

Part Three

The Prophets

CHAPTER 22

The Early Period

UP TO this point, we have considered the history of Israel and Judah largely in terms of kings and their subjects — the rulers and the ruled. This is a natural enough approach; if there are few kings in our twentieth century world, we are familiar with the presidents and prime ministers who exercise similar political leadership, power and influence. Moreover, it is the approach of our basic literary sources for the period, the Books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles; and much of the extra-biblical material was written in the name of some ancient king, to celebrate his power and achievements. But even if we have given pride of place to the kings of old, and concentrated on the political and the secular, we have already found it impossible to ignore the prophets entirely. Such remarkable figures were never easy to ignore! It is now high time we gave them their rightful place in the narrative. It is surely no accident, no mere historical coincidence, that the era of the Hebrew monarchy coincided with the hey-day of the prophets. The compilers of the Hebrew Bible showed a true insight when they bracketed the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings with the prophetic books, and labelled the whole collection “the Prophets”. The deeds of the kings and the words of the prophets can be seen to interconnect and interplay, from the time of Samuel and Saul until that of Jeremiah and Zedekiah.¹

We may readily grant their importance; but who *were* these individuals? The very word “prophet” is one that today requires some explanation; and it is very difficult to think of any modern analogy to the place such men held in ancient Israelite society. We

1. Prophecy did not, of course, come to the same abrupt end as did the monarchy; but the story of the exilic and postexilic prophets does not come within the scope of this book.

may be sure, however, that unique as they were as individuals, their office was a natural enough one in their own milieu.

The Old Testament itself acknowledges the fact that other deities had their own prophets; Elijah threw out his famous challenge not to the priests of Baal, as we might have expected, but to the Baal prophets. Within the stream of the worship of Yahweh, moreover, there were false prophets as well as true. After the period of Old Testament prophecy had long since expired, we meet Christian prophets in the New Testament; centuries later still there were prophets in Arabia, culminating in the person of Muhammad of Mecca; and J. Lindblom also hails St. Bridget of fourteenth century Sweden as a similar figure. Long before the "classical" prophets of the Old Testament, too, comparable figures were to be found in the ancient Near East. An interesting Egyptian tale about a traveller called Wen-Amun (c. 1100 B.C.) relates that at the court of the prince of the Phoenician city of Byblos, not so far from Palestine, a young man was suddenly possessed by the god Amun, and uttered an oracle giving instructions to the prince.² Earlier still, and further east, we find a similar situation pertaining in the great city of Mari on the Euphrates, during the eighteenth century B.C.; here too there were individuals who uttered divine oracles at the royal court.³

Professor Lindblom describes all such prophetic figures thus: "There are *homines religiosi* to whom religious experiences as such are the essence of their religious life. Personal communion with God, prayer, devotion, moral submission to the divine will are the principal traits in their religious attitude. That which distinguishes a prophet from other *homines religiosi* is that he never keeps his experiences to himself; he always feels compelled to announce to others what he has seen and heard. The prophet is a man of the public word. He is a speaker and a preacher. The prophet is an inspired man . . . The prophet is compelled by the spirit".⁴

Such a general description fits the Old Testament prophets very aptly. But let us turn specifically to the period of the monarchy, and to the prophets of Israel and Judah. The first individual figure that confronts us is that of Samuel. He was certainly a prophet, but apparently also a priest and a "judge", and it is an impossible task for the historian to distinguish between the various roles that he played. In any case, he lived at a unique point in Israel's history. But contemporary with him, there were also bands of prophets in Israel, one of which is described for us in 1 Samuel 10:5: "a company of prophets . . . led by lute, harp, fife, and drum, and filled

2. Cf. *ANET*, pp. 25-29.

3. Cf. A. Lods in H. H. Rowley (ed.), *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy* (Edinburgh, 1950), pp. 103-110.

4. Cf. J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 1f.

with prophetic rapture''. These folk were by no means unique; they play a very minor rôle in the story, and the implication of the chapter is that the biblical writer did not wholly approve of them. We do not know anything about their leadership or organization (if they had any). The spotlight rests on the unique individual, Samuel.

