

## TO BE A PROPHET . . .

WHAT IS A PROPHET? WE BEGIN BY ASKING A QUESTION people in ancient Israel would probably never have thought to ask. Some might conclude that the Hebrews lacked the reflective power we assume in the modern Western world, or had not the reflective capacity and analytical power of the Greeks, their near contemporaries in the Mediterranean world. The Greeks wrote textbooks on medicine, rhetoric, mathematics, and a number of other subjects, and if prophets had been as defining a group in Greek culture as they were in ancient Hebrew culture—which they were not, we would expect some sort of statement somewhere telling us what it was to be a prophet. But nowhere in the Bible, which is our only real source book for the life and thought of the ancient Hebrews, is there any real statement telling us what it was to be a prophet. Fragmented remarks, yes, but nothing more.

There is probably an even better reason for the Bible's lack of a defining statement on the prophetic office. The writers of the Bible would scarcely have analyzed a phenomenon that was common knowledge, and here they were no different than we. Seldom do we ask today, *What is a pastor?* or *What is a priest?* Both professions we know well, as they are familiar in the world we inhabit. It is less so with the prophet, although the term has some currency in the modern world. Nevertheless, a great distance in time separates us from the known prophets of antiquity, a great difference between their world and ours, which means we end up having to ask basic questions about what the ancient people knew well and more or less took for granted.

There are six of what I would call “distinguishing marks” of the Hebrew prophet. These set the prophet off from ordinary people, on the

one hand, and from other professional types, on the other. The lines are by no means absolute; they give us only a profile, but this is what we need. In one way or another, the Old Testament lifts up each of these marks, indicating that they must have carried weight for the people among whom the prophets lived and moved.

To cite distinguishing marks is not to imply that every prophet possessed all of them, for they did not. One mark, for example, was an ability to perform mighty works, and only a few prophets possessed this gift. But for those who did, it made them prophets in the eyes of others, even though it was doubtless evident that there were other prophets who did not perform mighty works. Not every prophet possessed the whole range of prophetic gifts. Nor were gifts possessed to the same degree, much less manifested in precisely the same way. Prophets never ceased being singular individuals, and it hardly needs saying that no two of them were alike. So while we will be focusing here on what Hebrew prophets had in common, it must not be forgotten that each prophet was unique, he or she a blend of certain defining qualities to which was added a good deal more.

We shall discover that these distinctive marks show up also in prophets and prophetic types whom the Old Testament discredits. Included here would be intermediaries of various description from Babylon, Assyria, Egypt, Moab, and Canaan, also Hebrew prophets who signed on fully or partially with the Canaanite Baals. These marks showed up even in Yahweh prophets who were ultimately discredited. Virtually every mark can be attributed to some prophet whom the Old Testament discredits. Such marks, then, are no guarantee of prophetic authenticity. A connection between these distinctive marks and authenticity does exist, but one does not translate into the other. In another chapter we will look at the tests preserved in the Old Testament for distinguishing true prophets from false prophets.

Today it is widely recognized that neither prophecy nor prophetism generally was restricted to ancient Israel. The many extrabiblical texts now in our possession make it clear that Hebrew prophecy has its roots and also came to flower in a larger movement that existed throughout the ancient Near East.<sup>1</sup> Discerning the uniqueness of the Hebrew prophets, which for many is the bottom line issue, is a complex task. Sometimes defining marks will set them off. Other times it will be a perceived authenticity. Still other times it appears to have been behavior judged to be on a higher level than their opposite numbers. If any one thing points consistently to the uniqueness and lasting greatness of the Hebrew prophets it is their *message*. It was a message of words, yes, but even more

a total life statement of radical obedience to the living God. What made the Hebrew prophets great is what made Israel—in its best moments—great. Had the Hebrew prophets not borne witness to the living God, they would, like all other prophets and intermediaries who walked the stage of history, have disappeared into the dust and promptly been forgotten. We will take a closer look at their remarkable message, but first let us discover what it is to be a prophet.

## THE DIVINE CALL

*To be a prophet, in the first place, is to be someone who has received a divine call.* Prophets, were they to boast, could boast only of having received a call from Yahweh God. This is the warrant for all the prophet says and does. Hebrew *nābîʿ* (נָבִיא), which we translate “prophet,” most likely means “one who is called.”<sup>2</sup> In Akkadian, which predates Hebrew and is a cognate language to Hebrew, *nabû* means “to call,” and a *nibîtu* is “one called (by the gods).”

Among Israel’s neighbors it was the king who received a call for divine service. Old Babylonian texts from the third millennium B.C. report kings being called by the gods.<sup>3</sup> The same was true in Egypt. An Egyptian stele from the reign of Pharaoh Pianche (751–730 B.C.) records a call that came to this pharaoh from the god Amun.<sup>4</sup> Amun says,

It was in the belly of your mother that I said concerning you that you were to be ruler of Egypt; it was as seed and while you were in the egg, that I knew you, that (I knew) you were to be lord.

This call has a similarity to the call of Jeremiah, where Yahweh says to him:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you  
and before you were born I consecrated you  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

(Jer 1:5)

Jeremiah’s call, however, was not from the womb. It was more remarkable still, being issued *before* he was born, *before* he was conceived. Jeremiah’s call took place at a time known only to Yahweh. In typically Hebraic fashion, like the creation of the world itself, the true beginning of things is shrouded in obscurity.

The Assyrian king Esarhaddon (680–669 B.C.) also received a divine call. The initiator in this case was the goddess Ishtar.<sup>5</sup> She says:

I am Ishtar of Arbela; I have turned Ashur's favor to you.  
When you were small, I chose you. Fear not! Praise me!

Israel's first kings, Saul and David, received calls for divine service, which in both instances were mediated by the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 9–10; 16). Even earlier, Gideon the judge received a call mediated through a divine messenger to deliver Israel from the Midianites (Judg 6:11–24). Nevertheless, the divine call in Israel appears largely to have been reserved for the prophet. Kings came to power because of success in war, or later, because they stood in a royal line. Priests had a hereditary office and, during the monarchy, were subject to royal appointment.<sup>6</sup> Wise men, who had become a professional class in Jeremiah's time (Jer 8:9; 18:18), and perhaps earlier (Isa 29:14), earned their place in the royal court because of wisdom, discernment, and excellence of speech (Prov 16:21–23). They too received appointment from the king. The prophet seldom if ever had a royal appointment. Most of those who did, like their opposite numbers in neighboring societies, became “rubber stamps” of royal policy and quickly faded into insignificance.

