

Hebrew Prophecy: The Non-Literary Prophets

Lecture 15 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-15>

Overview

This lecture concludes the discussion of the Deuteronomistic historian's efforts to show that idolatry and associated sins lead to God's wrath and periods of trouble. The remainder of the lecture is an introduction to the phenomenon of Israelite prophecy which included ecstatic prophecy and prophetic guilds. The non-literary prophets of the historical books of the Bible and their various roles (as God's zealot; as conscience of the king) are examined.

1. Concluding Remarks about the Deuteronomistic Historian

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* So we were talking last time about the Deuteronomistic historian and their interpretation of the events that befell Israel, a very special interpretation that would make it possible for Israel to remain intact after the destruction of the state, the temple and the national basis of their society. And according to the Deuteronomist, it's the sin of idolatry, specifically the sin of idolatry and particularly the idolatry of the king, for which the nation is punished with exile and destruction. Punishments come for other sorts of sins, but the national punishment of exile and destruction follows upon the idolatry and particularly the idolatry of the king.

[2] So in the book of 2 Kings, a king who permits sacrifice only at the Jerusalem Temple is praised no matter what other faults he may or may not have, and one who does not is condemned, no matter what other accomplishments he may have to his credit. Now the Deuteronomistic historian is aware that the historical record doesn't lend itself very easily to this kind of interpretation. Because there are some good kings who reigned very briefly, and there are some very bad kings, on their view, who reigned for a very long time. Manasseh is a case in point. He reigned for over 50 years and is viewed as the most wicked of all kings.

[3] Sometimes disaster would strike right after the rule of a king that the Deuteronomist would view as a good king because of their

faithfulness to Yahweh, and sometimes it would not strike after the rule of a king that was viewed to be very wicked. So the Deuteronomist sounds the theme of delayed punishment — delayed punishment, deferred punishment.

[4] So for example, Solomon's misdeeds in allowing the building of altars for the worship of foreign gods to please his many wives, his foreign wives, is blamed for the division of the kingdoms, but the punishment was deferred until after his death and the time of his sons, and then you have this split between north and south with Jeroboam and Rehoboam reigning, respectively, in the north and south. The Deuteronomist sees Israel's defeat at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 as deferred or delayed punishment for the sins of Jeroboam I. Jeroboam I, 922 or so, came to the throne and installed two cultic centers at Dan and Beth-El, erecting golden calves. This is seen as a sin, for which the nation was punished 200 years later.

[5] As for the southern kingdom of Judah: you had some good kings in the view of the Deuteronomist in the south. Hezekiah — he's judged to be a good king; he instituted sweeping reforms and got rid of idolatrous altars and managed to maintain Judah's independence against the Assyrians. But his son Manasseh, who reigned for a large part of the seventh century, is viewed as extraordinarily wicked. He turned the Jerusalem temple into a pagan temple, and it was a time of great misery for those who were loyal to Yahweh, a time of great terror. And yet, he reigned a long time.

- [6] His eight-year-old grandson, Josiah, came to the throne upon his death, sometime, probably, in the 630s. And the Deuteronomist views Josiah as a good king. We've already heard about, or read the story which is reported in 2 Kings 22, of the refurbishing of the temple, which happens when he's about 25 or 26 years old; [he] discovers the book of the law, reads it, and is distressed because its terms are not being fulfilled. And so Josiah orders the abolition of outlying altars and pagan cults. He brings all of the priests to Jerusalem and centralizes all worship there in Jerusalem.
- [7] So in the Deuteronomist's view, Josiah is believed to be a very good king for purging the country of these idolatrous rites and centralizing worship. But the sin of Manasseh was too great and it had to be punished. So a prophetess, a prophetess named Hulda, tells Josiah that God plans to bring evil punishment on Judah for these sins, but it will be after Josiah's lifetime as something of a mercy to him.
- [8] And, in fact, it's in the next generation that Judah falls. In 586 the walls of Jerusalem are breached and the Temple is destroyed, and the king at that time, King Zedekiah, is blinded and taken in chains into exile with his court. And only the poor are left behind.
- [9] This is the Deuteronomist's attempt to account for these anomalies within their historiosophic view. And the result of the Deuteronomist's interpretation was remarkable. Because if the defeat of the nation were to be seen as the defeat of the nation's god by the god of the conquering nation, then the Israelites would have turned from the worship of their god, Yahweh, and embraced the new ascendant god Marduk. And undoubtedly, there were Israelites who did do this. That would have been the argument of history in their view. But not all did.
- [10] For some, defeat did not lead to despair or apostasy because it could be explained by the likes of the Deuteronomistic historian or the Deuteronomistic School as fitting into the monotheistic scheme. This did not impugn God's kingship or lordship over the universe, it was proof of it. God was punishing Israel for the sin of idolatry, which was in violation of his covenant. And to punish Israel, he had raised the Babylonians. They were merely his tool.
- [11] The historiosophy of the Deuteronomistic historian finds its classic expression in 2 Kings 17. I'm going to skim through sections of it so you can see the argument that's laid out there:
- In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria [the capital of the northern kingdom]. He deported the Israelites to Assyria and settled them in...[various places].
- [12] This happened because the Israelites sinned against the Lord their God, who had freed them from the land of Egypt, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshipped other gods and followed...the customs which the kings of Israel had practiced. Putting, again, the blame on the kings as the head of this idolatry. The Israelites committed against the Lord their God acts which were not right: They built for themselves shrines in all their settlements, from watchtowers to fortified cities; they set up pillars and sacred posts for themselves on every lofty hill and under every leafy tree; and they offered sacrifices there, at all the shrines, like the nations whom the Lord had driven into exile before them. So now he's going to follow through since they behaved the same way, to drive them into exile also. They committed wicked acts to vex the Lord, and they worshipped fetishes, concerning which the Lord had said to them, "You must not do this thing." The Lord warned Israel and Judah by every prophet [and] every seer, So God didn't just stand by idly. He was constantly sending prophets, messengers to tell them to turn back to the covenant. And we'll start talking about those prophets today. He sent warnings by "every prophet [and] every seer," saying, "Turn back from your wicked ways, and observe My commandments and My laws, according to all the Teaching that I commanded your fathers and that I transmitted to you through My servants the prophets." But they did not obey; they stiffened their necks, like their fathers who did not have faith in the Lord their God; they spurned His laws and the covenant that He had made with their fathers and the warnings He had given them. They went after delusion and were deluded;...they made molten idols for themselves — two calves — and specifically now, the sin of Jeroboam at Dan and Beth-El, two calves, "and they made a sacred post and they bowed down to all the host of heaven, and they worshipped Baal." (We'll hear more about