When Saul was made king, Samuel lost his rôle as political leader, but retained his religious rôle, that of prophet-priest. He did not, however, choose to "opt out" of the political arena altogether. At the very beginning of Saul's reign, he executed a document which in some sense was intended to hinder any despotic behaviour on the part of the king. The New English Bible rendering of the relevant verse (1 Samuel 10:25) tells us that "Samuel then explained to the people the nature of a king, and made a written record of it on a scroll which he deposited before the LORD". This might be taken to refer to some such warning about the despotic tendencies of kings, as is set out in 1 Samuel 8: 11-18. The Revised Standard Version, however, speaks of "the rights and duties of the kingship". The verse, says J. Mauchline, "is concerned with the rights and duties of an anointed king united with Yahweh and his people in covenantal obligation"; and Professor Mauchline suggests that whenever the king afterwards worshipped at that shrine (Mizpah), and set eyes on the document, he was reminded of the charge laid upon him by Samuel in Yahweh's name.⁵ One is reminded of the passage in Deuteronomy 17:14-20. The Hebrew monarchy was from the start a "constitutional" monarchy. The king was bound by covenant, and the man who ensured that this should be so was Samuel, who may well, by practice and maybe precept too, have laid the foundation for the distinctive rôle of the prophets who followed him. The prophet was to be not only the man who uttered oracles at court (as at Byblos and Mari) but also the man who constituted himself the people's watchdog, the Ombudsman of Israel and Judah. He would keep a keen eye on any breach of the laws of Yahweh — by king or people.

Before long, there was a bitter quarrel between Samuel and Saul, resulting from two incidents which have been represented as the new king's attempt to make himself master of both priests and prophets.⁶ Be that as it may, two aspects of this quarrel are of particular interest. The first is that both incidents occurred in the context of foreign wars, one with the Philistines, the other with the Amalekites. The second important feature is the result of the quarrel — the fact that Samuel proceeded to anoint another man, David, as king of Israel. In other words, Samuel set two further precedents for future

5. J. Mauchline, *1 and 2 Samuel* (NCB: London, 1971), pp. 102f.

6. See H. L. Ellison, *The Prophets of Israel* (Exeter, 1969), p. 26. The incidents are recounted in 1 Samuel 13:8-14 and 15:1-33.

prophets; he established their right both to pronounce God's word about international affairs, and to take revolutionary action, if need be, in their own political context. One can well understand why both kings and their secular advisers came to view prophets with suspicion.

The in-built tensions between prophet and king were muted during the reign of David; there might well have been conflict between David and Nathan, in view of the latter's strictures over the Bathsheba affair, but since David proved willing to humble himself (having after all pronounced judgement upon himself), no quarrel ensued. This particular episode concerned private morality, we might be tempted to think; but adultery and murder were specifically forbidden by Israel's covenant laws, and Nathan was a true prophet, a true guardian of the covenant, when he challenged David's behaviour.

Nathan also figured prominently in another matter. 2 Samuel 7 reports that when David proposed to build a temple, Nathan intervened and dissuaded him; at the same time, he informed the king that God had chosen him to found a dynasty. Thus David was signally favoured, where Saul had been rejected. W. Zimmerli has written: "when we set this promise in the wider context of the promise of God to Israel, we can see that it expresses a new, and hitherto unknown, demonstration of the gracious attitude of God to his people and their king. This history of Yahweh's saving action towards Israel was thereby continued".⁷

In the sequel, Nathan himself took a leading part in the accession of David's son Solomon, fulfilling (in part) the prediction made to David, but also indicating God's choice in the matter, that is to say which son of David was to succeed him.

In all these various interventions on the part of Samuel and Nathan, we observe another hallmark of the prophet: his message from Yahweh very frequently embraced a future as well as a present dimension. Samuel had predicted Saul's loss of the throne; Nathan predicted both the death of David's first son by Bathsheba, and the fact of the dynasty which would presently succeed to David's throne. Prophecy always included a measure of prescience; if second sight tends to be largely discredited by our materialistic contemporaries, the fact remains that some such ability has been widely attested for seers and soothsayers of many epochs, and not merely for the biblical prophets. Whatever approach we may adopt to Scripture, men like the prophets are not to be judged by normal standards.