In Israel, the real prophet was typically called to critique kings and governmental policy, which led, as one might expect, to frequent tensions between the prophet and the royal house. Often a prophet became *persona non grata* with the king. Yet even unpopular prophets ate at government expense.<sup>7</sup> Gad, a prophet and a seer, is thought by some to have had an appointment under David. Isaiah, too, may have had a royal appointment under Hezekiah, but if so, he understood himself to be first and foremost in the employ of Yahweh, Israel's true king (Isa 6:1–5). Whatever the prophet's relation to government, it was a call from Yahweh that gave him the office and authority he possessed.

The prophetic movement in Israel began with Samuel,<sup>8</sup> although Samuel also wore the hat of judge and seer. He was the last of the judges. He was also a Nazirite. This was a time of social stress in ancient Israel, when the old was giving way to something new.<sup>9</sup> Yahweh called Samuel while he was still a young boy at the Shiloh sanctuary. Samuel's call came in a night vision, and he needed help in recognizing it (1 Sam 3:2–14). Ironically, the one providing the help, Eli the priest, was singled out in the communication—along with his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas—for judgment. Samuel thus discovered early on what prophets would discover time and again in the future, that receiving a call from Yahweh had

its perils. The young Samuel, to his everlasting credit, conveyed the bad news to Eli, and the old man accepted it (1 Sam 3:15-18). Samuel heard again from Yahweh—both by word and by vision—and over time became firmly established as Yahweh’s prophet.

Amos reports his call only because he is driven to it. Had he not been pressed for a defense by the hostile priest of Bethel, we may never have heard about his call. Amos says initially that he is *not* a prophet, simply a herdsman and a dresser of vines (Amos 7:14), words that have caused considerable difficulty. Does Amos mean that he is not a prophet at all? Or is he perhaps not a prophet in his own eyes? Possibly he means to say that folks back home in Tekoa do not consider him a prophet. His answer, in any case, is best taken as rhetorical. By emphasizing a lack of professional standing—in his own eyes, in the eyes of others, or both—the opposition is defused. Opposition came in the person of Amaziah, the priest, who addresses Amos as “seer” (7:12). For him “seer” is a term of disparagement, since Amaziah does not view Amos as a prophet. Nevertheless, if Amos began with a disclaimer, he does not end with one, for he goes on to say that he had indeed been called to prophesy:

Yahweh took me from following the flock, and Yahweh said to me, “Go, prophesy to my people Israel.” (Amos 7:15)

No one since has seriously doubted that Amos was called to be one of Yahweh’s prophets.

This defense by Amos calls attention to the problem of subjective versus objective testimony. Who knows best who a person really is—that person, or others looking on from a distance? Normally we put greater weight on personal testimony and self-understanding. At the same time, we realize that one’s true identity is sometimes known only by others. We see evidence of the latter in the case of John the Baptist, who denied that he was Elijah *redivivus*, simply calling himself “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (John 1:19-23). But Jesus says that he was “Elijah” (Matt 11:11-14; 17:11-13). Then, too, objective testimony can be divided. Jesus quoted the proverb, “A prophet is not without honor except in his own country” (Mark 6:4; Matt 13:57), which he applied to himself. The proverb could apply also to Amos. Back home, Amos was not a prophet, but at Bethel he was. Despite the hostility of a resident priest, Amos gained a hearing and was reckoned ultimately as a prophet. In the end, all Judaism paid him honor as one of Israel’s prophets.

Moses in his own time was not called a “prophet,” yet by the eighth and seventh centuries b.c. he was very much one. Hosea lifts up him and

Samuel, as the two prophets responsible for Israel's salvation and preservation (Hos 12:13). In the seventh-century book of Deuteronomy, which may be the institutional response to the collected works of Amos, Hosea, and other eighth- to seventh-century prophets,<sup>10</sup> Moses becomes *prophet par excellence* (Deut 34:10-12). The suggestion has been made that priests played his part when Deuteronomy—or a portion of Deuteronomy—was recited at the yearly festivals (cf. Deut 31:10-13).<sup>11</sup>

Exodus records the call of Moses, which came in the wilderness while Moses was tending the sheep of Jethro, his father-in-law. There he saw a bush aflame, and when he turned aside to look,

God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here am I.” Then he said, “Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” . . . “Come I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.” (Exod 3:4-6, 10)

Moses was being called to be the great prophet of deliverance. There were times, of course, when he spoke unmitigated judgment, but his call was to announce and participate in Yahweh's deliverance of an enslaved people (Hos 12:13). He was less than willing, resisting the call when it came to him (Exod 4:10, 13). We see the same later in the case Jeremiah (Jer 1:6), who was called to be “the prophet like Moses” (Deut 18:15-18; Jer 1:9). But Moses' protestations were to no avail. In the end, Yahweh got his man. It was the same with Jeremiah.

Isaiah received his call on holy ground. The setting was the Jerusalem temple, where the entire interior with its altar and seraphim came alive in a vision. The place was transformed into the throne room of Yahweh. It was a high and holy moment when Yahweh asked for a messenger to run, and Isaiah volunteered. From what some have called the prophet's memoirs, we read:

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here am I! Send me.” (Isa 6:8)

The prophet here is modeling himself after the royal messenger. Other prophets employed other models, for example, the “servant” (Isa 20:3), the “watchman” (Isa 21:11-12; Hab 2:1; Ezek 3:17), and the “assayer” (Jer 6:27), but it is the royal messenger that best describes how a prophet

is to go about his work. Yahweh wants someone he can “send” and someone who will “go.”

In a society lacking modern methods of communication, it was the messenger who delivered the news. In the employ of the king, the royal messenger was privy to the king’s business, carrying messages to foreign governments and people of his own country. A staff of messengers waited in readiness in the throne room. When the king had a message he wanted sent, a messenger was called, given the message, and sent on his way to deliver it. Upon arrival, he would preface the message with: “Thus says the king” (2 Kgs 9:18), or “Thus says (King) so-and-so” (1 Kgs 20:3, 5). Isaiah in his vision sees himself as a messenger in the throne room of Yahweh. The call is issued and he steps forward. His message is to go directly to the people (Isa 6:9-13). It is not prefaced by a messenger formula—which Isaiah, for some reason, is not in the habit of using; nevertheless, the word he brings is a direct word from Yahweh the King.