that today.) They consigned their sons and daughters to the fire; they practiced augury and divination, and gave themselves over to what was displeasing to the Lord and vexed him. The Lord was incensed at Israel and he banished them from His presence; none was left but the tribe of Judah alone. Nor did Judah keep the commandments of the Lord their God; they followed the customs that Israel had practiced. So the Lord spurned all the offspring of Israel and He afflicted them and delivered them into the hands of plunderers, and finally He cast them out from His presence.

- [13] It's a very depressing ending of things that started so auspiciously back in Genesis 1. But if the Deuteronomist laid the blame for the tragic history of the two kingdoms at the door of the sin of idolatry, and particularly the idolatry of the royal house, a different answer will be provided by Israel's classical prophets — no less an answer, no less an interpretation, and no less an interpretation that was intended to shore up faith in this God that one might think had abandoned His people.
- [14] We'll be turning to the prophetic answer to this great crisis that faced the Israelites in the next lecture. In this lecture, I first want to talk about the phenomenon of prophecy and some of the prophets who appear in the historical narrative.

2. Introduction to the Phenomenon of Israelite Prophecy

- [15] So, in the historical books that we've been looking at in the section of the Bible we call the Former Prophets — remember, the section called the Prophets we divide into Former Prophets and Latter Prophets: the section we call Former Prophets is a historical narrative; it runs from Joshua through 2 Kings, and it reads like a narrative — in that material, you have several prophets who appear, and they play a very important role in the national drama. The prophets of the tenth century, the ninth century BCE were associated with religious shrines. On occasion they were associated with the royal court.
- [16] But starting in about the eighth century, you have prophets whose words were eventually set down in writing, and they come to be in the books that now bear the names of the prophets to whom they are attributed. So these prophets, the ones whose words get recorded in books

that bear their name, these prophets we call the literary prophets or the classical prophets, in contrast to the prophets who are characters in the stories that we read from Genesis through 2 Kings. So there are two kinds of prophets.

- [17] The literary prophets: those books are collected together in the section we call the Latter Prophets. I hope this is making sense. So Former Prophets is the historical narrative, which happens to feature kings and prophets as characters in the narrative. The Latter Prophets, those are the books of prophetic oracles that bear the name of the person who gave the utterance, or the oracle. Okay?
- [18] And as I just said, the literary prophets, just like the Deuteronomist, struggle to make sense of Israel's suffering and defeat and to come up with an explanation and a message of consolation. And we will get to that next time. Today we'll look at the phenomenon of prophecy in ancient Israel by comparing or examining narratives in Samuel and Kings particularly, narratives that feature prophets. And that will provide very important background for the next lecture, when we turn to the books of the literary or classical prophets and the themes of that literature.
- [19] Now, prophecy was very widespread in the Ancient Near East. It took different forms in different societies, but ultimately [it was] very widespread. We know of ecstatic prophets from Second Millennium BCE texts in Mesopotamia. Seventh-century Assyria also has ecstatic prophets. Their primary focus was on delivering oracles for kings, usually favorable. It was always wise to give a favorable oracle to your king. And we have ecstatic prophecy in the Bible also, among the earliest prophets in particular.
- [20] The term ecstasy, when it's used in this context, refers to the state of being overcome with such powerful emotions that reason seems to be suspended, self-control is suspended, what we might think of as, you know, normative behavior. These things, normal behavior, these are suspended. Ecstasies would employ music and dance; they would induce a sort of emotional seizure or frenzy. They would often be left writhing and raving, and the Bible attributes this kind of ecstatic state to the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of Yahweh, which falls upon a prophet or rushes upon a prophet, comes

upon a prophet and transforms him then into some sort of carrier or instrument of the Divine Will or the Divine message.

