *naba* used to describe what was going on. Now for the present, my purpose in calling your attention to this passage is primarily just to show you a reference of a company of prophets, not an individual prophet, but a company of prophets. We’ll talk more later about the thing they were doing and what these companies generally did and what this idea of ecstatic phenomena associated with prophesying is, but for the present here’s a company of prophets in 1 Samuel 10.

2. 2 Kings 2-4 Elisha and the Company of the Prophets, Jericho, Bethel ...

In the time of Elisha, you have references to companies of prophets in various places. In 2 Kings 2:3, we read, “The company of prophets at Bethel came

out to Elisha and asked, ‘Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?’” In 2 Kings 2:5, there’s also a company at Jericho, the company of the prophets at Jericho went to Elisha. In 2 Kings 4:38, “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.’” There are three references to companies of prophets, at Bethel (2 Kings 2:3), Jericho (2 Kings 2:5), and Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38) and there are some other references.

3. 1 Sam. 19: Saul and the Prophetic Companies

I should’ve mentioned before those Kings references, the reference back in 1 Samuel 19:20. This is after Saul had been rejected, David had been anointed to replace him and David was successful in battle, and Saul becomes jealous. Saul tries to kill David and David is ultimately driven from the court and becomes a refugee. But what he does first is go to Samuel as he flees from Saul. Let’s get the context first. In 1 Samuel 19:18, “When David had fled and made his escape, he went to Samuel at Ramah and told him all that Saul had done to him. Then he and Samuel went to Naioth and stayed there. Word came to Saul: ‘David is in Naioth at Ramah;’ so he sent men to capture him. But 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 also prophesied.” So here’s a group of prophets, Samuel is their leader. They are prophesying; whatever they’re doing is not altogether clear. These agents of Saul come, trying to capture David, and what happens to them? The Spirit of God comes on them and they start prophesying. Again, whatever that means.

Saul was told that, so he sent more men and they prophesied too. Saul sent men a third time. “Finally, he himself left for Ramah and went to the great cistern at Secu. And he asked, ‘Where are Samuel and David?’ ‘Over in Naioth at Ramah,’ they said. So Saul went to Naioth at Ramah. But the Spirit of God came

even upon him, and he walked along prophesying until he came to Naioth. He stripped off his robe and prophesied in Samuel's presence. He laid that way all day and all that night. This is why the people say, 'Is Saul also among the prophets?'"

I'm going to come back to this later, but here I want to note the meaning of this term *naba* and what kind of abnormal behavior may be associated with the use of the word. This is a question of the relation of ecstatic condition coming on the prophet that enabled him to speak, if that's what's going on. I think that the bottom line is clear here is that the spirit of God comes on Saul's messengers and as well as on Saul himself in a way that prevents them from doing what they set out to do, which was to capture David, and they couldn't do it. The Spirit wouldn't let them do it. Although in connection with that, it said that they were prophesying.

All right, so we have these fairly numerous references to the same things. Exactly what the functions of these bands or companies of prophets is is not ever made very clear. They may have been assistants or disciples of Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha. It's in the time of Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha that they appear. Perhaps they were entrusted with the task of assisting a prophet in promoting true religion in the communities where they lived.

4. 1 Kings 20 – A Prophet of the Company of the Prophets Speaks

There's only one passage – and that's in 1 Kings 20:35-43 – where a member of the company of prophets actually speaks a word of divine revelation. There's only one case of it. Perhaps we should look at that. You read in 20:35 "By the word of the LORD one of the sons of the prophets said to his companion, 'Strike me with your weapon.'" Now that phrase "sons of the prophets" [*bene hanebiim*] is sometimes translated in the NIV as "company of prophets", and sometimes more literally as "sons of prophets." And one of that company says to another member of the company, "Strike me with your weapon," but his companion then refused. So the prophet said, "Because you have not obeyed the

LORD, as soon as you leave me a lion will kill you.’ And after the man went away, a lion found him and killed him.

