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The Function of the Prophets in the United Monarchy

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The purpose for the origin of the prophetic office, according to Freeman, was for "guarding Israel against Canaan's superstitious practices, as well as those of her neighbors... . Because of this, Moses announced the forming of the prophetic office for the purpose of continuing the divine revelation through the line of prophets." ¹ Therefore in a survey of any portion of Israel's history subsequent to Moses in which prophets are ministering, the two basic functions of revelation and guardianship should be found. On the other hand, with the passage of time a certain development can be expected in relation to such things as Israel's establishment in the land, the raising up of the judges, the background of the persons called to be prophets, the establishment of the monarchy, and the giving of additional revelation by God.

During the period of the United Monarchy the ministries of three named prophets are recorded—Samuel, Nathan, and Gad. A survey of the Scripture dealing with their ministries indicates that they functioned in three general areas. First, in the realm of revelation they functioned as revealers of God's word and preachers of God's message. Second, in the realm of intercession they functioned as priest and prayer warrior. Finally, in the realm of guardianship or administration they functioned as judge, king-maker, and advisor.

The Prophetic Function in the Realm of Revelation

In the area of revelation the prophets of the United Monarchy functioned both as revealers of God's word and preachers of God's message. That is, God directly revealed to the prophets His word for the nation or individuals at specific times for specific purposes, and the prophets also proclaimed and explained to the nation the message which God had revealed.

The Prophet as a Revealer of Revelation

The function of the prophet as a revealer of God's word can be seen in two ways. First, by the titles ascribed to him and secondly by specific instances recorded in Bible history where the prophets are shown to be revealers of revelation.

Prophetic titles. During the time of the United Monarchy the prophets were known by three titles—prophet (*navi'*), seer (*hozeh*), and seer (*ro'eh*), cf I Chronicles 29:29.

The term *navi'* is by far the most common term used to designate a prophet. It is used over 300 times in the Hebrew Old Testament and is translated prophet each time.² According to Brown, Driver, Briggs, *navi'* means "spokesman, speaker, prophet" and is used of genuine and false prophets.³ This title is given to such persons as Abraham (Gen 20:1-2), Moses (Deut 34:10), Aaron (Ex 7:1), Samuel (I Sam 3:19-20), Gad (I Sam 22:5), Nathan (I Ki 1:8-45), Elijah (I Ki 18:36), Isaiah (II Ki 20:1), Jeremiah (II Ch 36:12), Habbakuk (Hab 1:1) and Haggai (Hag 1:1). The prophet (*navi'*) was "a speaker, a mouthpiece or a spokesman for a superior... a speaker who declared the word that God revealed to him."⁴

The other two terms, *ro'eh* and *hozeh*, are not as common as *navi'* but are also used to refer to the prophetic function. The term *ro'eh* is the participial form of the verb *ra'ah* and is used twelve times as the title describing the function of a prophet.⁵ It is used in referring to Samuel (I Sam 9:9-19) and Hanani (II Ch 16:7) specifically, but in other contexts refers to prophetic activity as in Isaiah 30:10, Jeremiah 1:11, Amos 7:8, and Zechariah 4:2, 5:2.

The second term, *hozeh*, is used eighteen times as a title describing the function of a prophet.⁶ This term is used of Gad (II Sam 24:11), Iddo (II Ch 9:29), Hanani (II Ch 19:2), Asaph (II Ch 29:30), and Amos (Amos 7:12). Both terms are derived from verbs meaning "to see" and emphasize "the mode of receiving divine revelation."⁷ The prophets as seers received revelation from God through visions on occasion. That the two terms are synonymous can be seen from such passages as Isaiah 30:10 where they are used together and from the fact that both terms are used to describe the same person—of Hanani in II Chronicles 16:7, 19:2 and of Amos in Amos 7:8, 12.