[21] We'll see that we have bizarre behavior among many of the prophets. We even have bizarre behavior among many of the later literary prophets. Ezekiel, for example, will engage in all kinds of unusual, outrageous, dramatic behavior as a vehicle for the communication of his message. And I think this is the heritage of the ecstatic prophecy that was so much a part of Ancient Near Eastern prophecy.

[22] But not all biblical prophecy has this ecstatic character. The Hebrew word for prophet is a navi, and the word navi seems to mean one who is called, or perhaps one who announces. That's important because it signals to us that a prophet is someone who is called to proclaim a message, to announce something, called by God to carry a message. And so in the Bible we have this phenomenon of what we call "apostolic prophecy." An apostle is merely a messenger. The word "apostle" means messenger, one sent with a message. So apostolic prophecy — this refers to messenger prophets. They are called by God and charged with a mission. They can even be elected against their will. They must bring the word of God to the world.

[23] This is very different from prophets who are consulted by a client and given a fee to divine something. This is different. This is the deity now charging a prophet with a message to a people.

[24] So these apostolic prophets are represented in the Bible as the instrument of God's desire to reveal himself and to reveal his will to his people. And many scholars have noted that, in a way, Moses is really the first in a long line of apostolic prophets in the Bible. In some ways, his call and his response are paradigmatic for some of these later classical prophets. In many of the literary prophets you will read, they will contain some account of their call, of the sudden, dramatic encounter with God. Usually the call consists of certain standard stages.

[25] You first have this unexpected encounter with God. Maybe a vision of some kind or a voice that issues a summons or a calling. And then you have the reluctance of the individual. And that was also paradigmatic with Moses, wasn't

it? The reluctance of the individual concerned to answer this, but ultimately the individual is overwhelmed and eventually surrenders to God and his persuasiveness. That happens in many of the prophetic books.

[26] So in the Bible this kind of apostolic prophecy is a little different from ecstatic prophecy. It's also distinct from divination. Divination is an attempt to uncover the divine through some technique, or, excuse me, the divine will, through some technique, perhaps the manipulation of certain substances, perhaps inspecting the entrails of a sacrificed animal. Divination of this type as well as sorcery and spell casting and consulting with ghosts and spirits are all condemned by Deuteronomy. This is a very important part of the Deuteronomist's diatribe against the practices of other nations. But the fact that Deuteronomy polemicizes so vehemently against these practices is a sure sign that they were practiced — they were practiced at a popular level. This is probably what Israelite-Judean religion consisted of to some degree.

[27] And some of you will be looking in [discussion] section, I know, at the story of the Witch of Endor — when Saul goes to a witch to conjure up the spirit of, the ghost of Samuel to consult with him. Moreover, we do have divination in the Yahweh cult itself. But this was performed by priests. They consulted some sort of divinely designated oracular object or objects. We call these the urim and the tummim, which should be familiar to all of you here at Yale. But urim and tummim are usually untranslated in your text, because actually we don't really know what they mean. They might be related to the word for light, which is or, and the word for, you know, integrity, perhaps, or perfection, which is tam. It's probably something like abracadabra, a little bit of a nonsense syllable that plays on words that did have meaning.

[28] We don't really know what the urim and the tummim were, but they are said to be assigned by God. We think that it may have been colored stones that were manipulated in some way by the priest to give a "yes or no" determination to a question. But these were said to be assigned by God as a means that he himself authorizes for divining his will. And so, the Deuteronomist accepts these.