Our information about Nathan is severely limited, and we know

7. W. Zimmerli, *The Law and the Prophets* (ET Oxford, 1965), p. 63. Zimmerli's approach contrasts with that of a number of scholars who have rejected the historicity of much of 2 Samuel 7. Cf. Lindblom, *op. cit.*, pp. 76f. See also A. Weiser, *ZAW* 77 (1965), pp. 153-168.

even less about the functions and activities of his contemporary, Gad. He is referred to as "David's seer", in addition to the title "prophet" (cf. 2 Samuel 24:11), and it seems probable that he was a sort of private chaplain to the king; he first appears at David's side in the days of the latter's fugitive existence in southern Judah (1 Samuel 22:5), long before he gained the throne. In the narrative recounted in 2 Samuel 24, Joab chose to approach the king via the good offices of Gad, which again suggests that there was a close personal relationship between David and Gad. Gad left one permanent legacy to the whole nation, however; it was he who instructed David to set up an altar on the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite (2 Samuel 24:18), thus making sacred the spot where the temple of Solomon would be erected.

No doubt there were prophets during Solomon's reign, and no doubt they disapproved of some of Solomon's actions; but there is no record of any prophet's having confronted him with his misdeeds. Possibly the divine warning contained in 1 Kings 11:11ff. was delivered to Solomon through the agency of some prophet, but the text does not say so; it is equally possible that the passage is the historian's comment on Solomon's conduct, but we may confidently deduce from the sequel that this was a prophetic viewpoint held at the time.

Before Solomon died and was succeeded by Rehoboam, a prophet from Shiloh called Ahijah had already taken steps to divide the kingdom. He it was who not only predicted that division, but conveyed the word of Yahweh to Jeroboam that he was to be king of the northern tribes. He tore a new cloak into twelve pieces, and handed ten of them to Jeroboam as a symbol and pledge of what Yahweh purposed for Jeroboam and for Israel (1 Kings 11:26-39). Such symbolic action is another characteristic of the Old Testament prophets. The torn robe signified that there could be no escaping the word of God; what God willed, must be. Thus Ahijah pronounced the irrevocable fate of the united Hebrew kingdom. Political realists of the time might have foreseen that the tensions within the kingdom must inevitably lead to division; but the prophets did not operate on the ground of political analysis and assessment. For Ahijah, the imminent disruption of the monarchy was not a political inevitability, but God's plan and decision in the light of Solomon's idolatry. Solomon, in other words, had breached the solemn covenant with Yahweh; he had in some measure failed to observe the First Commandment, and to some degree oppressed the covenant people.

Ahijah was a northern prophet — Shiloh lay in the tribal territory of Ephraim — but there is a brief indication that his view of the matter was shared by his Judaeian counterpart, Shemaiah. When Rehoboam mustered his troops to do battle with the upstart,

Jeroboam, the prophet Shemaiah dissuaded him from major hostilities with a brief but pungent oracle from Yahweh: "You shall not go up to make war on your kinsmen the Israelites. Return to your homes" (1 Kings 12:24).

Thus from the earliest years of the Hebrew monarchy, we find prophets making kings and deposing them, dividing a kingdom and stopping a war. Such men were far from being preachers of pious platitudes, eloquent in the pulpit and ineffective outside it. They were men whom kings and statesmen had to reckon with. Jeroboam might have supposed that Ahijah had allowed him *carte blanche* in Israel; if so, he soon discovered his error. He endeavoured to make the shrines of Dan and Bethel attractive rivals to the Jerusalem temple, and in doing so appears to have catered to all the idolatrous and syncretistic tastes of his citizenry. The priesthood became his lackeys, and raised no objections; but prophets such as Ahijah were scandalized, and voiced their objections in no uncertain manner (see 1 Kings 13:1-14:18). Jeroboam might have been known to posterity as the man who created the kingdom of Israel; instead he is "the man who made Israel to sin". He might have founded a long-lived dynasty to rival David's in Judah; instead, his son Nadab could hold the throne for only a couple of years before falling by conspiracy and assassination. There was to be tension, if not downright hostility, between king and prophet throughout the history of the northern kingdom. Jeroboam sought to place one prophet under arrest (1 Kings 13:4); Ahab went so far as to imprison another (1 Kings 22:26f.); even the great Elijah had to flee from a royal threat to his life (1 Kings 19:1ff.), while Amos was served with a deportation order (Amos 7:12). Equally, prophets might at times take strong action against a king, as when Elisha organized the *coup d'état* which overthrew the dynasty of Omri. The fact that prophets were not eliminated altogether in itself testifies to the fact that none of their contemporaries could deny that God spoke through them. They were to a large extent shielded by the power seen to reside in them, and also by popular esteem — even when the people paid little heed to what they were saying. The alternative policy was to establish other prophets who could contradict them, even ridicule them; in part the kings of Israel (and Judah too, in due course) may have created the phenomenon of false prophets. At all events, they certainly fostered the phenomenon by their patronage.