The prophet found another man and said, ‘Strike me, please.’ So the man struck him and wounded him. Then the prophet went and stood by the road waiting for the king.” And the king comes by. “As the king passed by, the prophet called out to him, “Your servant went into the thick of the battle, and someone came to me with a captive and said, ‘Guard this man. If he is missing, it will be your life for his life, or you must pay a talent of silver.’ While your servant was busy here and there, the man disappeared.’ ‘That is your sentence,’ the king of Israel said. ‘You have pronounced it yourself.’ Then the prophet quickly removed the headband from his eyes, and the king of Israel recognized him as one of the prophets. He said to the king,” – and here’s the one case where you get a member of one of these companies giving a word from the Lord, – “This is what the LORD says:” – and this is the prophet speaking to Ahab – ““you have set free a man I had determined should die. Therefore it is your life for his life, your people for his people.’ Sullen and angry, the king of Israel went to his palace in Samaria.” Now that was Ben-hadad, a Syrian ruler, whom Ahab had set free, and this prophet condemns him. So you have one instance out of all the references to companies of prophets where a member of a company actually proclaims the word of the Lord. So what was the function of these companies? As I said, it’s not altogether clear.

5. Function of the Companies of the Prophets

If you look at your citation page 1, at the bottom of the page, in Hobart Freedman’s *Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, he makes these comments, “What then was the true function and purpose of the sons of the prophets? (‘Sons of the prophets’ is translated as ‘company of prophets.’) In attempting to answer this question, it would be well to note their function in those passages where they were mentioned in Scripture. One, they are depicted as residing together in common dwelling at religious centers like Gilgal, Bethel,

Jericho, sitting before a great prophet where perhaps spiritual instructions were imparted to them.” I’m going to come back to that. I’m not so sure that is part of it.

“Two, another spiritual function of these groups was that of prophesying together,” as in 1 Samuel 10:5 and following, which we already looked at. “Just what this prophesying was and what form it took has been the subject of much speculation. First Samuel 10 seems to indicate that part of it was singing praises to God. A band of prophets was descending from the high place where they participated in some form of religious observance and they were prophesying accompanied by musical instruments. Evidence that this was an accepted method of prophetic expression is clear from 1 Chronicles 25:1-3.” There’s another place where prophesying is associated with music. “Thus the groups would not simply prophesy as individuals, but jointly, in a procession in various places of public praise and worship.” So that’s the second purpose of prophesying together in whatever way that is understood.

“Third, they also acted as spiritual messengers in important matters pertaining to Israel. This is seen when Elisha sends one of the sons of prophets to anoint Jehu the king of Israel and again when God sent another messenger of judgment to speak his word of rebuke to king Ahab for his leniency in dealing with Ben-hadad,” the first passage we just looked at in 1 Kings 20. So, what Freeman suggests is that these groups were one, receivers of instruction from a leader, like Samuel or Elisha, two, leaders of public praise and worship, and three, messengers. So I’m not sure we can say a whole lot more than that. Even some of that can be questioned and we’ll talk a little more about that next week. Particularly number one. Did these companies of prophets have to be instructed or educated in order to perform a prophetic task?

2. Sons of the Prophets

All right, number two, the members of these companies came to be called

the [*bene hanebiim*]. That phrase occurs nine times in the Old Testament. All of them between 1 Kings 20 and 2 Kings 9. This was from the time of Ahab until the revelation of Jehu, or about 974 to 841 B.C. If you looked at 2 Kings 2:3 and 5, which we already looked at, but you're aware of that in the NIV text of what the Hebrew wording is. You see, in 2 Kings 2-3, where you read "the company of prophets at Bethel," the Hebrew wording there, *bene hanebiim*, the sons of prophets of Bethel and the NIV has translated that as "company of prophets." I think they did that so the reader in English would not become confused about what the intent is. Were these children of prophets, the sons of the prophets, or is this a prophet and the prophet had children and it's the children of the prophets at Bethel who come out to Elisha and ask? So pretty consistently, although not always, the NIV translates "*bene hanebiim*" as "company of prophets" rather than as "sons of the prophets." In 2 Kings 2:3, 2:5, 2:7, 2:15, 4:1, 4:38, 5:22, 6:1, the NIV has "company of prophets" and in every case it's "sons of the prophets" in Hebrew.

a. The Various meanings of the term "son" (ben) etc.

Now in biblical usage, the term "son," can mean a male child, of course, that's normally the way it's used. It can mean "descendent." The Semitic usage there, although it's not Hebrew, can be seen in Matthew 1:1, "Jesus Christ the Son of David" – "son" in the sense of "descendent." But it also can mean "member of a group." I think it's in that third sense, "member of a group," that the word is used in this expression, "sons of the prophets." It is as a member of a prophetic company that they are referred to as sons of the prophets. It does not mean something like preacher's kids or children of a prophet.

Now I see my time is up. I want to look at some illustrations of the way in which "*ben*" or "son" is used where it clearly is not used in the sense of children, but in the sense of "a member of a group." So we'll stop at this point and pick up from there and move forward next week.

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