

## Session 3: The Early Prophets

### A. Seers and Prophets

#### A1. Samuel the Seer

First, note a number of points, which emerge from the story in 1 Samuel 9 and 10:

- In 9:6-8, Samuel is known as a "man of God".
- He is available to give advice about small domestic matters and charges a fee for doing so.
- However, 9:9 notes a change of terminology. The "man of God" was "formerly" called a "seer" but is "now" called a "prophet". We do not know when "now" actually was. It could have been the first time the story was written down. It could have been when it was first incorporated into what is now the Book of Samuel. At some point, an editor has inserted this verse to explain the out of date terminology used in the old story.
- 9:15-17 shows us that Samuel has a hot-line to God which others do not have. Because of this, he has a responsibility to the community. Contact with God is not his personal property; it exists for the benefit of the community. In fact, Samuel plays a leading role in his community. The slaughter of an animal was both a community occasion and a religious occasion. This was because, once killed, the animal's carcass could not be kept for very long. So a slaughter meant inviting the whole community to share the feast. It was a religious education because it meant the shedding of blood, which was sacred to God (Leviticus 17:10-13). The sacrifice was a communal feast and Samuel, because he was the "man of God", had to play a leading role in it.
- In chapter 10 we find that his role has a political dimension. Samuel anoints Saul and thereby legitimizes him as God's choice for Israel's first king.
- In 10:5 we meet a group of people who are called "prophets" by the writer of the original story. They are attached to the local shrine, Gibeath-Elohim or "Gibeah of God". They use a lot of music: harp, tambourine, flute and lyre. And they demonstrate a "prophetic frenzy", translated in other versions simply as "prophesying", the result of the influence of the spirit of the Lord.

#### A2. The "prophets"

What was a "prophetic frenzy"? There is a possible example of one in 1 Kings 18

**1 Kings 18:25-29**

Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, 'Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.' So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, 'O Baal, answer us!' But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.' Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

The prophets mentioned here are prophets of Baal. However, they were known as "prophets" so it is possible that what they were doing was "prophesying". We see them calling out to their god; "limping" about the altar - a ceremonial dance, similar, perhaps to what New Zealand and other South Sea Island rugby players do at the start of their matches. They also cut themselves with knives "after their custom". This appears to involve an element of imitative magic: their ritual would include asking Baal to release his life-blood to fertilize the earth, so here they are releasing theirs as a sign to the god of what they wanted him to do. It may be that "their custom" is the custom specifically of Baal prophets rather than all prophets. In Hosea 7:14, Hosea criticizes those who "gash themselves" to get grain and wine and the parallel line in this passage is "they rebel against me".

In contrast to the prophets of Baal, who indulge in a group ritual, Elijah, the "man of God", is on his own. He distances himself from the magic elements and the frantic ritual and mocks the prophets of Baal for their powerlessness. In contrast, Elijah's message is given through a series of actions. In 1 Kings 18:30-37, he repairs the altar of the Lord, he builds it according to the instructions of the Law, he uses twelve stones to symbolize the unity of the tribes of Israel, even in the time of the Divided Kingdom. Then he drenches the altar and the sacrifice with water, waits until the right time for the evening sacrifice and offers a simple prayer.