

Week 10. The Prophetic Movement

[1] A BRIEF OVERVIEW

1. Patriarchal Period

Most of the prophets that we'll be considering were active during the period of the monarchy and beyond; but the **history of prophecy** in Israel goes back further than that. Indeed, there are indications in Genesis that **Abraham** was considered to be a prophet. He is **designated** as such in **Genesis 20:7**, an interesting verse where **intercession** – not for the last time - is identified as a **prophetic function**, though we often tend to associate it solely with the ministry of the priests. At an earlier stage, in **Gen 15:1 and 4**, Abraham is also portrayed as **receiving revelation** from God, an activity that we tend to associate much more with the prophets than is the case with intercession. In these two verses in Genesis 15 we find **repeated a phrase** that at a later stage became one of the '**signature tunes**' of the prophets: 'The word of the Lord came to ...').

Of course, in **Lk 11:50-51**, Jesus seems to imply that even **Abel**, son of Adam, was a prophet, which suggests that from the beginning the **prophetic word** has been **available** to human beings. But **what happened to Abel** at the hands of his brother also provides a **clear indication** of **the lot of the prophets** throughout the generations – they were **often a despised and persecuted** group, with some of them being **slain** by their own people, all of which **foreshadowed** what would happen to the **greatest** of all the prophets, **Jesus Christ**, who was not only **The Prophet** but also **The Word** made flesh [much as he was also both King and Servant; and both Priest and Sacrificial Lamb].

2. Mosaic Period

When we come into the Mosaic Period, during which the nation of Israel was born, we find that **Moses** (see Num 12:6-8; Deut 18:17; 34:10) and, **possibly**, his brother **Aaron** (Num 12:2) were regarded as prophets; while their sister **Miriam** is described as a prophetess (Ex 15:20ff; Num 12:2).

In this regard, **Exodus 7:1-2** give us an insight into one of the **main roles** of the prophet. You will remember that these verses form part of the **exchange** between the Lord and Moses in which **Moses makes** all kinds of **excuses** for his reluctance to speak to Pharaoh on behalf of the Lord. In the **closing verse** of the previous chapter Moses had made the **excuse** that he was of '**uncircumcised lips**', in other words he felt himself somewhat **deficient** in his ability to communicate God's word to Pharaoh, so the Lord then said to Moses: 'See I have made you like God to Pharaoh and your brother Aaron will be your

prophet. You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country.' It is clear from that incident that the **basic role** of the prophet was to be a **mediator** between God and those to whom God wished to communicate his message, **whether**, as in this case **to Pharaoh**, or **to Israel** or the **Israelite king** or whoever. In that role the prophet was to **hear** the word of the Lord; and then **communicate it fully and wholly** to God's intended audience.

3. Period of the Judges

During the Period of the **Conquest** under Joshua's leadership **no mention** is made of any prophets in Israel. They **appear again** in the Period of the Judges. **Deborah** is described as a prophetess in Judges 4:4 although she **also** appears to function in a **judicial role**. In addition, in **Judges 6:7-10**, in the early part of the **story of Gideon**, mention is made of the ministry of **an unnamed prophet**, the **first** of a significant number of such nameless prophets mentioned in the OT, reminding us that the **message** is much **more important** than the messenger.

4. The Period of the Monarchy

But, as I said, it's really with the period of the monarchy that we associate **most** of the OT prophets. The prophets of this period have been placed in one of **two categories**: (i) the non-writing or primitive prophets; and (ii) the writing or classical prophets.

(i) The Non-writing/ 'Primitive' Prophets

Among the non-writing prophets, we could list **Samuel**, although he might also be included amongst the prophets of the period of the Judges, since he was a judge. However, since his ministry **straddled** the era of the judges and that of the monarchy, we'll consider him along with the prophets from the Period of the Monarchy.

Throughout the period of the monarchy the **number** of prophets seems to have **increased considerably**, or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the **activity** of the prophets is reported in **increasing measure**. In addition to Samuel, some **twenty prophets** are named, including: **Gad** (1 Samuel 22:5); **Nathan** (David's chief spiritual adviser, cf 2 Sam 7); **Elijah and Elisha**; **Micaiah** (1 Kings 22); and prophetess **Huldah** (2 Kings 22:14).

In addition, from the time of Samuel we read of **groups/ companies of prophets** gathered together at various worship centres (See, e.g., 1 Sam 19:20; 2 Kings 2).