The divine messenger is now known to be a very familiar figure in the ancient Near East. The Mari texts tell us that divine messengers were active in the Upper Euphrates region as early as the eighteenth century B.C., some sent by the god Dagan with messages to King Zimri-Lim.<sup>12</sup> Some of the divine messengers in Genesis and Judges may be individuals of a similar type, in which case they should be numbered along with seers as yet other important precursors to the prophets. Hebrew *mal’āk* (מַלְאָךְ) is translated in our English Bibles as “messenger” or “angel.” “Angel” (from Greek *angelos*) is normally used for the divine messenger, the assumption usually being that reference is to an extra-terrestrial being moving between heaven and earth. In some cases, this suits the context, for example, in Jacob’s dream at Bethel, where angels are ascending and descending a ladder extending from earth to heaven (Gen 28:12).

Yet other “angels” in Genesis may be earth-bound, professional types attached to a local worship center, comparable to modern-day missionaries or itinerant preachers. There is debate, to be sure, on just how to read these early chapters of Genesis, but if they are legend, as Hermann Gunkel maintained, they would contain a kernel of historical truth and the “messengers of Yahweh” appearing in them could certainly be religious itinerants. Such persons are likely to have appeared to Hagar in the wilderness (Gen 16:7-14), to Abraham and Sarah by the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18), and again to Abraham as he was preparing to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22:11). Some years ago the Swedish scholar Alfred Haldar suggested that an individual of this type appeared to the wife of Manoah, telling her

that she would bear a son (Judges 13).<sup>13</sup> As we have said, the messenger later becomes an important model for the prophet in describing the work he is called to carry out.

By the mid-ninth century, at the time of Elijah, “messenger of Yahweh” (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה, *mal’ak YHWH*) appears to be simply another designation for the prophet, being used interchangeably with “man of God.”<sup>14</sup> The messenger of Yahweh giving Elijah information and advice in 2 Kgs 1:3, 15 is likely Elisha,<sup>15</sup> who, on another occasion, is the “angel” supplying his hungry master with food (1 Kgs 19:4-8). Much later, in postexilic times, Haggai is called a “messenger” (Hag 1:13), and the name Malachi means literally “my messenger” (Mal 1:1; 3:1).<sup>16</sup>

Jeremiah’s call to be Yahweh’s prophet was brought home to him in an orchard near his Anathoth home (Jer 1:1-12). Yahweh, as we have said, called him before he was born (v. 5), but now he was announcing it to the young boy, who was probably about the age of Samuel when Yahweh called him (1 Samuel 3). Jeremiah’s call was to be a prophet to the nations, “to uproot and to break down to destroy, to build up and to plant” (v. 10). Jeremiah resisted the call, as Moses had done, but Yahweh overruled him, saying that he would nevertheless go forth as Yahweh’s messenger. The call was promised a fulfillment in a vision of “almond blossom,” in which Yahweh said he was “watching over [his] word to do it” (v. 12). One is reminded of Moses’ earlier call coming in a “burning bush” (Exodus 3). Acceptance came some years later, when Jeremiah “ate” Moses’ words on the temple lawbook newly found in Josiah’s reform (Jer 15:16).<sup>17</sup> Sometime after this, Jeremiah was commissioned by Yahweh to begin his ministry as Yahweh’s prophet (Jer 1:13-19).

Ezekiel had the misfortune—or fortune, depending on how you look at it—of being taken to Babylon in Nebuchadnezzar’s deportation of 597 B.C., and it was in this strange land, while he sat by the River Chebar, that Yahweh called him to be a prophet. Yahweh said:

“Son of man, stand upon your feet, and I will speak with you.” And when he spoke to me, the spirit entered into me and set me upon my feet; and I heard him speaking to me. And he said to me, “Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to a nation of rebels, who have rebelled against me to this very day. The people are also impudent and stubborn; I send you to them; and you shall say to them, “Thus said Yahweh God.” And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that there has been a prophet among them. . . . (Ezek 2:1-5)



That Ezekiel is also to be Yahweh's messenger can be seen here by the repeated use of the verb "send," also by the messenger formula used to introduce his oracles. The vision here is of the heavenly council, but unlike the vision received by Isaiah, the setting is out-of-doors, which is where Moses, Amos, and Jeremiah received their calls. Ezekiel accepted the call but reports that he left Yahweh's presence in bitterness. For seven days, he says, he could do nothing but sit overwhelmed among his people (Ezek 3:15).

One of the most beautifully articulated calls in all of Scripture comes from someone whose name we do not know. During the last years of Babylonian exile, a prophet in the tradition and spirit of Isaiah arose to whom Yahweh gave a message like the one given to Moses:

A voice cries:

"In the wilderness prepare the way of Yahweh  
 make straight in the desert a highway for our God  
 Every valley shall be lifted up  
 and every mountain and hill be made low  
 The uneven ground shall become level  
 and the rough places a plain  
 And the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed  
 and all flesh shall see it together"

For the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.

(Isa 40:3-5)

The colons framing this poem show that the crying voice is Yahweh's. This voice continues:

A voice says, "Cry!"  
 and I said, "What shall I cry?"  
 "All flesh is grass  
 and all its beauty is like the flower of the field  
 The grass withers, the flower fades  
 when the breath of Yahweh blows upon it  
 surely the people is grass  
 The grass withers, the flower fades  
 but the word of our God will stand forever

Get you up to a high mountain  
 O herald of good tidings to Zion  
 Lift up your voice with strength  
 O herald of good tidings to Jerusalem  
 Say to the cities of Judah  
 "Behold your God!"

(Isa 40:6-9)

No two of these calls are alike. Yahweh summons his prophets in a variety of ways. The call may come in a flaming bush or a flowering orchard, on holy ground or in some perfectly ordinary spot on God's earth. But the divine call makes any ground holy ground.