Moreover, these two terms for seer are equivalent to the term prophet, the three being synonyms. This can be seen in their use in

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reference to Samuel (I Sam 9:10 - *ro'eh* and 3:19-20 *navi'*); in reference to Gad (II Sam 24:11 *hozeh* and *navi'*), in reference to Amos (Amos 7:12-14 *hozeh* and *navi'*) and in I Samuel 9:9 where the act of obtaining revelation from God is connected to one called both *ro'eh* and *navi'* at different points in history. As far as titles referring to function the three terms synonymously refer to spokesmen who declare God's message. The difference between the three is in regard to their emphasis. *Navi'* emphasizes the proclamation as a spokesman, while *ro'eh* and *hozeh* emphasize the reception of the message.

Prophetic activity. The activity of the prophets during the United Monarchy also indicates that they functioned as revealers of God's word. Each of the three named prophets received and declared God's word.

Since much was recorded about Samuel's ministry to the United Monarchy, several references can be found to show that the prophet functioned as a revealer of God's word. However, only one passage needs to be dealt with in order to confirm this fact. In I Samuel 3 Scripture records the call of the boy Samuel to the prophetic office. In verses 1-3 the background of the story is given; in verses 4-14 the account of Samuel's call is found, in verses 15-18 Samuel's first prophetic utterances are recorded; then in verses 19-21 the results are summarized.

Two phrases in verses 19-21 conclusively show Samuel to be a revealer of God's word. First, in verse 19, Scripture records that "the Lord was with him and let none of his words fail." Samuel is here portrayed as the spokesman of God whom God has commissioned and empowered. To "let none of his words fail" refers to the fact that God accomplished everything that He revealed through Samuel.⁸ Secondly, Scripture records in verse 21 that "the Lord revealed Himself to Samuel...by the word of the Lord." The idea of this phrase is that God continued to give Samuel a revelation of His word by some prophetic means. This continued throughout Samuel's ministry—he was a revealer of God's word.

The prophet Nathan also functioned as a revealer of God's word. This can be clearly seen on at least two occasions. First, in II Samuel 7, when David expressed his desire to build a temple to God, God directly revealed His will to Nathan (vv 5-7) along with the provisions of the Davidic Covenant (vv 8-16). Again in II Samuel 12 God sent Nathan to David with a message of repentance (vv 1-12) and favor (vv 24-25).

Not only were prophets spokesmen to reveal new revelation, but also they proclaimed and explained previously revealed truth.

Gad also functioned as a revealer of God's word. This is portrayed in II Samuel 24:11-25. In verses 1-10 David had sinned in numbering the people and had been convicted of it. In verses 11-25 God directs Gad to go to David with His revelation of judgment and forgiveness.

The Prophet as a Preacher of God's Message

This function of the prophet in the United Monarchy is almost exclusively found in the ministry of Samuel. It is possible that Nathan functioned in this sense at Solomon's anointing and inauguration in I King 1. On the other hand, Samuel on several occasions can be found addressing the people proclaiming and explaining God's message.

In I Samuel 7:3 Samuel is addressing the nation not with new revelation but with explanation and exhortation to obey previously revealed truth. In I Samuel 10:25-27, at the establishment of the monarchy, Samuel addressed the nation in regard to what had been revealed by God concerning the monarchy. This message most likely involved a proclamation and explanation of the principles found in Deuteronomy 17:14-20.

During the time of the United Monarchy the prophets functioned as revealers of God's word and preachers of God's message. Not only were they spokesmen to reveal new revelation to the nation and to individuals but also they proclaimed and explained previously revealed truth. As revealers of revelation the prophets made the unknown known. As preachers of revelation the prophets made the known understood and applied.

The Prophetic Function in the Realm of Intercession

The prophets were not empty channels of revelation who stoically passed along God's messages without involvement or emotion. They were in many instances moved by the spiritual conditions around them and by the reception and heed given to the revelation of God through them. This function, though not a major aspect of the prophetic ministry, is evidenced during the United Monarchy exclusively in the ministry of Samuel.