(ii) The 'Writing/ Classical Prophets'

In addition to these non-writing prophets, we also have the ministries of the (so-called) **'writing prophets'** [sometimes referred to as **'classical prophets'**] whose **teachings and stories** have been **gathered** together in the books named after them: the **3** (so-called) **'major'** prophets and the **12** so-called **'minor'** prophets – the **designations** major and minor being

simply a reference to the **size** of books these prophets have left to us and **not** an assessment of **the importance** of their ministries, etc. [In the passing, it is an **interesting question** why we should have a book of Amos, but not a book of Elijah!]

As you will see from the additional handout, the writing prophets **belong** to 3 or 4 **successive periods** of Israel's history. **Amos** and **Hosea** (who both ministered in the **Northern** Kingdom of Israel), and **Micah** and **Isaiah** (who both ministered in the **Southern** Kingdom of Judah) around the same time are regarded as **eighth century prophets**; **Nahum**, **Habakkuk**, **Zephaniah** and **Jeremiah** are the **seventh century prophets**; **Ezekiel** belongs to the period of **the exile**; while **Haggai**, **Zechariah** and **Malachi** belong to the **post-exilic period**. [We do not have enough details about the ministries of **Obadiah**, **Joel** or **Jonah** to date their activity precisely, though they are often classed with the **eighth century** prophets.]

The **additional handout** sets the main prophets in **chronological order**. The prophets named in the **far right**-hand column ministered in the **Northern** Kingdom; while those listed in the **left**-hand column (from the time of the division of the kingdoms) ministered in the **Southern** Kingdom.

[2] THE PROPHETIC CALL EXPERIENCE

I want to turn now to **one of the main elements** that characterise OT prophets - their experience of a **specific 'call'** from God to the prophetic ministry. It's quite **likely that each** of the prophets had some kind of call experience though what that experience entailed is **only recorded** for a number of them including Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos and Jonah (and possibly also Habakkuk). Today, I want to focus on the call experience of the 'primitive'/ non-writing' prophet **Samuel**, the account of whose call we find in **1 Samuel 3**.

This call happened at the Israelite worship centre **at Shiloh** where Eli and his sons functioned as priests and where Samuel had been **left by his parents** at the tender age of 4 or 5 years, **in fulfilment of a vow** made by his mother before his conception (cf 1 Sam 1:28). There in Shiloh, Samuel was placed **under the guidance of the priest Eli** and we can probably think of him as a kind of '**novice priest**.' This is suggested by the Hebrew word (*meshareth*) for 'ministered' in verse 1.

In the opening verse we are told that *'in those days the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions'*. '**Word**' and '**vision**' were, of course, the **two primary means** by which God **communicated** with his servants the prophets and, through them, with the rest of his people. Here the point is made that, at that time in Israel's history, there was **very little prophetic revelation** and communication occurring. Little, if any, fresh revelation was being

received by Israel (or, humanity) from God. The prophets were a **rare breed**, and visionaries were an **endangered species**.

And, in context, there's little doubt but that we're intended to understand these facts as a **criticism** of God's people, and especially of **their leadership** at that time. Certainly, **in other parts of the OT** such absence of visions and of the word of the Lord was **regarded as a sign of divine disfavour**. [Amos, for example, in **8:11** prophesied that this would be part of God's chastisement of Israel: *'The days are coming ... when I will send a famine through the land - not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord but they will not find it'*. Similarly, **Micah 3:6-7**: *'... the sun will set for the prophets, and the day will go dark for them ... they will all cover their faces because there is no answer from God'*. These prophecies **came true**, as we see, for example, in **Ps 74:9**, written probably at the time of the **exile**. Here the psalmist laments: *'We are given no miraculous signs; no prophets are left, and none of us knows how long this will be'*. Similarly, in **Lamentations 2:9** (again from the period of the **exile**): *'the law is no more, and her prophets no longer find visions from the Lord'*.]

So, **here too**, in 1 Samuel 3, we should understand the infrequency of the 'word of the Lord' and 'visions' as a **sign of divine disfavour** – can **something similar** be said of our nation today, with a **growing number of vacant pulpits** across the land and so few hearing or heeding the call of God to service? **Might that become even more so** the case in the years and decades ahead, **since we have despised** to a large extent the opportunities that we have had in abundance to hear and heed the words of the Lord?