We have already considered a number of examples of the predictive powers of the prophets. Sometimes they merely indicated what would happen; sometimes their very words created the event they predicted, as when Ahijah in effect offered the northern kingdom to Jeroboam. The fact that such predictions were made cannot be doubted by any serious investigator. But 1 Kings 13:2 contains a particularly remarkable prognostication. An unnamed prophet from

Judah, we are told, confronted Jeroboam at the altar of the Bethel shrine and cried out as follows: "O altar, altar! This is the word of the Lord: 'Listen! A child shall be borne to the house of David, named Josiah. He will sacrifice upon you the priests of the hill-shrines who make offerings upon you, and he will burn human bones upon you'." Jeroboam lived before 900 B.C.; the Josiah who fulfilled the prophecy lived fully 300 years later, long after the downfall of the kingdom of Israel. What are we to make of a passage like this? Did the prophets really make predictions at such long range and in such remarkable detail as this?

Perhaps they did, on occasions. There might be parallels in history — there were those, for example, who (on theological grounds) predicted the creation of the modern State of Israel many years before it came into being, or even loomed on the horizon. Moreover, we must at all costs resist the temptation to reduce the prophets to twentieth century political commentators. However, the reference to Josiah is not the only surprise in the chapter, and a paragraph from H. L. Ellison's book *The Prophets of Israel* is worth quoting. He writes (pp. 22f.):

The story in 1 Kings 13 has obviously been edited, probably by the compiler of the book, for the mention of Samaria (verse 32), which was not founded until the time of Omri (1 Kings 16:24), must be an adaptation of the prophet's words to later terminology, a practice we find more often in the Old Testament than is normally suspected. Since the men of Bethel recognized the fulfilment of the prophecy (2 Kings 23:17) but showed no recognition of the name, it seems likely that 'Josiah by name' (verse 2) is also an editorial addition pointing forward to the fulfilment.

Certainly in the case of the historical books of the Old Testament, and very probably in the case of the prophetic literature, we have to reckon with editorial activity, undertaken not to destroy or overlay the original wording of earlier documents or of prophetic oracles, but rather to bring home to the readers the importance and relevance of their message. (In the same way, Old Testament quotations are sometimes modified and adapted in the New, for a new generation of readers.) It is therefore perfectly legitimate, and sometimes indeed essential, for the modern critical historian to assess what is "original" and what "secondary" — such a decision need not be, and should not be, a value judgement at all — in Old Testament records. Nevertheless, it is to a large extent a subjective exercise, yielding uncertain and debatable results.

Half a century after Ahijah's time, we meet the formidable character of Elijah, who confronts the reader of 1 Kings with the same startling impact with which he confronted King Ahab, son of Omri, who founded the third dynasty of the kings of Israel. With the nar-

ratives about Elijah and Elisha, the modern critical historian meets not only a literary, but an historical question of some moment. Prediction is a relatively rare phenomenon, but is at least well authenticated as such; but what is the historian to make, for instance, of the resuscitation of dead children, or the destruction of whole bands of troops by fire from heaven? As a Christian man, convinced of the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, he may accept the factual accuracy of such narratives on faith; but as a scientific historian, he is compelled to admit that such events stand outside normal human experience, and would be rejected as legendary if they appeared outside the Canon of Holy Writ. Needless to say, the critical historian who is *not* convinced of the plenary inspiration of Scripture is almost bound to view such stories as legends. Much depends, then, on one's theological viewpoint and presuppositions.