- [29] But in general, it's the view of the Deuteronomistic historian that divination, sorcery and the like are not only prohibited, they're quite distinct from the activity of prophets. That's not what the prophets were about, according to the Deuteronomistic representation.
- [30] The Hebrew prophet wasn't primarily a fortuneteller. And I think this is a very common misconception. The navi, the prophet, was addressing a very specific historical situation and was addressing it in very concrete terms. He was revealing God's immediate intentions as a response to the present circumstances. And the purpose of doing this was to inspire the people to change, to come back to faithful observance of the covenant. Any predictions that the prophet might make had reference to the immediate future as a response to the present situation. So in reality the prophet's message was a message about the present, what is wrong now, what has to be done to avert the impending doom or to avert a future calamity?
- [31] There were some women prophets in Israel. None of them are found among the literary prophets, that is to say none of those books bearing the names of the prophets who uttered the oracles in them are named for women. So we have no women among the literary prophets, but you do have prophetic or prophesying women besides Miriam in the Pentateuch. There's also Deborah, who was a tribal leader and a prophet featured in Judges 4 and 5. I mentioned Hulda, her advice is sought during the reign of King Josiah. And you also have Noadiah. Noadiah prophesied in the post-exilic period. So this doesn't seem to be limited to males.
- [32] Prophecy and kingship are closely connected in ancient Israel. And this is going to be very important. You'll recall, first of all, that the king is the anointed one of Yahweh, and it's the prophet who's doing the anointing. And that makes the connection between kingship and prophecy quite strong. If you think about Israel's first two kings, you also see a strong link with the phenomenon of prophecy. The first king, Saul, who was anointed by the prophet Samuel, is in addition, said to have prophesied himself in the manner of the ecstatic prophets. When he is anointed king, he's then seized by the spirit of Yahweh. He joins a band of men — and this is in 1 Samuel 10:5; they're playing harp, tambourine, flute and lyre, and he joins them and this induces an ecstatic frenzy, a religious frenzy, that transforms him into another man, according to the text. And on another occasion during his ecstatic prophesying, Saul strips himself naked.
- [33] We have other accounts in the Bible of ecstatic prophets who would engage in self-laceration. David, the second king, is also said to prophesy himself. He also receives Yahweh's spirit or charisma from time to time, in addition to being anointed by a prophet. Subsequent monarchs aren't said to prophesy themselves. So that ends really with David. It's only Saul and David who are among the prophets. But even so, though subsequent monarchs, do not themselves prophesy, the connection with prophecy remains very, very close. And it's exemplified in several ways.
- [34] Again, prophets not only anoint kings, but they also announce their fall from power. They are kingmakers and king-breakers to some degree. Also, you have a remarkable motif that runs through so much of biblical narrative, and that's the motif of prophetic opposition to kings. Every king had his prophetic thorn in the side. So you have Samuel against Saul. You have Nathan against King David. We'll talk about him a bit later. You have other prophets, Elijah, of course, against Ahab, Micaiah against Ahab. You have Elisha against the House of Ahab. Jeremiah is going to also stand against the king quite dramatically.
- [35] So that prophetic opposition to the monarch, to the king, sort of God's watchdog over the king, is an important theme throughout the stories of the former prophets. And it sets the stage for us to understand the writings of the named prophets that will come later. Those are very often given in opposition to official policy or royal policy.
- [36] Very often you have this literary motif that introduces the prophet's opposition. The Word of the Lord came to X, prophet X, against Y, against king Y. And then you get the content of it: because you have sinned, I will destroy you, I will wrest the kingship from you and so on. I want to take a quick look, though, at some of the roles that are played by prophets in the stories in Samuel and Kings. And I have them listed over on the far side of the board.

3. Roles Played by Prophets: Yes Men versus True Prophets

favorable about me, only disaster — Micaiah, son of Imlah” [Hayes’s translation].

[37] The first thing I want to consider is the notion of what I call “yes-men,” as opposed to true prophets. Like the kings of Assyria, the kings of Israel and Judah found it politic to employ prophetic guilds. And in many cases these court prophets, who were in the king’s employ, were little more than endorsers of royal policy.

[38] So on numerous occasions we see these professional prophets, these royal prophets, at odds with figures that the biblical writer will view as true prophets. They [the latter] are truly proclaiming the word of God and not just endorsing royal policy. And they proclaim it whether the king wants to hear it or not, whether the people want to hear it or not.

[39] And the classic example is Micaiah, the son of Imlah. Micaiah prophesies the truth from Yahweh even though it displeases the king and ultimately is going to cost him his freedom — not to be confused with Micah: Micaiah. His story is told in 1 Kings 22.

[40] This story is a pointed critique of the prophetic yes-men who are serving as court prophets for, and automatically endorse the policy of, King Ahab. He’s the king in the northern kingdom of Israel in the ninth century. And during King Ahab’s reign, the kingdoms of the north and the south, of Israel and Judah, have decided to form an alliance. They want to try to recapture some of the territory that has been lost to the north, territory in Syria. But you didn’t undertake any military expedition without first obtaining a favorable word from the Lord. So King Ahab’s prophets — and he has 400 of them — they are called, and the King asks them, “Shall I march upon Ramoth-gilead,” this is this region in the north, “for battle? Or shall I not?” “March,” they said, “and the Lord will deliver it into Your Majesty’s hands” [1 Kings 22:6].

[41] So we see that prophecy here is an institution. It is functioning as a source of royal advice. But the King of Judah, King Jehoshaphat, he had been perhaps hoping for an oracle against the campaign. And he says, “Isn’t there another prophet of the Lord here through whom we can inquire? And the King of Israel answered Jehoshaphat, “There is one more man through whom we can inquire of the Lord; but I hate him, because he never prophesies anything

[42] Well, Jehoshaphat insists and Micaiah is summoned. And he’s warned by the messenger who summons him that he’d better speak a favorable word like all the other prophets. The messenger says, “the words of the prophets with one accord are favorable to the king. Let your word be like the word of one of them; and speak favorably” [1 Kings 22:13, RSV; see note 1]. It’s almost an open admission that the prophets are, you know, little more than yes-men. So Micaiah answers the king’s question when he asks about the advisability of marching to the north. And he says, “March and triumph! The Lord will deliver [it] into Your Majesty’s hands.” He’s done what he’s been told to do: give the same answer as the other prophets. But he doesn’t use the prophetic formula. He doesn’t say, “Thus says the Lord” or some other indication that he’s had a vision, that he’s prophesying, that he’s actually conveying the word of the Lord. And the king seems to sense this and sense this deception, and he says, “How many times must I adjure you to tell me nothing but the truth in the name of the Lord?”