This fact may be attributed to several factors—first, Samuel was a Levite who functioned as a priest (I Sam 2:18, 16:1-5); second, Samuel was the predominant figure in Israel before the rise of Saul in that he functioned as a prophet, priest, and judge ushering out the line of judges and ushering in the establishment of the monarchy; third, much more is recorded of Samuel's ministry than that of Gad or Nathan; finally, Gad

and Nathan served during a more stable period of Israel's history when there were both king and high priest functioning.

The Prophet Functioning as a Priest

That the prophets functioned as priests is evidenced in the ministry of Samuel. By birth Samuel was a Levite and not of the high priestly line. This can be seen by comparing I Samuel 1:1 with I Chronicles 6:33-38. In I Samuel 1:1 Elkanah, Samuel's father, is identified as a descendent of Zuph. In I Chronicles 6:33-38 Samuel's ancestry is given in more detail indicating his descent from Levi through Kohath, Zuph and others. Samuel was of the tribe of Levi and particularly a Kohathite in regard to temple duties.

Samuel frequently functioned as a priest. In I Samuel 2:18 he is wearing the priestly ephod. In I Samuel 3:1 he is ministering either with or for the priests before Yahweh. In I Samuel 7:9-10, 9:11-14 and in other places he is offering up sacrifices to God as a priest would. As a Levitical priest, the prophet Samuel of the United Monarchy regularly functioned as a priest.

The Prophet Functioning as an Intercessor

Once again this function is found only in the recorded ministry of Samuel. Though there are no recorded instances of Nathan or Gad functioning as an intercessor, it is probable that they did on occasion intercede to God in prayer for the nation and the king.

Samuel's ministry of intercession was so outstanding that he is recorded along with Moses and Aaron in Psalm 99:6-9 as examples of prayer warriors. Samuel's recorded prayers are for the nation and the king. In I Samuel 7:5 he promises to pray for the nation and in verse 9 he prays and is answered. Again in I Samuel 8:6 he prays for the nation. In I Samuel 12:19 the people ask him to pray for them, then in verse 23 he promises to pray without ceasing for them. This promise probably included prayer for the king (cf v 25). In I Samuel 15:35 Samuel's grief over Saul no doubt included prayer. Without a doubt the prophets of the United Monarchy functioned as intercessors for Israel to God.

As spiritual leaders sent by God to the nation of Israel the prophets stood between God and Israel not only as revealers and preachers of God but also as intercessors for Israel. When personally qualified the prophet functioned as a priest in offering sacrifices. When spiritual conditions were low or other needs arose, the people turned to the prophet for

Samuel, Moses and Aaron are examples of prayer warriors.

prayer on their behalf. The prophets of the United Monarchy functioned as priest and prayer warrior.

The Prophetic Function in the Realm of Administration

The prophets served as God's guardians to the nation of Israel. In the time of the United Monarchy this guardianship or administration took the form of judge, king-maker, and advisor. All three named prophets of the United Monarchy functioned in one or more of these capacities. Even with the establishment of the monarchy the office of prophet did not cease because the need for their God-directed guidance and guardianship did not end.

The Prophet Functioning as a Judge

This function is found only in the life of Samuel since he served as "the link that binds together the period of the judges and that of the monarchy."⁹ When Nathan and Gad ministered, the line of judges had already come to an end, having been replaced with the office of king.

Samuel's judgeship may be looked upon as being composed of two phases divided by the anointing and ascension of Saul. Before Saul's reign, Samuel's judgeship contained an element of preparation for the monarchy during which he was the civil leader of Israel. "Samuel became a judge in a different sense from his predecessors... He was the restorer of the whole land; one who brought the different parts of it into connexion with each other; who made them feel the blessings of a common organization."¹⁰

In making his circuit annually (I Sam 7:15-17) he judged in what Edersheim describes as "the real meaning, by setting right what was wrong within Israel, and by becoming the means of their deliverance from the enemy."¹¹

After the reign of Saul began, Samuel continued his annual circuit (I Sam 7:15) but did not exercise the civil aspects of his judgeship. He no longer functioned as the civil leader since there was a king on the throne. However, he did continue to function in the capacity of a judge in the spiritual sense as "the centre and organ of the religious...life of the people."¹² This ministry probably included prayer, teaching, and sacrifice (cf I Sam 16:1-5, 19:18-24).