Some of the narratives are patient of "natural" explanations, it must be admitted. Professor Gray, for instance, has observed that the actual wording of the story recounted in 1 Kings 17:17-24 permits us to suppose that the son of the widow of Zarephath, though at death's door, never actually died.⁸ A careful study of the Hebrew statements confirms that this is so. If modern medical science has its difficulties about defining the precise moment of death, it must be allowed that the ancients will not have been able, and perhaps will not have wished, to draw too precise a dividing line between a moribund and a dead condition. For the biblical writer, 1 Kings 17 in any case depicts a miracle, and whether it was a miracle of healing or a miracle of resurrection was for him of little consequence.

The crucial narrative involving a miracle in the chapters about Elijah is to be found in 1 Kings 18, where the contest on Mount Carmel is described. The chapter has been very widely discussed and debated.⁹ There is little agreement among scholars as to what elements are "original" and which are "secondary", nor what is historical and what legendary, nor even what the purpose and the function of the narrative was. But here is a narrative where the critical historian *qua* historian is in no position to shrug his shoulders and say that it all depends on one's attitude to the Bible whether one believes the story or rejects it. Let us assume that we choose to reject the story: fire did *not* fall from heaven and consume Elijah's sacrifice. Very well; then it follows that Elijah did not win his contest with the Baal prophets — for the whole scene demands that something remarkable happened to convince the populace that Elijah was in the right, and to persuade them to slaughter the Baal prophets. If nothing remarkable happened, the only logical conclusion,

8. Cf. J. Gray, *Kings*, pp. 382f.

9. See for instance D. R. Ap-Thomas, *PEQ* 92 (1960), pp. 146-155; H. H. Rowley, *Men of God* (London, 1963), pp. 37-65.

ultimately, is that the contest itself never happened . . . and before long one has emptied the whole story of Elijah of all its content, and reduced the great prophet to negligible proportions. With all great figures of history, in the Bible or outside it, one is forced to find some basis for the reputation for greatness. Many legends came to surround Alexander the Great, but no historian could deny his greatness — it was the greatness which attracted the legends. But if we deny the events of 1 Kings 18 *in toto*, we have nothing adequate left to support the greatness of Elijah.

The late Professor Rowley has left us an excellent common-sense summary. His approach to the Bible is not doctrinaire, and he is quite willing to consider the possibility of legend, but against those who "have thought to dissolve the story into pure fabrication" he maintains that "what precisely happened it is impossible for us now to say; but that something remarkable happened is overwhelmingly sure". He goes on to show the insuperable difficulties in historical reconstruction for those who deny it, and finally asserts: "Hence it seems impossible to escape the certainty that *something* remarkable happened on Mount Carmel, something which not alone in Elijah's eyes vindicated his faith, but which vindicated it in the eyes of the people also, something so remarkable that the prophets of Baal were discredited and slain."¹⁰

We may cite Rowley once more to good effect. "Without Moses," he wrote, "the religion of Yahwism as it figured in the Old Testament would never have been born. Without Elijah it would have died."¹¹ This is a strongly-worded statement, but not too strong, surely, when we consider the historical background of the Carmel incident. Ahab's queen, Jezebel, not content with the amount of idolatrous activity that was already in vogue at shrines like Dan and Bethel, was bent on making the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel, subordinate to the worship of her own native deity, Melqart of Tyre.¹² We may be sure that the final result of her policy, if it had succeeded, would have been the slow disappearance of the religion of Yahweh — in Israel, at least, if not in Judah. The faith was in jeopardy; so a prophet arose to meet the crisis, a man who was utterly devoted to the covenant with Yahweh, whose First Commandment stated unambiguously: "You shall have no other god to set against me" (Exodus 20:3). So great was the prophet's sense of peril that he ruthlessly exterminated the prophets of the hated foreign deity. We have already seen how Elijah's single-

10. H. H. Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 59ff. It should perhaps be added that there is some little objective evidence for the historicity of the chapter, in that the great drought was also reported by the historian Menander of Ephesus, as is reported by Josephus (*Ant.* viii, 13, 2).

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 64f.

12. See above, p. 80.

minded devotion to the covenant led to a prophetic feud with the ruling dynasty which resulted in the overthrow of the latter some years later, in the time of Elisha's ministry.

