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Schools of the Prophets in Old Testament Times.

Let us note that the character of the prophetic office differed distinctly from that of the priestly, though at times combined in one person. It was not, like the priestly, confined to one tribe; however, it did not, in its *personnel*, extend beyond the covenant people. Balaam might be designated an exception, but he was an enigma as to character. A prophet was not to establish his prophetic office by signs and wonders, for even false prophets might perform these, Deut. 13, 1—5, but by his adherence to the Law and testimony of Jehovah.

In the prophet of old we find not a mere reader and expositor of the Law, called for in the Temple service; he was a direct messenger of God to the people, adapting his message to the need of the hour. Furthermore, the Lord through prophecy also revealed the future to His people in threat or promise, to their warning or comfort. Amos 3, 7: "Surely the Lord God will do nothing but He revealeth His secret unto His servants, the prophets." Therefore prophecy, or the granting of prophets, is considered one of the highest proofs of divine favor to His people and placed on a level with their deliverance from Egypt and their journey through the wilderness, Amos 2, 10, 11.

While we stress the word or message of the prophet, let us not overlook his endowment with the Spirit. By the *רוח יהוה* the divine Word is put into the mouth of the prophet; hence his name is *נביא*, related to the nifal of the verb *נבא*, *προφητεύειν*, *vaticinari*. The speaker is moved by divine impulse; he is the instrument of another, *viz.*, God. The *נביא* is the mouthpiece of God. Ex. 7, 1: "I have made thee a god to Pharaoh, and Aaron, thy brother, shall be thy prophet (*נביא*), which is explained chap. 4, 16: "He shall be to thee instead of a mouth."

To trace prophecy from the days of Moses and to see it brightening and broadening up to the days of Malachi is beyond the limited pale of this paper.

Entering now upon our subject proper, we come to the days of Samuel, the last and greatest of the judges, the link between theocracy and monarchy, the reorganizer of Israel politically, who acted as priest, prophet, and judge. He anointed the first two kings of Israel and is a landmark in Jewish history, named in the same breath with Moses, Jer. 15, 1: "Then said the Lord unto me, Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, yet My mind could not be toward this people." See also Ps. 99, 6.

Samuel is considered the originator of the schools of the prophets. While in many details these "schools" naturally differed from the institutions of a like nature to-day, yet Smith, in his *Bible Dictionary*, holds: "Their constitution and object were similar to those of theological colleges. Into them were gathered promising students, and

here they were trained for the office which they were afterwards destined to fill. So successful were these institutions that from the time of Samuel to the closing of the time of the canon of the Old Testament there seems never to have been wanting a due supply of men to keep up the line of official prophets."

1 Sam. 10, 5. 10 we first meet with a "company" (חֲבֵל, band, troop) of prophets, coming with instruments of music from the "high place" (גִּבְעָה) of Gibeah in the tribe of Benjamin and prophesying. We are not told that these prophets dwelt permanently at the "high place"; they seem rather to have proceeded from the place of worship found there.

We next find 1 Sam. 19, 20. 22. 23 a "company" (אֲסֵמְלָהּ) of prophets prophesying, with Samuel at their head, at Ramah in Naioth, נִיּוֹת, i. e., dwellings, group of buildings, reminding us of a group of college buildings to-day. Instruction presumably was given by Samuel, but it likely assumed the conversational nature; the relation of teacher and pupil does not appear. We notice that prophets, נְבִיאִים, assemble around Samuel, not בְּנֵי, sons of the prophets, as we find it subsequently, which latter would denote *disciples* of the prophets. We rather have here an assembly, association of prophets, among whom the prophetic gift was cherished by sacred exercises performed in common. In Samuel's day the sanctuary, deprived even of the Ark, was no longer the central point of the theocracy, but under the leadership of Samuel a newly kindled religious life of the nation was noticeable. This found nurture and inspiration in the extraordinary manifestations of the Spirit and in the irresistible power it exercised on all who came within its circle of influence. Similar outstanding spiritual phenomena are recorded also of the early Christian churches, especially at Corinth, 1 Cor. 14.

Sacred music was cultivated for the purpose of inclining the mind to a more ready reception of the divine voice. "But now bring me a minstrel," said Elisha. "And it came to pass when the minstrel played that the hand of the Lord came upon him," 2 Kings 3, 15. No doubt the cultivation of sacred music received a great impulse from David, who, it seems, was closely connected with the association of prophets at Ramah and, in fact, sojourned there himself to escape the persecutions of Saul, 1 Sam. 19, 18. 20. 22. There is such a close connection between sacred song and prophesying that the former is itself called prophesying, 1 Chron. 25, 1. For the important part assigned to music and sacred song in the Old Testament worship see 1 Chron. 25; 2 Chron. 29, 30; 35, 15.