The **infrequency** of prophetic revelation can be regarded, then, as a **sign of the Lord's displeasure** with Israel. **But, graciously** and mercifully, God did not leave things like that as the subsequent call of Samuel shows. **That call** took place **at night** when Eli and Samuel were lying down in their usual places in the 'temple' of the Lord. *'Then the Lord called Samuel'* (v 4). **Three times** the Lord had to call Samuel **before it began to dawn on Eli** that God must be trying to communicate with the young lad (cf v 8). Just before that, we are told in v 7 that: *'Samuel did not yet know the Lord'*, a statement which is probably **to be understood** in terms of the second half of the verse: *'the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him'*. In other words, Samuel had **no personal experience of receiving** 'the word of the Lord' / **prophetic revelation**. And, **from the tardiness** with which **Eli** came to realise what was happening, it would appear to be the case that many years had passed since he himself had had such an experience, or had heard of anyone else having such an experience.

So Eli's **sluggishness** to appreciate the significance of what was happening to Samuel can be explained to some extent by the **rarity** of the experience of prophetic revelation underlined for us in the opening verse of the chapter.

Samuel's inexperience, however, in this realm of receiving prophetic revelation **becomes a thing of the past** as he is **initiated into the mysteries** of that experience (v 9), though, to some extent, these **still remain mysterious**, for, although they are described here, it's not altogether clear what was involved.

Did Samuel **hear a voice** in his ear? or was it **in his sleep, in a vision** that he 'heard' this voice? **Did he see** the Lord with his own eyes? or **in a vision**, dream, or what? After all, it was **during the night** while Samuel was 'lying down' that the 'call' was first heard.

It's clear from the opening verses that **Samuel wasn't conscious of any 'visible', divine presence** in the room with him otherwise he would not have run to Eli. **On the other hand**, as a prelude to the fourth call we read in v 10 that 'the Lord came and stood there'. **But, still, it's not clear if Samuel 'saw' anything** with his eyes, for example, the **glory** of God's presence. In v 15 his experience is certainly described as a '**vision**' yet the **emphasis** is very much **on the content of the message**, of the '**word**' which was (somehow) communicated to him during this experience (vv 11-14).

Verses 11-14 indicate that, like many of the OT prophets (cf Is 6:9-13; Jer 1:5-19), Samuel's message - at least on this occasion - was to be one of **judgement** - judgement that was to fall **on the leadership** within Israel, in this case judgement **on Eli's house**, judgement that was sealed with an awesome oath (v 14): '*Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering'*'.

The **following day, v 15** informs us that Samuel tried to carry on business as usual opening the doors of the house of the Lord at the usual time. However, '*he was afraid to tell Eli the vision*'. While 'there is **no element of objection** or demurral in the story', nevertheless, in common with many of the OT prophets, Samuel does appear as a **reluctant prophet**, naturally 'afraid' to communicate the contents of the prophetic message to Eli (v 15). **Nevertheless**, when asked, **he did not hold back** (cf v 18). He told Eli everything '*hiding nothing from him*'.

In the **closing verses** of the chapter (cf **vv 19-21**), we're given a **retrospective summary of the whole** of Samuel's prophetic ministry - so these are verses that are **chronologically out of place** - something that is quite **typical of Hebrew narrative** in the OT, and appropriate enough in the present context. '*The Lord was with Samuel as he grew up*'. In other words, he **enjoyed the presence** of the Lord throughout his youth and ministry

and the Lord *'let none of his words fall to the ground'*. In this way his prophetic ministry **satisfied the criterion of authentic prophecy** recorded in **Deuteronomy 18:21f**. Each of his prophecies was fulfilled. *'And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognised that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord'*. Samuel's **status** as a prophet was **authenticated and established** throughout the **whole** of Israel, Dan and Beersheba being the **traditional boundary limits** of Israel to the north and the south respectively.

In a **summary note in v 21** we read that *'the Lord continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word'*. This wording doesn't really throw any light on the exact nature of Samuel's experience. But, what it does stress - especially when taken in contrast with v 1 - is that **'the word of the Lord'** was **no longer in scarce supply**. With Samuel, **a new dawn in prophetic revelation** had come.

Again, this is another of those places in the OT, where one catches a sense of the **main thrust** of the chapter by **comparing and contrasting the ending with the beginning**. The chapter **starts** with the statement that, just prior to Samuel's call to the prophetic ministry, *'the word of the Lord was rare; there were not many visions.'* But the revelation that was given to Samuel here through this call experience as a child or youngster was **not a one-off experience**; it was no 'flash in the pan', but rather the **beginning of a life-long experience** of hearing and proclaiming the word of the Lord.