Human responses to the divine call also vary. Some prophets accept the call willingly; others put up resistance, which Yahweh must overcome. How many refused a call from Yahweh we can only guess, but there must have been some, just as there are some individuals in the modern day who resist God's call when it comes to them. These ancient calls were doubtless intensely private affairs, which, only after a period of time, became public knowledge. And we can imagine that prophets made their experiences public in different ways and under different circumstances. Some spoke willingly; others had to allow some time to pass before they could talk about their call openly. And then there was Amos, who related his call only because he was driven to do so. At some point people wanted to know what this man was about and with what authority he spoke. Reporting a call from Yahweh went some way to answering these questions.

We wonder about prophets who left no record of a call. Was there no singular experience for them to report? Or was their call so lacking in drama as to be unworthy of public record? That must have been true for some prophets. We can only speculate here. It would seem, however, that some calling of a general sort must be presupposed in all the prophets.<sup>18</sup> Their language is so personal and direct. Hosea says, "And Yahweh said to me . . ." (Hos 3:1); Micah says, "Hear what Yahweh says . . ." (Mic 6:1); Nahum uses the common messenger formula, "Thus said Yahweh . . ." (Nah 1:12); and Jeremiah says, "The word of Yahweh came to me" (Jer 1:4, 11, 13-14; 2:1; etc.), and "Thus said Yahweh . . ." (Jer 2:1, 5; 6:16; etc.). One can hardly escape the conclusion that all prophets thought of themselves as having been sent by Yahweh. Even false prophets assumed nothing less (1 Kgs 22:24). Yet it remains the case that some prophets left no record of their call.

Other intermediaries—ancient and modern—have claimed an intimate link to the divine. Yet the Hebrew prophet was not satisfied with such a claim. What mattered was that the prophet had heard the divine voice, was conscious of being called, and knew he had a divine message that had to be delivered.

While natural phenomena may have accompanied the divine call, these were of lesser importance—if they had importance at all. Elijah responded not to the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but only to the *still small voice* (1 Kgs 19:11-12). Hearing was of first importance to the Hebrew prophet. Only after Yahweh’s voice had been heard could one venture forth with the divine word, which brings us to the second distinguishing mark of the Hebrew prophet.

## THE DIVINE WORD

*To be a prophet, in the second place, is to be someone who speaks the divine word.* The prophet, in order to be the divine messenger, must have a message. When Yahweh’s voice cries to Second Isaiah, the prophet is told that he too must cry (Isa 40:6). He says, “What shall I cry?” and Yahweh tells him.

What we are saying, then, is that hearing must be active hearing. The Hebrew verb “hear” (*šāmaʿ*, שָׁמַע) can also mean “obey” (Josh 1:17; 1 Kgs 12:24; Jer 11:3; etc.). The same is true in English. We say, “Didn’t you hear what I said?” or “Why didn’t you listen to what I told you?” What we mean in both cases is “Why didn’t you *do* what I told you?” or “Why didn’t you obey?”

When Yahweh called Amos, he knew he had no option but to obey. Yahweh’s voice struck terror into his inner being, even as it had made the whole earth tremble. It was the roar of a lion. Not to respond was unthinkable. Amos says:

Yahweh roars from Zion  
and utters his voice from Jerusalem  
the pastures of the shepherds mourn  
and the top of Carmel withers.

.....

The Lion has roared  
who will not fear?  
The Lord God has spoken  
who can but prophesy?

(Amos 1:2; 3:8)

Even reluctant prophets knew that in the end they must obey the divine call. Moses knew it, and so did Jeremiah. Jonah, the most reluctant prophet of all, obeyed in the end, and went to speak Yahweh's word to the people of Nineveh.

Because the word of Yahweh was so compelling, we find prophets delivering it in like spirit. One of the great prophetic themes is "obedience," heard in unmistakable clarity at the very beginning of the prophetic movement in the preaching of Samuel. Not once, but twice, Samuel thunders on obedience to King Saul (1 Samuel 13; 15). His second word has become classic:

Has Yahweh as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices  
as in obeying the voice of Yahweh?  
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice  
and to hearken than the fat of rams  
For rebellion is as the sin of divination  
and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry  
Because you have rejected the word of Yahweh  
he has also rejected you from being king.

(1 Sam 15:22-23)

Earlier on, Moses had experienced the disobedience of all Israel, and he anticipated more of the same after his death. Just before he died, as Israel was about to enter the promised land, he taught them a song to carry with them in the years ahead. It is recorded in Deuteronomy 32. It happened much as he said, and the prophets are the ones who rose up to confront the nation with its disobedience to Yahweh and his covenant. Jeremiah struck the note of obedience in his famous Temple Oracles (Jer 7:3-14; cf. 26:4-6).

The spoken word in antiquity was thought to possess great power. Words spoken could not be recalled. The Persian king, for example, was unable to revoke an edict against the Jews even after his sympathies were reversed. All he could do was issue another edict—also irrevocable—that would override the first edict, bringing about the desired result (Esth 8:8). Yahweh's word, although capable of being revoked if he so desired, had the greatest staying power of all. Once it went forth, it did not return empty (Isa 31:2; 55:11). The prophet knew this. He knew that Yahweh would not revoke his call, nor would he likely override one word with another. With this certainty, the prophet went forth as Yahweh's messenger. The word he delivered had the same staying power, meaning that the prophet ended up operating not from a position of weakness but from a position of strength.

Because the prophet was a messenger, more than anyone else in Israelite society he or she became a person of words. Some therefore take *nābî'* (נָבִיא) in an active sense to mean, "one who calls." In Exod 7:1, the term comes close to meaning "speaker." Aaron, who was not otherwise a prophet, became a prophet in relation to Moses. (In the same manner, Moses, who was not God, nevertheless became "God" to Pharaoh). The prophet, in any event, is one who does some "calling" of his own, and this idea is embodied in the Greek word *prophētēs*, from which our word "prophet" comes. A *prophētēs* is "one who speaks for a god and interprets his will to man."<sup>19</sup> The prophet, says Abraham Heschel, is "a person charged with delivering a message and who speaks under the authority of someone else."<sup>20</sup> He possesses what in today's insurance business is called the "power of agency," namely, the authority of the company standing behind him. The words of an agent are therefore binding. This same "power behind the power, incidentally, obtains in Jesus' remark to Peter about his being given the keys to the kingdom of heaven (Matt 16:19).

