

Session 3: The Early Prophets

A. Seers and Prophets

A3. Prophets and Seers

This way of looking at the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal appears to set up a distinction between the "prophets", operating in groups, using music, dance and frenzy, and the "man of God" or "seer", operating as an individual and distancing himself from all that.

However, the situation is not as simple and clear-cut as that. There are several passages which show "prophets" and "seers" together. Here are some of them:

1 Samuel 19:18-20

Now David fled and escaped; he came to Samuel at Ramah, and told him all that Saul had done to him. He and Samuel went and settled at Naoth. Saul was told, 'David is at Naoth in Ramah.' Then Saul sent messengers to take David. When they saw the company of the prophets in a frenzy, with Samuel standing in charge of them, the spirit of God came upon the messengers of Saul, and they also fell into a prophetic frenzy.

2 Kings 2:1, 5, 15-16

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.

The company of prophets who were at Jericho drew near to Elisha, and said to him, 'Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?' And he answered, 'Yes, I know; be silent.'

When the company of prophets who were at Jericho saw him at a distance, they declared, 'The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha.' They came to meet him and bowed to the ground before him. They said to him, 'See now, we have fifty strong men among your servants; please let them go and seek your master; it may be that the spirit of the Lord has caught him up and thrown him down on some mountain or into some valley.' He responded, 'No, do not send them.'

2 Kings 3:11-16

But Jehoshaphat said, 'Is there no prophet of the Lord here, through whom we may inquire of the Lord?' Then one of the servants of the king of Israel answered, 'Elisha son of Shaphat, who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah, is here.' Jehoshaphat said, 'The word of the Lord is with him.' So the king of Israel and Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom went down to him. Elisha said to the king of Israel, 'What have I to do with you? Go to your father's prophets or to your mother's.' But the king of Israel said to him, 'No; it is the Lord who has

summoned us, three kings, only to be handed over to Moab.' Elisha said, 'As the Lord of hosts lives, whom I serve, were it not that I have regard for King Jehoshaphat of Judah, I would give you neither a look nor a glance. But get me a musician.' And then, while the musician was playing, the power of the Lord came on him. And he said, 'Thus says the Lord, "I will make this wadi full of pools."

2 Kings 9:1-14a

Then the prophet Elisha called a member of the company of prophets and said to him, 'Gird up your loins; take this flask of oil in your hand, and go to Ramoth-gilead. When you arrive, look there for Jehu son of Jehoshaphat, son of Nimshi; go in and get him to leave his companions, and take him into an inner chamber. Then take the flask of oil, pour it on his head, and say, "Thus says the Lord: I anoint you king over Israel." Then open the door and flee; do not linger.' So the young man, the young prophet, went to Ramoth-gilead. He arrived while the commanders of the army were in council, and he announced, 'I have a message for you, commander.' 'For which one of us?' asked Jehu. 'For you, commander.' So Jehu got up and went inside; the young man poured the oil on his head, saying to him, 'Thus says the Lord the God of Israel: I anoint you king over the people of the Lord, over Israel. You shall strike down the house of your master Ahab, so that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the Lord. For the whole house of Ahab shall perish; I will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. I will make the house of Ahab like the house of Jeroboam son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha son of Ahijah. The dogs shall eat Jezebel in the territory of Jezreel, and no one shall bury her.' Then he opened the door and fled. When Jehu came back to his master's officers, they said to him, 'Is everything all right? Why did that madman come to you?' He answered them, 'You know the sort and how they babble.' They said, 'Liar! Come on, tell us!' So he said, 'This is just what he said to me: "Thus says the Lord, I anoint you king over Israel." ' Then hurriedly they all took their cloaks and spread them for him on the bare steps; and they blew the trumpet, and proclaimed, 'Jehu is king.' Thus Jehu son of Jehoshaphat son of Nimshi conspired against Joram.

A number of interesting points emerge from these passages:

- In 1 Samuel 19:18, Samuel is among the prophets as their leader
- In 2 Kings 2, Elijah is about to be taken up to heaven, and the prophets know all about it. There is a company of prophets at Bethel, which was a major shrine, and another at Jericho, which can supply 50 men to mount a search.
- In 2 Kings 3:15, Elisha himself uses music to bring on a prophetic trance
- Although he operates alone, Elisha is also found as the recognized leader of a company of prophets. In 2 Kings 9:1-14, he sends one of the prophets with a message to Jehu, whom he is to anoint as king. Jehu speaks of him as a "crazy man" (2 Kings 9:11-12) but nevertheless the men with him expect a message from the Lord.

How are we to summarize the situation? It seems that there were two kinds of people. One type was, from earliest times, known as "prophets". They tended to work together in groups, usually at a local shrine. They used a lot of music and may have played a leading part in the worship of

the shrine. They were subject to "prophetic frenzy" when they came under the influence of the spirit of the Lord. This "holy strangeness" meant that they were looked at askance as "mad men", but respected as men with a special calling and might be called on for messages.

The other type is the single man who gave advice under divine inspiration, available for a fee in local towns and villages. He was known as the "seer" or "man of God". But the "seers" were never completely separate from the group phenomenon associated with "prophets". And in fact the term "prophet" eventually came to be applied to both groups.

Activity 3.2

Read 1 Kings 22:1-28

What do we learn about the activity of "prophesying" from this passage?

In 1 Kings 22, the prophets are brought in to "seek the counsel of the Lord". Ahab's queen, Jezebel, was a keen promoter of Baal religion, but following Elijah's victory at Mount Carmel, prophets at the royal court are operating under the banner of Yahweh. These court prophets are part of the establishment and consulted about national policy. They are asked a question and they are expected to come up with an answer. And in fact they do claim to come up with an answer. Zedekiah stands out among his fellow-prophets by indulging in a bit of imitative magic: perhaps the iron horns are to encourage Yahweh to do what is expected.

However, Jehoshaphat is not satisfied. He wants to consult a "prophet of the Lord". What does he mean by this? Perhaps he thinks Ahab is trying to fob him off with "prophets for hire". Perhaps he is not impressed by the prophetic frenzy being demonstrated and wants to hear from a seer instead. Perhaps he thinks Zedekiah and his colleagues are using techniques more appropriate to the worship of Baal or other pagan gods.

So Micaiah is sent for and he arrives, insisting that he is in touch with Yahweh. the words "I saw" imply that he has received the message in the form of a vision. In fact, this particular vision was a vision of the heavenly council. He has seen Yahweh on his throne, surrounded by his advisers, the host of heaven. Micaiah has been admitted to listen to the council in progress, so he knows what Yahweh's plans are, and he is implicitly trusted with the message.

Some 100 years later, Isaiah had the same experience. In chapter 6 we are told that he saw Yahweh on his throne surrounded by the heavenly host. He was told what Yahweh's plans were and commissioned as his messenger. The presence of the prophet in Yahweh's council is a detail which will become very important later, in the struggle between the prophets of the Lord and the "false prophets".