[43] So Micaiah lets the king have it, and he tells of this vision that he received from God, a vision of Israel scattered among, I’m sorry, of Israel scattered over hills like sheep. So he’s seeing sheep, right, without a shepherd. The implication being that Israel’s shepherd, who is the king, is going to be killed in battle and, like the sheep spread on the hill, Israel will be scattered. So the king is very irritated by Micaiah’s prophecy. He says, “Didn’t I tell you...he would not prophesy good fortune for me, but only misfortune?” [1 Kings 22:18]

[44] What’s interesting is, in the section that follows, Micaiah gives an explanation for why he is the lone dissenter. He doesn’t accuse the other prophets of being false prophets. He represents them instead as being misled, and as being misled by God, if you will. So for the second time Micaiah utters the word of the Lord. He has a second vision. And this vision is a vision of God, who is seated on a throne and the host of heaven are gathered around him. And God asks, “Who will entice Ahab so that he will march and fall at Ramoth-gilead?” And a certain one comes forward; he volunteers for this task, and he tells how he’s

going to do this. He says, “I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.” And God says, “You will entice, and you will prevail. Go out and do it.” So Micaiah concludes this vision by saying, “So the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours; for the Lord has decreed disaster upon you.” [1 Kings 22: 20-23]

[45] It’s all part of God’s plan. God is setting up Ahab for disaster, presumably as punishment for his many sins, just as he set up Pharaoh by hardening his heart, so that he would be punished — hardening his heart against Moses’ pleas to let the Israelites go. This is God’s way of ensuring their demise and insuring their punishment.

[46] The king’s a little upset. He doesn’t know whom to believe. So he doesn’t kill Micaiah on the spot. He imprisons him; he puts him on rations of bread and water, just to see what the outcome of the battle will be first. And Micaiah agrees to this. He says, “If you ever come home safe, then the Lord has not spoken through me” [1 Kings 22:28]. His prophecy proves accurate, of course. The king tries to disguise himself so that no one will know that he is king and no one will be able to target him in the battle. So he disguises himself. Nevertheless, he is killed in the battle and his army scatters.

[47] The story of Micaiah is polemicizing against what the biblical writer perceived to be the nationalization or the co-optation of the prophetic guild. And in the process, it paints a portrait of what the true prophet looks like. Micaiah is someone who is determined to deliver God’s word, even if it’s opposed to the wishes of the king or the view of the king and the view of the majority. He’s going to proclaim God’s judgment, and it will be a judgment against the nation. It will be a message of doom. And interestingly enough, this will eventually become understood as the mark of a true prophet. You know, the prophet of doom is the one who’s the true prophet. As you can imagine, this kind of negativity didn’t sit well with established interests. But at a later point in time looking back, the tradition would single out some of these prophets as the ones who had spoken truly. So that’s one role. The true prophet stands up against the prophetic guilds, the prophets who are employed by the kings.

4. Roles Played by Prophets: God’s Zealots, Kingmakers, King-Breakers and Miracle Workers

[48] A second role that we see prophets playing in this section of historical narrative: we see prophets as God’s zealots. And here again there’s a contrast between true prophets and false prophets. You find it particularly in those zealous Yahwists, Elijah and Elisha. The Elijah stories are found in 1 Kings 17-19 and 21. The Elisha stories appear towards the beginning of 2 Kings 2-9 and a little bit in chapter 13.

[49] These materials are good examples again of independent units of tradition, popular stories that were incorporated into the Deuteronomistic history. They are highly folkloristic; they have lots of drama and color, plenty of miracles, animals who behave in interesting ways. That this material began as a set of folk stories is also suggested by the fact that there’s a great deal of overlap in the depiction of the activities of the two prophets. So you have both of the prophets multiplying food, both of them predict the death of Ahab’s queen, Queen Jezebel. Both of them part water and so on. But in their final form the stories have been interspersed with historical footnotes about the two prophets and then set into this framework, this larger framework, of the history of the kings of the northern kingdom.

[50] So they’ve been appropriated by the Deuteronomistic School, which, remember, is a southern, Judean-based Deuteronomistic School. They’ve been appropriated for its purposes, which include a strong condemnation of the northern kingdom, of Israel and her kings, as idolatrous.

[51] So Elijah, Elijah the Tishbite — which means that he comes from the city of Tishbeh in Gilead, which is the other side of the Jordan — Elijah is a very dramatic character. He comes across the Jordan. He’s dressed in a garment of hair and a leather girdle. At the end of his story he’s sort of whisked away, one of the king’s servants surmises, by the wind of God. He does battle with the cult of Baal and Asherah. We associate Elijah most with the battle with the cult of Baal and Asherah. This had been introduced by King Ahab to please his Baal-worshipping queen, Queen Jezebel.