The Hebrew prophet is in true form when, as the divine messenger, he brings forth the divine word. There is Nathan coming to David when David wants to build Yahweh a house, telling him that Yahweh wants rather to build *him* a house (2 Samuel 7). We think, too, of Nathan returning to judge David for taking the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and then seeing to it that Uriah is killed in battle (2 Samuel 12). There is Elijah holding forth on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), and the fearless Micah, who calls back Yahweh's word to Ahab as they lead him out from the king's presence (1 Kings 22). All the classical prophets—Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah—are mighty messengers of the divine word. Prophets in neighboring societies are never so openly critical of the king. When their oracles do contain criticism, there is sufficient ambiguity in them so that the interpretation can be turned around, or the oracle can be made to say something entirely different.<sup>21</sup> Such prophets are inert, much like the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah who eat at Jezebel's table (1 Kgs 18:19); or the 400 prophets of Yahweh who do the bidding of Ahab on a later occasion (1 Kgs 22:5-12), who may, in fact, be simply the earlier 400 Asherah prophets who have undergone a name change. Jezebel's 400 Asherah prophets appear not to have been killed along with the 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:40). All these individuals are rubber stamps of royal policy and know nothing about delivering Yahweh's word.

One can easily see why the Hebrew prophets were feared by kings, priests, other prophets, leading citizens, and the people as a whole. Unlike the articulate wise man, the prophet is no ordinary advisor. When he

appears—before the king or anyone—it is to bring a word from Yahweh. And what he says is clear, painfully clear, binding all who hear it. Josiah makes the proper response to the prophetic word of Moses made contemporary by the prophetess Huldah: He tears his robe (2 Kgs 22:11). Jehoiakim, on the other hand, makes an improper response to the prophetic word spoken by Jeremiah, tearing not his garment, but rather the scroll on which the word is written, which he then casts strip by strip into the fire (Jer 36:23-24). A contemptuous act in the eyes of Yahweh.

We must nevertheless recognize that being the divine messenger does not bestow on the prophet unlimited power. Quite the contrary. In fact, it imposes important limitations. Possessing the “power of agency” means that ultimate power and responsibility belong not to the prophet but to Yahweh. Yahweh at all times stands behind the prophetic word; he is the one who will bring it to pass. Messengers today in city corporate life know what this means. They deliver important messages; still they always remain just the messenger. Ambassadors in foreign service know the same limitation. They bring messages to other governments that have far-reaching effects, and their words are binding. Yet they, too, are only messengers. The power they exert always stands behind them; it is never their own. So it is with the prophet. By his word people become ill or are healed, live or die; whole nations rise or fall. Yet behind each momentous word stands Yahweh. The prophet is simply the messenger, nothing more.

Finally, there was the problem in Israel of overzealous messengers delivering Yahweh’s word without having been sent. More will be said about them when we come to discuss true and false prophets. Here we repeat only what was said earlier about the signal importance of hearing. A prophet is presumptuous if he speaks a word without having first heard the divine voice. Jeremiah complains about prophets having spoken who had not stood in the divine council to hear what Yahweh had said (Jer 23:18, 21-22). About these Yahweh said:

I did not send the prophets  
yet they ran  
I did not speak to them  
yet they prophesied.

(Jer 23:21)

## THE DIVINE VISION

*To be a prophet is also to be someone possessed with divine vision.* Prophets have vision in the broad sense; that is, they have the capacity to perceive things

ordinary people cannot perceive.<sup>22</sup> They see that the times are out of joint, that human life before God is far from what it should be, that judgment is forthcoming, and that after judgment they are the first to anticipate Yahweh's salvation. Prophets also have a visual capacity in the sense that they receive visions and dreams (Num 12:6).

This mark of the Hebrew prophet needs to be nuanced, since the ancient Hebrews have been characterized as being a more auditory people. They are said to discern truth more through the ear than through the eye. The Greeks, by contrast, are characterized as a more visual people.<sup>23</sup> In psychological and theological terms, this means that for the Hebrews the ear plays a more significant role than the eye in receiving divine revelation.

Hebrew prophets hear the divine voice but do not see the divine face. In the oldest traditions of the Old Testament, Moses has the most intimate contact with Yahweh. He alone meets Yahweh "face to face" (Exod 33:11; 34:29), but this is so that Yahweh may *speak* to him. There is no visual dimension to the face-to-face meeting. Yahweh speaks "mouth to mouth" to Moses (Num 12:8). At the time of his call, Moses hears the voice but will not even look for a face (Exod 3:6). Later, when more bold, he requests to see Yahweh's face but is refused (Exod 33:18-23).

Traditions affirm the same regarding Yahweh's revelation to all Israel at Sinai. Deuteronomy 5:4 says that Yahweh spoke there to all the people "face to face," but again, there was hearing only, no seeing:

Then Yahweh spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.  
(Deut 4:12)

Revelation through hearing was extraordinary enough. The Deuteronomic preacher says:

Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live? (Deut 4:33; cf. 5:26)

Yahweh, then, cannot be looked upon; only his voice can be heard. Hearing always outweighs seeing in the psychology of the Hebrew prophets. When prophetism flowers in the eighth to sixth centuries B.C., the resounding call is, "Hear the word of Yahweh." Jeremiah criticizes prophets who say, "I have dreamed, I have dreamed" but do not faithfully speak Yahweh's word (Jer 23:23-32).

Having said this, however, we must be careful not to push the point too far. The impression must not be given that vision in the broad sense, or visions in the more restricted sense, are of no importance to the Hebrew prophets. This is not the case. Prophets in every age make some use of the visual sense in mediating divine revelation. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all have visions accompanying their calls. Ezekiel is also the “watchman” of Israel, and Jeremiah, so outspoken against dreams, has himself visionary experiences on which he lays great importance.

Visions convey to prophets secrets that kings, other prophets, and ordinary people are not privy to. Elisha has the reputation of knowing what the king of Syria talks about in his bedroom (2 Kgs 6:12). Jesus, years later, is confessed to be a prophet by a woman who discovers that he has hidden knowledge about her marital—also nonmarital—life (John 4:16-19).