Sacred literature, no doubt, was cherished by these associations of prophets. Some Bible students assume that Samuel himself was an author, writing a theocratic history. We recall that frequent reference is made to a chronicle of the kings extant at the time, but

not embodied in the sacred canon — a compendious historical work, it seems to have been, under the name of prophets. In the Books of Chronicles reference is had to the words of the seer Samuel, the prophet Nathan, the seer Gad, the prophecy of Ahijah, the visions of Iddo, the seer, the words of the prophet Shemaiah, the writing of Isaiah, the Book of Jehu.

After a lapse of time the schools of the prophets are again mentioned in the days of Elijah and Elisha. The term "sons of the prophets" appears first in the history of Ahab, 1 Kings 20, 35, and this time implies the relationship of teacher and pupil.

Where do we find these centers?

Bethel was already in Samuel's day a center of worship, 1 Sam. 10, 3, and later became the headquarters for the sons of the prophets. In the reign of Jeroboam an old prophet made his home at this place, 1 Kings 13, 11. When Elijah and Elisha were on the way to the place where the former was to be translated into heaven, we read: "The sons of the prophets that were at Bethel came forth to Elisha and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to-day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace," 2 Kings 2, 3. After his return from the east of the Jordan and after the healing of the bitter waters near Jericho, Elisha "went up from thence to Bethel," 2 Kings 2, 23. It is easy to see the prominence of Bethel.

Then there was *Gilgal*, mentioned already in Samuel's day. "Thou shalt go down before me to Gilgal," 1 Sam. 10, 8, this prophet said to Saul, which place also received Samuel's regular visits, 1 Sam. 7, 16. In Elijah's time we read: "And it came to pass when the Lord would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal." The two prophets likely were giving instruction in the school at this place. A number of years later there was a famine in the land, "and Elisha came again to Gilgal," 2 Kings 4, 38.

Jericho. A stopping-place of Elijah and Elisha on the former's last journey. It was here that sons of the prophets met them, 2 Kings 2, 4—7. After the ascension of Elijah, Elisha returned to Jericho, vv. 15—18, and tarried there three days with the sons of the prophets, whence he proceeded to Bethel.

Carmel. The evidence of Carmel as a gathering-place of the sons of the prophets is inferential rather than positive. 2 Kings 2 we find that Elisha, on his return from the Jordan and Jericho, "went up from thence unto Bethel," v. 23, and "from thence to Mount Carmel," v. 25. When the Shunammite woman was sorrowing over the death of her son, 2 Kings 4, "she went and came unto the man of God [Elisha] to Mount Carmel." We are told it was "neither new moon nor Sabbath" which might have called the prophet to Mount

Carmel for special services; so it is thought he there met a school or class of the sons of the prophets. Carmel was historic to them because there the test between Elijah and the false prophets had taken place.

Lastly, some infer that, as *Samaria* was at least for a time the home of Elisha, he, like Samuel at Ramah, would gather about him a school of the prophets there. Again we are informed that, when Jezebel raged against the prophets, Obadiah, "who was the governor of Ahab's house and feared the Lord greatly," 1 Kings 18, 3, 4, "took a hundred prophets and hid them by fifty in a cave and fed them with bread and water." Seemingly these men were inhabitants of Samaria.

Some of these places, it will be remembered, were also hotbeds of idolatry, showing that Christ rules in the midst of His enemies.

How about living quarters? We have already learned that at Samuel's time David and Samuel dwelt in Naioth (buildings, dwellings) at Ramah, the headquarters of the prophets. 2 Kings 6, 1, 2 we are told: "The sons of the prophets said unto Elisha, The place where we dwell before thee is too strait for us. Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan and take thence every man a beam and let us make a place there where we may dwell." This school was probably at Jericho, for they went down into the Jordan Valley for their timber. In 2 Kings 4, 38—41 we find they all ate from the same pottage, which would indicate common abodes. Elisha, because of the stress of the times, lived — like a hermit in a cave — for a long time upon Carmel and subsequently in his own house in Samaria. Some of these prophet-students were married and lived apart, showing us in passing that they were not obligated to celibacy. 2 Kings 4, 1 we read of a widow of a son of a prophet making appeal for support to Elisha. On the whole, their mode of life was stern and austere, 2 Kings 4, 10, 38; Matt. 3, 4.

The attendance, or enrolment. One of the institutions, we have observed, was overcrowded and had to enlarge quarters. About one hundred sons of the prophets sat before Elisha at Gilgal, and their number at Jericho could hardly have been less. When Elijah proceeded to the Jordan, "fifty men of the sons of the prophets went and stood to view afar off," 2 Kings 2, 7.

We are not told that a definite course of instruction was prescribed, nor how long it would take to complete the course, which means that, if students could come and go, the total number of those receiving instruction for, say, a year would far exceed the actual attendance at a given time.