- [52] And as his first act, Elijah announces a drought. He announces a drought in the name of Yahweh. Now, this is a direct challenge to Baal, because Baal is believed to control the rain. He's believed to control the general fertility of the land and life itself. So Elijah's purpose is presumably to show that it is Yahweh, and not Baal, who controls fertility.
- [53] We have very good evidence that Baal was in fact worshipped in the northern Kingdom right down to the destruction. This is something we've touched on earlier as well. It's quite possible that Israelites in the northern kingdom saw no real conflict between the cult of Baal and the cult of Yahweh. But in the Elijah story the Deuteronomistic historian represents these two cults as being championed by exclusivists. It's one or the other.
- [54] Jezebel, Ahab's queen, kept a retinue of 450 Baal prophets and was killing off the prophets of Yahweh. And by the same token, Elijah is equally zealous for Yahweh. He refuses to tolerate the worship of any god but Yahweh, and he performs miracles constantly in the name of Yahweh to show that it is Yahweh and not Baal who gives life, for example. He raises a dead child; he multiplies oil and flour and so on, all of this in the name of the Lord to show that it is Yahweh, and not Baal who has true power.
- [55] But as I've mentioned before, there are some scholars who argue that biblical religion, again as opposed to Israelite-Judean religion — what actual people were doing in Israel and Judah, that's one thing, but biblical religion, which is this exclusive Yahwism or the tendency towards monotheism — there are some who believe that that biblical religion originated in the activity of zealous prophets like Elijah and Elisha in the north, doing battle with Baal worship. After the fall of the northern kingdom, those traditions, those Yahweh-only traditions, came south and were eventually absorbed in the Deuteronomistic School. So this in fact may be the origin of some: this Yahweh-only party represented by figures like Elijah and Elisha.
- [56] The conflict between the two cults, the Yahweh cult and the Baal cult, reaches a climax in the story in 1 Kings 18, this wonderful story in which Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal and Asherah to a contest. We have to remember that a severe drought has fallen on the land, which Elijah attributes to God's punishment for Ahab's sin in introducing Baal worship on a broad scale. Now, Elijah is hiding from the king, who's very angry with him for declaring this drought in the name of God. After three years he returns to Ahab. Ahab sees Elijah, and he says, "Is that you, you troubler of Israel?" [1 Kings 18:17]. And the prophet responds, "It is not I who have brought trouble on Israel, but you and your father's House, by forsaking the commandments of the Lord and going after the Baalim. Now summon all Israel to join me at Mount Carmel together, with the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table" that are supported by the royal house. When all of these people are gathered, Elijah challenges the Israelites. He says, "How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; and if Baal, follow him!" [v 21]. You're hopping between two opinions.
- [57] So it seems that at the popular level there is no problem with integrating these two cults, but you have the prophets of both that are demanding a certain exclusivity. He's met with silence. So Elijah prepares for a dramatic contest. Two bulls are slaughtered, and they are laid on altars, one an altar to Baal and one an altar to Yahweh. And the 450 prophets of Baal are to invoke their god and Elijah will invoke his God to send a fire to consume the sacrifice. The god who answers first, or the god who answers with fire, is truly God.
- [58] So the Baal prophets invoke their god morning to noon, and they're shouting, "Oh, Baal. Answer us." And the description that follows is wonderfully satirical.
- [59] But there was no sound, and none who responded; so they performed a hopping dance about the altar that had been set up. When noon came, Elijah mocked them, saying, "Shout louder! After all he is a god. But he may be in conversation, or he may be relieving himself [in the bathroom], or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up." So they shouted louder, and gashed themselves with knives and spears, according to their practice, until the blood streamed over them. When noon passed, they kept raving until the hour of presenting the meal offering. [1 Kings 18:26-29; see note 2]