Visions of the prophets convey coming destruction. Micaiah sees Israel’s king dead in battle and all Israel scattered after a Syrian victory (1 Kings 22). Amos has visions of national destruction for northern Israel (Amos 7–9). Jeremiah sees all of Judah destroyed in a vision (Jer 1:13-14). More shocking still is a vision coming to Jeremiah that shows the entire creation returning to primeval chaos (Jer 4:23-26).

Prophets shared this visionary gift with their precursor, the “seer.” In 1 Sam 9:9 we read:

Formerly in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he said, “Come let us go to the seer”; for he who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer.[end ext]Samuel was a seer. Saul and his servants seek out Samuel when lost asses cannot be found. It will cost them a fee, but Samuel with his visionary gift can locate them, and he does (1 Sam 9:1—10:16).

Seers, diviners, and other intermediaries of like description were common throughout the ancient world. Visions and oracles were accompanied by fits of ecstasy, a tiny glimpse of which we see in 1 Samuel 10 after Samuel has anointed Saul to be prince over Israel. When Saul gets caught up in ecstasy with a band of prophets, he himself begins to prophesy:

And when all who knew him before saw how he prophesied with the prophets, the people said one to another, “What has come over the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets? (1 Sam 10:11)



Outside Israel such individuals were masters of a craft.<sup>24</sup> Harry Orlinsky says of the diviner:

The novitiate in divination, like the worker in textiles and metals, had to spend many years of hard and closely supervised work in learning his trade. He had to memorize incantations of all sorts. He had to learn to interpret the flight of birds, the formation of livers (hepatoscopy) and entrails (extispicy), the lay assumed by arrows and stones cast out of a container, the relative position of the heavenly bodies (astrology), the smoke and liquid emanating from a special cup or other container (lecanomancy; libanomancy), the significance of dreams and of signs in general; and the like.<sup>25</sup>

Modern counterparts inspect palms of the hand or read horoscopes to divine the future.

Precisely how different Israelite seers were from diviners and other intermediaries in the neighboring cultures is hard to say, but that there were some differences seems clear, if only because of legislation prohibiting the latter from plying their trade in Israel (Deut 18:9-14). While the Old Testament never outlaws the seer, only a few seers appear after the time of Samuel. Their place was taken by the prophets, with whom they had much in common.<sup>26</sup>

We get a good profile of the seer from Numbers 22–24, where the activities of Balaam are recorded. Balaam, son of Beor, is a non-Israelite hired by Balak, king of Moab, to come and curse Israel. The Old Testament does not call Balaam a seer (nor even a prophet, for that matter);<sup>27</sup> nevertheless, his activity corresponds to that of the typical seer. For one thing, he is hired (Num 22:7). He also performs elaborate sacrifices, which probably indicates that he was attached to some worship center like Samuel, who also presided over sacrifices.<sup>28</sup>

A text discovered at Deir ‘Alla in modern Jordan mentions Balaam and contains fragments of an oracle (or oracles) he received and was in the process of reporting. In this text he is called “seer of the gods” (*ḥzb ’lhn*).<sup>29</sup> In the biblical account, however, Balaam comes off more like a Hebrew prophet; for example, he will speak only what God tells him to speak (Num 22:8, 18, 38; 23:3, 12, 26; 24:13). But he is someone who both sees and hears (Num 24:3-4, 15-16), achieving the former, of course, only after the God of Israel succeeds in opening his eyes (cf. Num 22:21-35).

The Hebrew prophets both see and hear. What disturbs them most are people who can do neither. Isaiah speaks to this with biting irony:

Hear and hear, but do not understand  
see and see, but do not perceive  
Make the heart of this people fat  
and their ears heavy  
and shut their eyes  
lest they see with their eyes  
and hear with their ears  
and understand with their hearts  
and turn and be healed.

(Isa 6:9-10)

Jeremiah, for his part, says this to the people:

Hear this, O foolish and senseless people  
who have eyes but see not  
who have ears but hear not.

(Jer 5:21)

It is to such people that Yahweh sends his prophets. Little wonder that Yahweh must find someone who can *hear* the divine word, *see* the divine vision, and *speak* both to an insensitive people.

## MIGHTY WORKS

*To be a prophet is sometimes to be someone able to perform mighty works.* Only three Hebrew prophets—four if we include Aaron (cf. Exod 7:1)—were so gifted. Yet an ability to perform mighty works, or miracles as we say, marks one as a prophet of Yahweh.<sup>30</sup> At the conclusion of Deuteronomy, Moses is described as follows:

And there has not arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom Yahweh knew face to face, none like him for all the signs and the wonders which Yahweh sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, and for all the mighty power and all the great and terrible deeds which Moses wrought in the sight of all Israel. (Deut 34:10-12)

In some societies today the prophet is conceived of primarily in terms of being a miracle worker. I discovered this some years ago on a trip to central Africa. Visiting with President Doko of the Communauté

Évangélique a L'Ubangi-Mongala (CEUM), a Christian church in north-west Zaire (Congo), I learned about individuals in the area considered to be prophets. I asked what essentially marked one as a prophet among his people. His response was that the prophet possessed the gift of miracle-working. Conversations with other African pastors of the CEUM brought forth the same answer. In fact, this was the *only* mark any of them could point to in identifying one as a prophet. Prophet Harris of West Africa (1910–1929) performed exorcisms, healings, and other miracles, and miracles were attributed to Isaiah Shembe (d. 1935), Bantu prophet in South Africa.<sup>31</sup>

Prior to the Exodus, Moses and Aaron performed mighty works before the pharaoh (Exodus 7–10). Aaron turned his rod into a serpent and then proceeded to bring about the first three plagues: turning the Nile into blood, bringing the frogs, and bringing the gnats. Moses performed four mighty works: He brought on the plagues of the boils, hail, locusts, and darkness.

The other mighty duo in ancient Israel was Elijah and Elisha, who performed mighty acts of deliverance. They healed the sick and raised the dead. Food and oil were miraculously multiplied, and a city's drinking water was made clean. If Aaron could turn a rod into a serpent, Elisha was able to make an axe handle float (1 Kings 17; 2 Kgs 2:19–22; 4:1–6:7).