The **prophetic call experience** was clearly **very significant** for the prophets, and again and again as one reads the prophets one gets that sense that **there were times** in their ministries when it was that **sense of call** that was all that **kept them going**, even in the face of great adversity, opposition and persecution. I think of **Amos' cry (Amos 3:8b)**: *'The Sovereign Lord has spoken – who can but prophesy?'* The **sense of divine compulsion** experienced by the prophets was so strong it **overcame** even all the **pains and hurts** that might otherwise have **disabled or silenced** the prophet for ever.

You see this perhaps most clearly **in the experience of Jeremiah** who has left us a series of passages that have come to be known as his **'Confessions'** in which he pours out his heart – indeed his **complaints** before God. One of the most telling of these is found in **Jer 20:7ff** where the prophet reminds God of what he is suffering as a faithful prophet (v 7): *'I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me ... the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long.'* Things have got so bad; his **suffering** has come to such a **pitch** that he is **ready to throw in the towel** and never open his mouth again in prophetic ministry. **Yet**, he finds, that he just can't do that – the **sense of compulsion** to bring the word of God to

the people is so overpowering, despite his suffering (v 9): ‘*But, if I say, “I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot*’ – and so his prophetic ministry continues.

One senses something similar in the experience of the **apostle Paul (1 Cor 9:16)**: ‘*... I am compelled to preach/ AV necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I preach not the gospel.*’

[3] THE NINTH CENTURY PROPHET ELIJAH

And in particular to see the **role that he had vis-à-vis the king**. When we last met, I mentioned the fact that the **Books of Kings give us an assessment** of each of the kings of Israel and Judah – an assessment that was **based not on** their domestic or foreign **policies**; not on their **military prowess** or success or otherwise in battle; or any such thing; **but rather** on whether or not they **led the covenant people in the true and faithful worship** of the covenant God as that is outlined for us in the Torah; and this is very much **the background** against which we have to understand Elijah’s prophetic ministry.

[A] The Assessment of Ahab’s Kingship (1 Kgs 16:29-33) [read]

Now, as you can see from the additional handout today, Ahab was **one of the 9th century kings** of the **Northern Kingdom of Israel**. He **reigned** during the period **869-850 BC**. Here (v 30) we’re told how he ‘*did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him*’ – the **same kind of assessment** that was made of **Jeroboam** (14:9) who was the **first king** of the Northern Kingdom, and also the same kind of assessment that was made of **Ahab’s father, Omri** (see 16:25, 30) – all of which suggests that **during the 9th century**, at least in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, **spiritually and morally-speaking**, there was a similar kind of **downward spiral** amongst the kings of Israel as we found was the case at earlier times, not least during the dark period of the judges.

The **assessment** of Ahab’s reign **continues** (v 31): ‘*He not only considered it trivial to commit the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat [as I mentioned, Jeroboam had been the very first king of the Northern Kingdom and he had set up idolatrous elements of worship from the very beginning of his reign – which are the ‘sins’ referred to here], but [Ahab] also married Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal – notice the -baal element at the end of his name - king of the Sidonians (in modern day Lebanon), and began to serve Baal and worship him. He set up an altar for Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made an*

Asherah pole and did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him."

It is clear from these words that Ahab's problems were to a large extent due to the **influence of his Phoenician wife**, Jezebel who hailed from the city of Tyre. Like Solomon's foreign wives before her, she **continued her pagan worship after marriage, maintaining it** on a large scale and **introducing her husband** to it, **and**, through him, the **population of Israel**. Jezebel was a **devotee of the fertility cult**, worshipping Baal and Asherah, respectively the god and goddess of fertility. That worship of Baal led not only **to theological confusion and syncretism**, but also to increasing **debauchery and immorality** since **drunken orgies and cultic prostitution** were part and parcel of the whole Baal fertility cult – and, **anyway**, as we saw in an earlier week, **once you break** the commandments in the **first table** of the law (Commandments 1-4); then it becomes **impossible to keep** the commandments of the **second table** of the law, as we are discovering to our cost in our own nation today.

Here, in **v 32** we're told that, in Israel's capital city of Samaria, **Ahab built a temple for Baal** and within the temple precincts an **altar** upon which, no doubt, sacrifices were offered to Baal. He also made an **Asherah pole** which was a symbolic representation of the Canaanite mother-goddess of fertility, the consort of Baal – actions that **contrast strikingly** with the teaching of **Deut. 12:3** which required that the Israelites cut down and burn any such (wooden) Asherah poles. So the king of Israel **boldly and brazenly** sets up and establishes **openly and publicly** things that the law of God demands should be destroyed – does that not **resonate uncannily** with what is happening at many points **in society at large** today in this country? And what's even worse, does it not resonate uncannily with what's happening **even in some of our churches** and denominations today?