- [60] So more hours have gone by and still there's no sound and none who responded or heeded. And then it's Elijah's turn. Elijah sets up 12 stones to represent the 12 tribes; he lays the bull out on the altar. He then digs a trench around the altar and he orders water to be poured over the whole thing so that it's completely saturated and the trench is filled with water. This is going to highlight, of course, the miracle that's about to occur.
- [61] And then he calls upon the name of the Lord, and instantly a fire descends from God and consumes everything: offering, wood, stone, earth, water, everything. And the people prostrate themselves and declare, "Yahweh alone is God. Yahweh alone is God."
- [62] The prophets of Baal are all seized and slaughtered. Elijah expects an end to the drought, and a servant comes to report to him that "A cloud as small as a man's hand is rising in the west," and the sky grows black and there's a strong wind and a heavy storm, and the drought is finally over.
- [63] The language that's used to describe this storm is the language that's typically employed for the storm god Baal. It drives home the point of the whole satire, that Yahweh is the real god of the storm, not Baal. Yahweh controls nature, not Baal. It's God who is effective; Baal is silent and powerless, and Israel's choice should be clear. Yahweh should be the only God for Israel, just as he is for Elijah, who's name El-iyahu means "my God [Eli = my God] is Yahweh."
- [64] So Jezebel is pretty upset and she threatens Elijah with execution. He flees into the desert, and he will spend 40 days and 40 nights on a mountain called Horeb, or Sinai. That, of course, is the site of God's revelation to Moses. Moses also spent 40 days and 40 nights there, and many scholars have pointed out the numerous parallels between Elijah and Moses. It seems that there was a conscious literary shaping of the Elijah traditions on the model of Moses, in more ways than just these two. We'll see a few coming up.
- [65] Elijah is in great despair at Sinai. He wants to die. He feels that he has failed in his fight for God. And so he hides himself in a rocky cleft, and this is also reminiscent of the cleft that Moses hides himself in in order to catch a glimpse of God as God passes by. Similarly, Elijah hides in a cleft where he will encounter God.
- [66] This passage is in 1 Kings 19:9-12:
- Then the Word of the Lord came to him. He said to him, "Why are you here, Elijah?" He replied, "I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life." "Come out," He called, "and stand on the mountain before the Lord." And lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind — an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake — fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire — a soft murmuring sound. Or perhaps a still, small voice. A lot of translations use that phrase, which is very poetic. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his mantle about his face and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.
- [67] Elijah seems to be renewed somehow at Sinai. This was the mountain that was the source of Israel's covenant with God. But whereas the earlier theophanies there at Sinai had involved earthquake and wind and fire, the narrative here seems to be making a point of saying that God is not in the earthquake and the wind and the fire. He is in the lull after the storm. This might then be providing a kind of balance or corrective to the preceding story that we've just had of Mount Carmel, Elijah on Mount Carmel. God may be the master of the storm, and Elijah dramatically demonstrated that, but he isn't to be identified with the storm in the same way that Baal was. He's not a nature god, and he's known only in silence. A kind of awesome vocal silence.
- [68] In the theophany then that follows to Elijah, God instructs Elijah to return. He has to leave Sinai; he has to return to the people. He has work to do; he has to foment rebellion, or revolution I should say, in the royal house. This task is one that Elijah will not complete. His disciple Elisha will end up completing it. But the importance in this scene I think is its emphasis on God as the God of history rather

than a nature god. Israel's God acts in history; he's made known to humans by his acts in history. His prophet cannot withdraw to a mountain retreat. He has to return and he has to play his part in God's plans for the nation.

And this kind of religious activity — which was clearly widespread in the Ancient Near East and in Israel — this kind of popular belief, this fascination with wonder-working charismatics, it's also seen very prominently in the gospels of the New Testament.

[69] So we've discussed the prophet as God's zealot, particularly as illustrated or exemplified by Elijah and Elisha. The prophets also had other roles, and we'll see this in Elisha. Elisha succeeds Elijah. The cycle of stories about Elijah ends with Elijah's ascent into Heaven on a fiery chariot in a whirlwind. That's a detail in the story that has contributed to the longstanding belief that Elijah never died. And so Elijah will be the harbinger of the Messiah. He will come back to announce the coming of the Messiah.

5. Roles Played by Prophets: Conscience of the King

[70] Elijah left his prophetic cloak to his disciple and successor Elisha. Elisha's involvement in the political arena was also important and highlights another prophetic role we've touched on before, that of kingmaker and king-breaker. So just as Samuel anointed Saul king and then David king in private meetings, you also have Elisha. He sends an associate to secretly anoint Jehu (Jehu is one of Ahab's ex-captains) as king of Israel. This is going to initiate a very bloody civil war. Jehu is going to massacre all of Ahab's family, all of his supporters, his retinue in Israel. He also assembles all of the Baal worshippers in a great temple that was built by Ahab in Samaria, and then he orders all of them killed and the temple demolished. So it is a pitched battle, an all-out war between the Yahweh-only party [and] the Baal party.

[73] A final prophetic role is very well-illustrated by the prophet Nathan. Nathan is the classic example of a prophet who serves as the conscience of the king. In 2 Samuel: 11-12, we have the dramatic story of David and Bathsheba.

[74] King David's illicit union with Bathsheba — as you know, she's the wife of Uriah who is fighting in the king's army — his illicit union with Bathsheba results in her pregnancy. And when David learns that Bathsheba is pregnant, he first tries to avoid the issue. He grants Uriah a leave from the frontlines. He says: Come on home and have a conjugal visit with your wife. And Uriah is very pious (and it leaves you to wonder who knew what when). It's a great story. It's told with a lot of subtlety and indirection. But Uriah is very pious, and he refuses: No, how could I enjoy myself when people are out there dying? which is an implicit criticism of the king, who just did that very thing. And so David is foiled there, and he plans to then just dispose of Uriah. So he orders Uriah's commanders to place Uriah in the front lines of the battle and then pull back so that Uriah is basically left on his own and he will be killed. And indeed he is. So David adds murder to adultery.

[71] We're not going to be looking at Elisha in great detail, but I will just point out one last aspect of his prophetic profile that I think is notable here in the book of Kings. And that is the characteristic of prophets as miracle workers.

[75] But not even the king is above God's law, and God sends his prophet Nathan to tell the king a fable. This is in 2 Samuel 12:1 through 14.