These prophets did more than see and hear; they were also more than able speakers, if they had that gift at all. What they did was *demonstrate* the power of Yahweh. The magicians of Egypt and Baal prophets of Canaan had limited success at this same sort of thing (Exod 7:11, 22; 8:7; Deut 13:1–2), although their success has been attributed to magic. The great majority of Hebrew prophets, in any case, were not so gifted, and we do not see such power again in Israel until Jesus comes in the spirit of Moses and Elijah (John 6:14; 9:17).

## THE DIVINE SPIRIT

*To be a prophet is also to be someone filled with the divine spirit.* The prophets have *rûah* (רוּחַ), which is translated into English as “spirit” or “wind.” Of course, they have their own spirit, but another spirit rushes upon them and controls them in extraordinary ways. This is the spirit of Yahweh, causing them to speak and act with extraordinary passion. Saul, as was pointed out, when meeting a group of spirit-filled prophets was himself brought under the spirit's power. The spirit came also upon David when he was anointed

king (1 Sam 16:13), but, unlike Saul, he was conscious of the spirit's presence throughout life (2 Sam 23:2; cf. 1 Sam 16:14).

After David, Israel's kings are not noted for being men of the spirit. The one possessing the gift of the spirit is now the prophet (Neh 9:30), who appears to inherit it from the judges (Judg 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14).<sup>32</sup> Only on occasion is Yahweh's spirit said to rest upon priests (2 Chr 20:14; 24:20), and certain other individuals, such as Amasai the military leader (1 Chr 12:18). The day is still a ways off when God's spirit will be poured out upon all people (Joel 2:28-29; John 14; Acts 2). But a foreshadowing of this day appears in Num 11:29, when Moses says to Joshua: "Would that all Yahweh's people were prophets, that Yahweh would put his spirit upon them!"

Here again we must sound a note of caution. Hebrew understanding of Yahweh's spirit and other spirits is complex. It is also fragmented, at least to us who have but a few biblical texts to inform us. There are, for example, evil spirits such as the one Yahweh sends upon Saul after his own spirit withdraws and is sent to rest upon David (1 Sam 16:14). According to Micaiah, "lying spirits" were sent by Yahweh to the four hundred prophets in the court of Ahab, who, incidentally, believed they were possessed by the spirit of Yahweh (1 Kgs 22:23-24). In addition, there were those empty spirits recognized by the perceptive as being only so much "wind." Here the Hebrew *rûah* means "hot air."

This mark of prophetism is actually played down in the Old Testament. One reason must be the widespread phenomenon of ecstatic prophecy in neighboring cultures.<sup>33</sup> Prophets who showed a tendency to hyper-spirituality often ended up being discredited. This was certainly true in the case of the spirit-filled prophets of Baal, who slashed themselves and performed their rain dance on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18:27-29), eliciting nothing but wrath and mockery from Elijah.

There were Hebrew prophets, too, who were judged to possess more "wind" than "spirit." Hosea remarked that "the man of the spirit is mad" (Hos 9:7).<sup>34</sup> Micah claimed that insensitive people in his audience would rather sit and listen to "windy" preachers, who push "liquid spirits" on people, than to his cry against social injustice (Mic 2:11). Jeremiah played on the double meaning of "spirit," saying that some prophets he knows will become what they already are: "bags of wind." The word of Yahweh is not in them (Jer 5:13).

At the same time, genuine prophets are inspired people.<sup>35</sup> Micah, despite his comment about "windy preachers," understands himself to be filled with Yahweh's spirit (Mic 3:8). So also Ezekiel (Ezek 2:2; 11:5) and

the lesser-known Azariah ben Obed (2 Chr 15:1, 8). The prophet of the exile says this about himself:

The spirit of Yahweh is upon me  
 because Yahweh has appointed me  
 to bring good tidings to the afflicted  
 he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted  
 to proclaim liberty to the captives  
 and the opening of the eyes of those who are bound.  
 (Isa 61:1)

These words were read in the Nazareth synagogue by Jesus, who then went on to apply them to himself (Luke 4:16-21). We see now why the masses often confessed Jesus to be a prophet.

Because prophets are filled with Yahweh's spirit, they display emotion openly.<sup>36</sup> They speak in a loud voice.<sup>37</sup> When the spirit of Yahweh comes upon them, there is a kind of party atmosphere: music, dancing, loud voices, and the rest. Prophets meeting Saul were playing harps, tambourines, flutes, and lyres. This party atmosphere characterized Pentecost, when the spirit was poured out upon the church. Some thought these spirit-filled people were drunk on wine (Acts 2).

The spirit, however, may work in precisely the opposite way. Instead of causing great excitement, it can have a deep quieting effect, an effect not to be confused with depression, such as Saul experienced when Yahweh's spirit left him and an evil spirit came in its place. Yahweh's spirit had an unmistakable quieting effect upon Ezekiel. At the time of his call, Ezekiel said:

The spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit, the hand of Yahweh being strong upon me; and I came to the exiles at Telabib, who dwelt by the River Chebar, and I sat there overwhelmed among them seven days.  
 (Ezek 3:14-15)

No party this time. Ezekiel sat quietly for seven days! The spirit left him virtually speechless. In both Jeremiah (cf. Jer 15:17) and Ezekiel we see a deep indwelling of Yahweh's spirit—more contemplation, more inner reflection, more prayer, and more confession. More time is spent conversing inwardly with God.

The spirit of Yahweh moves. Like the wind, it comes and it goes (cf. John 3:8). Because of this, the prophets too are moved, sometimes to outward bursts of excitement, other times to deafening silence. One thing is clear. Life for them is not always on an even keel. Sometimes prophets are an octave too high, says Heschel,<sup>38</sup> other times they are an octave too low. But that's how it is to be filled with Yahweh's spirit.