From **chapter 18**, it is clear that Jezebel was not only **intent on promoting Baal worship**, she was also **intent on destroying the worship of Yahweh**. In **v 4** of that chapter, we learn of her determined bid to "kill off the Lord's prophets", **forcing** many of them **into hiding**. These **prophets of Yahweh** she **replaced** with significant numbers of prophets dedicated to Baal and Asherah. **Chapter 18:19** puts the **number** of the **prophets of Baal at 450**, and those **of Asherah at 400** - all maintained by the royal purse: they ate "at Jezebel's table".

It is against this background of the **importation and imposition of Baal worship** and the **deliberate attempt at the destruction of Yahweh worship** that we are to understand the

ministry of Elijah.

[B] The Main Concerns of Elijah's Ministry

1. Concerned about Issues of Social Righteousness (second table of the Law)

Like most of the other prophets, Elijah too was concerned about issues of **social righteousness** as we see most clearly from the episode in **chapter 21** to do with **Naboth's vineyard** which was **acquired ruthlessly** by Ahab and Jezebel **acting above the law** through the **manipulation and corruption** of elders and witnesses. As a result of that **Naboth was wrongly accused and killed** in the interests of rich and powerful royalty. But, as we saw in a previous week, **the King** of Israel was to be as much **under the law of God** as any other Israelite. So, **God revealed to Elijah** what had happened; he **sent Elijah to confront Ahab** to the face and to and to **pronounce judgement** against himself and his wife for their sin (vv 21ff). Elijah was concerned about issues of social righteousness, and **so also must the church** be in our own day.

2. Concerned about the True Worship of God and Undivided Loyalty to the Lord in Worship (first table of the Law)

Elijah's chief concern was to **counteract the increasing emphasis on Baal worship** and to **recall the people** to undivided loyalty to Yahweh, God of Israel. **His strategy** for so doing:

(i) Confront the man whose responsibility it was to lead the people in true worship - the King - and Announce the Judgement of God upon the Land. So, apparently out of nowhere, Elijah **bursts on the scene** in **1 Kgs 17:1**, **confronting** King Ahab and **announcing** in his presence one of the **curses/ judgements of the covenant** on the disobedient: '*there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word*' (see Deut 28:23-24) – as a result of which the king **designated Elijah** as the **Troubler of Israel** (18:17), much as today **those who stand up for the truth of God's word in the church** may well find themselves **pilloried** even within the church for '**trouble-making**', when in reality the true trouble-making – as in Elijah's day – lies elsewhere.

(ii) When God's time was right, he Challenged the People to Exclusive Allegiance to Yahweh (v 21), and Engaged in Open Conflict with the Whole False System of Worship Sponsored by Ahab and Jezebel

And he did that in the **great battle** on Mt Carmel. Having '**repaired the altar** of the Lord, which was in ruins' (18:30ff), having **laid the burnt offering** on that altar, having **dug a trench** round the base of the altar, and **having stacked the cards** against himself and his

Lord by **pouring copious amounts of water** on the sacrifice, not once, nor twice, but **thrice** so that even the trench was filled with water, Elijah **engaged in battle in the place of prayer** (v 36), crying: *‘O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these people will know, that you, O Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.’* And the next thing we read (v 38) is that *‘the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench.’*

At which point the **people got off the syncretistic fence** on which they had long been seated, halting/ wavering between two opinions (see v 21), **fell prostrate** and cried out convinced of this great truth: ‘The Lord – he is God!. The Lord – He is God!’ The **battle for worship was won** – at least temporarily – **at the place of sacrifice**, where the living God, the covenant God of Israel, manifested himself in power while the false gods were rendered powerless.

Of course, great as that battle – and victory - was on Mt Carmel, it **pales into insignificance** in **contrast** to the **once-for-all warfare that was waged and won on the Cross** of Calvary where Christ **destroyed the work of Satan**, as Paul reminds us in **Col 2:15**: ‘having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.’

That is why the Cross, and the **preaching of the Cross** in the power of the Spirit must ever remain at the **very heart** of the church’s proclamation, because therein lies **the power of God unto salvation** to everyone who believes. And I don’t know about you, but **from my own experience** I would have to say that there is **no other message/ no other doctrine/ no other teaching** in Scripture itself **that causes me to prostrate myself** before the Lord and cry: ‘The Lord – he is God; the Lord – he is God’ than the message of the cross.

So, let’s do everything in our power to keep the **preaching of the cross** and the message of **substitutionary atonement** through the cross at the very heart of the church’s proclamation. That is where the battle for worship has ultimately been won!