As for subjects taught, we take it for granted that the Law was not neglected and that all the ceremonies connected with the Old Testament worship were fully explained. What about "prophesying,"

which is repeatedly mentioned? It is difficult to define the full scope of this word. When Saul met the prophets coming down from the hill of God, they were "prophesying," 1 Sam. 10, 5. And when he met the band of prophets in Gilgal, "the Spirit of the Lord came upon him, and he prophesied among them," v. 10. When three sets of Saul's messengers came to Ramah to capture David, they in turn all prophesied; Saul himself yielded to the same influence, 1 Sam. 19, 18—24. This apparently was a physically very exhausting method of worship; for we find that Saul was so fatigued by it that he lay down exhausted a day and a night, v. 24. Likely this "prophesying" included the recital of verses and psalms in praise of God, interspersed with song and accompanied by the sacred dance.

We have already mentioned the great emphasis placed upon sacred music in David's and Samuel's day. It reached a high stage of development and popularity at that time and no doubt was considered an integral part of worship also in Elijah's and Elisha's day. We may safely assume that it was cultivated in the schools of the prophets, 2 Kings 3, 15. And it is not far-fetched to suppose that these prophet-students were encouraged to compose sacred music and poetry and to use this widely in their praises and worship. No doubt they were also taught to judge the religious and political life of the times aright.

What were their means of subsistence? If these young men were constantly engaged in religious services and duties, they had little time to look after the necessities of life; hence they were dependent on support. We find some information on this 2 Kings 4. Passing over the poverty of one of the wives of the sons of the prophets and the chamber provided by the Shunammite woman for the prophet in his journeyings, 2 Kings 4, 8—11, we find the sons of the prophets gathering their food in the fields, probably fields that were uncultivated. But they also received donations, vv. 42—44. Not that this contribution is not referred to as exceptional.

It appears from 1 Kings 14, 3 that presents were offered the prophets when their advice was sought. See also 1 Sam. 9, 8. In view of this it is at first glance very surprising that Elisha did not accept the princely fee which Naaman urged upon him for being cured of leprosy, 2 Kings 5. It would have put the schools of the prophets on a sound financial footing. But under the circumstances the word of our Lord applies: "Freely have ye received, freely give"; all appearance of mercenary interests was to be carefully avoided.

From 2 Kings 4, 23 it may be gathered that the pious of the Northern Kingdom — being barred from the worship at Jerusalem — betook themselves, on the new moons and Sabbaths, to the schools of the prophets, and it may be presumed from the incident referred to in v. 42 that there were some who brought to the prophets the dues prescribed in the Law for the sanctuary.

Finally, let us turn to the influence and mission of the prophets and sons of the prophets. Jehovah had sanctioned the establishment of the monarchy in Samuel's day. Still, in spirit, the government of the Israelites was to remain a theocracy, and the prophets were to be "watchmen," **רֹאשֵׁי שָׂרְיָא**. See Micah 7, 4; Jer. 6, 17; Ezek. 3, 17; 33, 7.

This office of watchmen was to be exercised both toward the nation in general and the rulers of the nation in particular. The latter could not, on theocratic principles, be observed and controlled by representatives of the people, but only by the immediate agents of Jehovah. We can recall Samuel reproving Saul, Nathan indicting David, Elijah braving Ahab. Even sons of the prophets were sometimes assigned regular duties of the prophet. 2 Kings 9 we are told: "Elisha, the prophet, called one of the sons of the prophets and said unto him, Gird up thy loins and take this vial of oil in thine hand and go to Ramoth-Gilead." He was to anoint Jehu king over Israel, certainly an important commission.

And when Ahab had allowed Benhadad to escape, 1 Kings 20, "a certain man of the sons of the prophets" met him and by feigned action succeeded in having Ahab pronounce judgment upon himself. Ahab regarded him on a par with the prophets and "went to his house heavy and displeased."

However, God did not limit His revelation to this organization of prophets. Concerning Amos, *e. g.*, we read (7, 14, 15): "Then answered Amos and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son, but I was a herdman and a gatherer of sycomore fruit. And the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto My people Israel."

Amos lived in the time of Jeroboam II, during the latter days of the Northern Kingdom. It is in the passage quoted that we meet for the last time the expression son of a prophet, **בְּנֵי נְבִיאִים**, and consequently here have the last trace of the schools of the prophets. We must assume them to have been extinct at the time of the Maccabees, 1 Macc. 9, 27; 14, 41.

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Sermon Study on Acts 16, 16—32.

(Eisenach Epistle-lesson for the Eighth Sunday after Trinity.)

Every preacher is under a debt of lasting gratitude to the patient plodders who have selected the various series of pericopes. The expository preacher especially is happy and contented in mind when he has a preselected portion of Holy Writ before him to be treated homiletically; for he is convinced that "the text, the text, is the thing