The Function of the Prophet as a King-maker

As a king-maker the prophet designated by public anointing the man whom God had chosen to be king. Both Samuel and Nathan functioned in this aspect of the prophetic ministry. The need for the prophet to function as king-maker arises from the need to be certain of God's choice

of the right man to be king. As God's spokesman and revealer of God's word the prophet was used to accomplish this act.

The anointing of Saul. The anointing of Saul is recorded in I Samuel 9-10, with the account of a public renewing of the kingdom in chapter 11. The element of divine guidance in the lives of both Saul and Samuel cannot be overlooked. First, God providentially directs Saul to Samuel (9:1-14). Then God reveals His will to Samuel (vv 15-16) and specifically points Saul out as the prospective king (17). After a time when they can be alone, Samuel privately anoints Saul to be king (9:25-10:1). Then after a time of preliminary signs and tests Samuel anoints Saul publicly (10:17-27, 11:12-15). Samuel functioned as king-maker in anointing Saul to be the first king of the United Monarchy.

The anointing of David. The account of David's anointing is found in I Samuel 16. Since Saul already sat on the throne, David's anointing by necessity was private, taking place among his immediate family only (vv 6-13). However, with time others came to realize that David was God's choice to be the next king. Jonathan, Saul's own son and heir-apparent, realized God's plan for David to succeed Saul (I Sam 20:30, 24:20). Even Abigail, the wife of Nabal, recognized David as God's choice as "ruler over Israel" (I Sam 25:30).

After Saul's death David was publicly anointed by Samuel as king over Judah (II Sam 2:4-7) and over Israel (II Sam 5:2-3). "These anointings are to be seen as official inaugurations to the duties of kingship. They are based upon the first anointing by Samuel as I Chronicles 11:3 states."¹³ Samuel, the king-maker, anointed the United Monarchy's first God-given king, David.

The anointing of Solomon. The anointing of Solomon is recorded in I Kings 1. Solomon's prophetic designation as king is a little different from Saul's and David's since with the revealing of the Davidic Covenant the emphasis shifts from the individual to the line. "Divine designation now shifted from that of the individual to the dynasty. He who ruled in the Davidic line automatically enjoyed divine sanction though he still had to obey Yahweh to enjoy full benefits."¹⁴ However, the need for anointing a king remained after the Davidic Covenant was instituted because God's choice was not always the eldest son. While succession to kingship in pagan governments might rest in position of birth with the eldest replacing the father, in God's monarchy succession to kingship was indicated by prophetic anointing.

It was Nathan who was directly involved with Solomon's ascent to the throne. Nathan took the initiative in bringing about Solomon's reign (v 11). He planned the meeting with David (vv 12-14). And he took part along with Zadok, the high priest, in anointing Solomon to be king (vv 34,

*God's choice to be king was not always
the eldest son.*

45). As God's guardian to Israel, Nathan secured Solomon's kingship and prevented the wrong man from succeeding to Israel's throne.

The Prophet Functioning as Advisor

Because of the function as spokesman for God and king-maker, the prophet naturally became the king's critic declaring to him the will of God. Young writes, "The prophetic institution as such may be regarded as the guardian of the theocracy... . They would thus be preservers and defenders of the principles upon which the theocracy had been founded by God. Their work in one sense was to supplement that of the kings."¹⁵ Thus this prophetic function includes the idea of critic and advisor. The prophet directed by God criticized the wrongful acts of the kings on one hand and counseled them to righteous acts on the other hand.