The spirit also moves prophets in the sense that they are people who come and go. Here Elijah provides the classic example. He will appear unexpectedly, then be gone before you know it. One day Elijah met Obadiah, who was the royal steward for King Ahab, and he told Obadiah to announce the prophet's presence to the king (1 Kings 18). Obadiah was surprised to see Elijah, but infinitely more alarmed to accede to the prophet's request, since Elijah was known not to stay around long. Should he leave, Obadiah would be in a perilous position with the king. Obadiah tells Elijah:

As soon as I have gone from you, the spirit of Yahweh will carry you whither I know not, and so, when I come to tell Ahab and he cannot find you, he will kill me, although I your servant have revered Yahweh from my youth. (1 Kgs 18:12)

Elijah must promise Obadiah that he will not leave, and he honors that promise. Even at the end of Elijah's life, the belief persisted that Yahweh's spirit had taken him to an unknown destination (2 Kgs 2:16).<sup>39</sup>

This mobility that the prophet and others take for granted sets the prophet off sharply from the priest, who is a fixed member of the community. The priest resides at the sanctuary, where he officiates at sacrifices, makes judgments about law, health, and hygiene, and in the early days was on hand to give divine oracles (1 Sam 23:9-12; 30:7-8). He was, for all practical purposes, "a man of God in residence." He does not come to see you; you go to see him, and you know where you can find him. The prophet, on the other hand, is never so tied down. He will appear at the temple to give oracles, lead perhaps in a liturgy, offer prayers, and then be gone.<sup>40</sup> Often he will come to see you, and when he does, it will be at a time you least expect. You may welcome his coming; you may wish he had never come.

As divine messengers, then, prophets were people on the go, and as we have said—their appearances could evoke genuine surprise. Sometimes people dared not ask the divine messenger where he had come from (Judg 13:6); other times people confessed openly that the messenger was sent directly from God. Genesis 21:17 says that when Hagar was about

to leave her child to die, a messenger called to her “out of heaven.” The expression “out of heaven” tells us not only that the voice was from God but that it came to her as a complete surprise. Today we might say such a voice came “right out of the blue.” After all, one is barely able to conceal one’s excitement when a messenger of God appears to Hagar at a critical moment, not only showing her the way to water but offering a timely word of hope for the future. Abraham is met in a similar way by a divine messenger when he is about to slay Isaac (Gen 22:11). A voice also comes to him “right out of heaven,” which is to say, suddenly and unexpectedly.

To be a prophet, then, is to come and go, the result of being possessed by Yahweh’s spirit. The importance of mobility for the prophet persisted even into the late first century A.D., when, in the early church, the false prophet was the one who stayed with his host more than two days (*Didache* 11:5).

## PRAYER

*Finally, to be a prophet is to be someone who prays.* In his capacity as divine messenger, the prophet brings messages back to Yahweh, which we call prayers. For the most part these consist of requests. The prophet prays for himself, and he prays on behalf of others, in which capacity he acts as a divine mediator. We learn from Gen 20:7 that intercessory prayer is what marks the prophet.<sup>41</sup> There God speaks to Abimelech about Abraham, saying: “Now then restore the man’s wife; for he is a prophet and he will pray for you, and you shall live.” Abraham this one time is called a prophet, no doubt because he can pray for the life of another person—in this instance, a foreign king.<sup>42</sup> Jeremiah, too, considers intercession with Yahweh the mark of a bona fide prophet (Jer 27:18).

Thus far, we have said little about the prophet as a mediator, which, in neighboring societies was an expected function of the divine intermediary. Indeed, this overshadowed virtually everything else, since ancient religion was bent on influencing the divine will. Prophets and other intermediaries called frantically upon the gods, sometimes even cutting themselves till the blood gushed (1 Kgs 18:28). It was a form of manipulation, like hunger strikes by modern-day prisoners. Such actions were carried out to evoke divine pity, which, it was believed, would lead to divine action. Fasting was another common practice in the ancient world intended to force a divine response.

Ancient sacrificial practice was rooted in the belief that the gods would be beneficent if they were well treated by their human subjects.

The smell of smoke brought pleasure even to Yahweh (Gen 8:21), and it softened him, enough so that he promised never again to send another great flood. When priests offer sacrifices, they act as intermediaries between the people and God.

Prophets are rarely involved in sacrificial worship.<sup>43</sup> With them the accent is a different one entirely. The prophet's commitment is to be in the service of Yahweh. Yahweh calls him, gives him his word, and gives him a measure of vision. When the prophet speaks, it is Yahweh's word that he speaks, and the power he demonstrates is Yahweh's power. Yahweh's spirit controls him. Yet he prays, and people know he prays. So in this one important respect, the Hebrew prophet does stand before God representing the people.<sup>44</sup> He may pray the concerns of his own heart, as Elijah did at Horeb (1 Kings 19), or as Jeremiah did in his many so-called confessions. He may also pray on behalf of the king or on behalf of the nation. When he does, he acts as a divine mediator.

Rarely do we read in the Bible about others praying. Yes, King David prays in his many psalms, Solomon offers a prayer when the temple is dedicated (1 Kings 8), and King Jehoshaphat offers a temple prayer before an important battle (2 Chr 20:5-12). Priests are hardly ever recorded as praying, although they must have done so. The prophet is the important person of prayer.

Certain prophets are remembered for being particularly effective in their intercessory prayers. Moses and Samuel are singled out in Jer 15:1 as the two great mediators in Israel. Countless times they prayed to Yahweh on behalf of the people. Elijah too, as we mentioned, was a mighty man of prayer. Not only is he the divine mediator when he first emerges as a prophet, but even at the end of his life he is the person through whom Israel's kings are expected to go. Ahaziah is remiss and censured strongly for not coming to him when seeking help for the curing of his illness (2 Kings 1).

The other great mediator and man of prayer is Jeremiah.<sup>45</sup> In his confessions to God, he pours out as no other prophet does his own hurts and the hurts of his people (Jer 8:21). It must have come as a shock to Jeremiah when Yahweh told him to pray no longer (Jer 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). My teacher, James Muilenburg, used to say that this probably meant he was praying all the time. But when Judah's fate was sealed, mediation was no longer possible. Yahweh said then that he would not even listen to Moses and Samuel were they present to lay the people's case before him (Jer 15:1). But this ban on intercessory prayer was not permanent. After Jerusalem fell, Jeremiah was once again interceding on behalf of the remnant (Jeremiah 42).



Because propheta are divine messengers, they are well placed to make requests of Yahweh. But it may also be because the prophet—assuming that he or she was genuine—was possessed with uncommon integrity. The New Testament says, “the prayer of a righteous person has great power in its effect,” with Elijah cited as one such righteous person (Jas 5:16-17). At any rate, not everyone in ancient Israel had equal access to Yahweh. Among those performing acts of mediation, the prophet stood at the forefront. The reason was that he could pray.