The First Commandment was not the only one to interest Elijah, however; the same covenant law-code prohibited murder and the giving of false evidence, and Elijah was just as concerned to ensure that the royal court should observe this aspect of the covenant too. Naboth, the Jezreel land-owner, was not murdered in the normal sense of the term, to be sure; he was executed quite legally, although an innocent man. But the legal indictment was procured by deliberate, malicious, false evidence, at the instigation of the queen, Jezebel. 1 Kings 21 says nothing of the fate of the two rogues whose voices actually gave the false testimony; the word of God commissioned Elijah to pin the blame where it really belonged — on Jezebel, and on King Ahab who had turned a blind eye to her deliberate breach of the covenant with Yahweh.

Elijah was no "private chaplain" to the king, at Ahab's beck and call. Ahab saw that it was politic not to replace the slaughtered Baal prophets, so he took care to organize a body of men who would prophesy in the name of Yahweh. We need not doubt that they were sincere men; their leader, Zedekiah by name, showed a genuine anger when another man threw doubt on the accuracy of his predictions (1 Kings 22:24). Nevertheless, the fact remains that their message to the king was what he wanted to hear — a prophecy of victory in battle. How could it be otherwise when their bread and butter depended on his goodwill? One of their number, Micaiah, had already earned the king's displeasure by showing some independence of thought, as Ahab's naïve remark to Jehoshaphat of Judah makes plain: "He prophesies no good for me; never anything but evil" (1 Kings 22:8). We are not told how Ahab had responded previously to gloomy prophecies from Micaiah, but we may guess that his response was designed to serve as a warning, both to him and to any other prophets of an independent turn of mind. His last prediction to Ahab, at any rate, earned him a spell in prison, on a "prison diet of bread and water" (verse 27).

1 Kings 22 is a fascinating chapter in several respects. How, for instance, did Jehoshaphat come to suspect that Ahab's 400 prophets were not all that they seemed? Like any other prophet, they did the right things, enacting a parable to symbolize Ahab's predicted victory. How was it that when Micaiah arrived and gave exactly the same prophecy as the other had done, Ahab accused him of telling lies?¹³ Why, when he did tell the truth, did Jehoshaphat and Ahab alike proceed into battle without further consideration? It should

13. H. L. Ellison, *op. cit.*, pp. 40ff. should be consulted for plausible suggestions and useful discussion.

have been clear by now that the true prophets of Yahweh characteristically spoke in terms of judgement and warning, and only rarely in terms of blessing and promise. Ahab, it seems, was given to wishful thinking, and in his enthusiasm he carried Jehoshaphat along with him. Ahab did take the precaution of disguise, of course, but in spite of it, the ensuing battle saw him killed by a stray arrow, fired at random, which "just happened" to find a weak point in the king's armour. We are left to guess what happened to Ahab's prophets; Ahab's successors — with good reason — seem to have distrusted them, to judge by 2 Kings 3:13, and they fade into the background. Ahab's son and successor Ahaziah sought to get divine advice from outside Israel altogether (cf. 2 Kings 1), but the four kings who followed him were all willing to consult Elisha.

Many of Elisha's activities are similar in character to those of earlier prophets, and we need not study the narratives of 2 Kings in detail. We may observe one point of special interest, however; the man who organized what turned out to be a bloody *coup d'état* gained a reputation for his willingness to help simple folk in simple situations, as several stories about him bear witness. Was this a case of Jekyll and Hyde? Not at all; it was the national covenant with Yahweh which governed his thinking and behaviour, as it did all the true prophets of the Old Testament. This had now become the touch-stone; those who kept that covenant deserved covenant kindness, but those who, like Ahab and his court, had spurned it could expect no covenant mercy, but only fearful judgement. The prophet divided the nation — in accordance with the word of God received by his master Elijah (1 Kings 19:17f.).

The Books of Kings are silent about prophecy in Judah during this period. It is always dangerous to argue from silence, but it seems a natural assumption that there were no prominent prophets in Judah between Nathan and Isaiah. 2 Chronicles indicates that they certainly existed, and seeks to give the gist of their message from time to time; but the very fact that the author of Chronicles recounts a story of a letter from Elijah to a king of Judah tells its own tale — that Judah had no prophet of Elijah's stature.