[72] Like Elijah, Elisha performs miracles. He causes an iron axe to float; he raises a child from the dead; he fills jars of oil. He makes poison soup edible. He causes 20 loaves of barley to feed a hundred men, and he heals lepers. These legendary stories, in which divine intentions are effected by means of the supernatural powers of holy men, this represents a popular religiosity. People would turn to wonder-working holy men when they were sick or in crisis, when they needed help.

“There were two men in the same city, one rich and one poor. And the rich man had very large flocks and herds, but the poor man had only one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He tended it and it grew up together with him and his children: it used to share his morsel of bread, and drink from his cup, and nestle in his bosom; it was like a daughter to him. One day, a traveler came to the rich man, but he was loathe to take anything from his own flocks or herds to

prepare a meal for the guest who had come to him; so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." David flew into a rage against the man and said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He shall pay for the lamb four times over because he did such a thing and showed no pity. And Nathan said to David, "That man is you."

[76] It's such a wonderful story, and it's wonderful to think that Nathan wasn't struck down on the spot. He escaped with his life after this accusation. But it's symptomatic of the biblical narrator's view of monarchy, the subjugation of the king to Yahweh, to Yahweh's teachings, to Yahweh's commandments, to Yahweh's true prophets that we don't hear that Nathan is carted off, but instead David acknowledges his guilt and he repents. He doesn't escape all punishment. For this deed the child of the union does in fact die, and there's a great deal of future strife and treachery in David's household as we know, and the writer does blame a good deal of that on the deeds, these terrible sins of David's.

[77] Elijah similarly is going to function as the conscience of King Ahab in 1 Kings 21. There you have a story of a vineyard. The king covets this particular vineyard of a particular man. So the king's wife Jezebel falsely accuses the man of blasphemy. That is a capital crime and the man is stoned to death, even though these are trumped up charges, and his property is transferred to the crown. Shortly after that, Elijah appears, and he pronounces doom upon Ahab and his descendants for this terrible deed. Ahab admits the sin. He repents. And so his punishment is delayed, but as we've seen he is later killed in battle at Ramoth-Gilead.

[78] So in these stories we see the prophets functioning as troublemakers of Israel — certainly from the royal point of view. And their relationships with the royal house — these relationships are quite adversarial.

[79] So we're ready to move into what we call the period of classical prophecy and the literary prophets. And that's a period that begins with two prophets, Amos and Hosea, whom we'll be talking about next time. The last prophet of the classical prophets was Malachi.

[80] So you have about a 320-year period. You have the prophets prophesying from about 750 down to about 430, 320 years. That's the span of time covered by these books of the literary prophets. And these prophets were responding to urgent crises in the life of the nation. It's easiest if we think of them as being grouped around four periods of crisis or four critical periods, which I've listed here. First we have prophets of the Assyrian crisis. Right? Remember the fall of Israel in 722 — so around that, clustering around that time. We have prophets of the Babylonian crisis, the destruction, of course, is 586, so we have prophets who cluster around that time, a little bit before. Then you have prophets of the Exile, the years that are spent in exile in Babylon, and that's primarily Ezekiel. And then we have prophets of the post-exilic or restoration community, when the Israelites are allowed to come back to restore their community. And we'll see certain prophets there.

[81] So in the eighth century, the Assyrian Empire is threatening Israel and Judah. You have two northern prophets, Amos and Hosea. The N is for north, so Amos and Hosea are prophesying in the north, and they're warning of this doom. It's going to come as punishment for violations of the Mosaic Covenant. Israel fell in 722. You have a similar threat being posed by the Assyrians to the southern kingdom, Judah. And so you have two Judean prophets, Isaiah and Micah. They carry a similar message to the Judeans. So those four we associate with the Assyrian crisis.

[82] With the fall of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria — that fall is in 612 and that's something that the prophet Nahum celebrates; then Babylon is the master of the region — Judah becomes a vassal state but tries to rebel. And the prophets Habakkuk and Jeremiah, they prophesy in the southern kingdom, in Judah. Jeremiah, he urges political submission to Babylon because he sees Babylon as the agent of God's just punishment.

[83] We'll come back and look at all these messages in great detail. Post-exilic prophet, or exilic prophet, Ezekiel as I said, a prophet of the exile who's consoling the people in exile in Babylonia, but also asserting the justice of what has happened. And then finally at the end of the sixth century when the first exiles are returning to restore the community, returning to the

homeland, they face a very harsh life. And you have Haggai, Zechariah promising a better future. You have prophets like Joel and Malachi who bring some eschatological hope into the mix. So that can help frame — those are the ones we’re going to touch on mostly. We’re not going to hit all of the prophetic books, but these are the main ones we’ll hit. And we’ll start with Amos next time.

[84] [end of transcript]

[85] Notes

[86] 1. Quotations marked RSV are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

[87] 2. The Jewish Publication Society’s Tanakh translation is modified here to reflect the idiomatic usage of “relieving himself.”

[88] References

[89] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from “Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text.” Copyright (c) 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. Single copies of the JPS biblical citations cited within the transcripts can be reproduced for personal and non-commercial uses only.

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