The prophet as a critic. Unlike other Near Eastern monarchies the word of the king of Israel was not absolute, since the king was but a representative of God. "Among the Israelites it is generally assumed that the prophet had a free hand, and not only dared, but was permitted, a freedom of speech which would have been quickly punished in another."¹⁶

On this basis Samuel served as God's critic to Saul in I Samuel 13:13-14 and 15:17-35. Not only did Samuel set Saul up as king but when Saul sinned against God, Samuel criticized him by delivering God's message of judgment on his dynasty and kingship.

Nathan and Gad served as God's critics of David. Nathan in II Samuel 12 was sent by God to criticize and reveal David's sins of adultery and murder and to announce the appropriate judgment for sin. Gad was sent to David in II Samuel 24 to pronounce God's judgment for sin when David wrongly numbered the people.

The prophet as a counselor. As guardians of the theocracy and spokesmen of God, the prophets were the obvious choice to be advisors to the king. Thus the prophets were frequently in the presence of the king. Often however, they were not sent to him primarily but they were sent through him to the nation since they had the best position of influence on the welfare of the nation.¹⁷

Thus Samuel is found advising Saul in I Samuel 15:1. Gad directs David even before his public ascension (I Sam 22:5). Nathan is confided in by David concerning the building of the temple (II Sam 7:2-3). The reference to Gad in II Samuel 24:11 as "David's seer" seems to indicate the relationship of a trusted counselor. Also the histories written by the prophets (I Chron 29:29) may have been in part products of their function as advisor.

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and counselled to righteous acts.*

As advisors, being both critic and counselor, the prophets never lost sight of the spiritual in their political activity. They ever remained God's spokesmen in order to assure the prosperity of the monarchy and of the nation.

Conclusion

During the years of the United Monarchy God sent three named prophets to Israel—Samuel, Nathan, and Gad. In their ministry as prophets they functioned in the realm of revelation to reveal and to proclaim God's word. They functioned in the realm of intercession as priest and intercessor with sacrifice and prayer. And they functioned in the realm of guardianship or administration as judge, king-maker, and advisor to direct the civil and spiritual affairs of the nation by their criticism and counsel.

God very graciously granted to His people a continuous, accompanying revelation, which would endure side by side with the theocracy.¹⁸ God Himself provided a revelation through His prophets who proclaimed God's word and directed its practice.

Endnotes

¹ Hobart E Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), p 26

² George Wigram, *Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub House, 1970), pp 784-6

³ Francis Brown, S R Driver, Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (London: Oxford on the Clarendon Press, 1907), p 611

⁴ Gordon L. Complin, "A Study of the Biblical Hebrew Appellatives and Epithets Relating to the Old Testament Prophets" (unpub Th M thesis, Dallas Theo Seminary, 1972), p 20

⁵ Wigram, pp 1139-40

⁶ *Ibid*, p 410

⁷ Freeman, p 40

⁸ C F Keil and F Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publ Co, 1973), II, 51

⁹ John E McFadyen, *The Messages of the Prophetic and Priestly Historians* (Chas Scribner's Sons, 1903), p 141

¹⁰ Frederick D Maurice, *The Prophets and Kings of the Old Testament* (London: Mac-Millan & Co, 1891), pp 4-5

¹¹ Alfred Edersheim, *The Bible History* (London: The Religious Tract Society, n d), IV, 28

¹² *Ibid*, p 31

¹³ William Warren, "The Role of the Prophet as Designator of Yahweh's King" (unpublished Th M thesis, Dallas Theological

Seminary, 1968), p 24

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p 28

¹⁵ Edward J Young, *My Servants the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publ Co, 1952), p 82

¹⁶ Loring W Batten, *The Hebrew Prophet* (London: Methuen & Co, 1905), pp 165-6

¹⁷ Young, p 82

¹⁸ *Ibid*

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