

Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures

Session 2: Prophets before the Kingdom

Note: All scripture passages are taken from the New International Version (2011), unless otherwise specified.

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1 Defining the Period

The kingdom period in Israel’s history begins when, at the request of the people and God’s command, Samuel anoints Saul to be their first king. Most Christian interpreters who receive the Biblical account as historically accurate date this event around 1050 BC.

Prior to this date, Abraham, is usually dated by traditional interpreters somewhere around 1800 BC. We are therefore focusing upon the 750 years between these two dates: 1800 – 1050 BC.

The six individuals specifically referred to as prophets within this period are:

- Abraham
- Moses
- Aaron
- Miriam
- Deborah
- Samuel

The book of Numbers also describes an account of the elders of Israel “prophesying,” including two men named, Eldad and Medad. (Numbers 11:24-30)

2 Who are the “Former Prophets”?

Jewish tradition at some point – we are not entirely sure when – divided the prophetic literature in the Hebrew scriptures into two groups: Former Prophets and Latter Prophets. In the Hebrew Bible, the Former Prophets consist of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. (Note that Christian Bibles divide both Samuel and Kings into two books each). The Latter Prophets consist of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve. (Note that Christian Bibles divide the Twelve into separate books, collectively known as the Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.)

In more recent times, some interpreters have grouped the book of Deuteronomy together with the Former Prophets and collectively refer to these books as “Deuteronomic History”.

More traditionally, however, the Book of Deuteronomy is grouped with Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers as part of the Torah, or Law of Moses, sometimes called the “Pentateuch,” which simply means “five books.”

Focusing then on the four books traditionally included among the “Former Prophets,” only Samuel is explicitly connected to a named prophet. While both Judges and Kings contain stories about prophets, the book of Joshua not explicitly use the term. In Jewish tradition, however, Joshua is still regarded as a prophet. Deuteronomy 34:9 states that Joshua was *“filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses laid his hands on him.”*

Taken together, these “Former Prophets” tell the story of God’s communication with His people from the time of Moses through the end of the Kingdom period. The “Latter Prophets” then provide the collected works of individual prophets during this kingdom period, and then extend that history through the periods of exile restoration.

3 Abraham

Abraham is only once called a “prophet”, and God Himself uses the term when He addresses Abimelech, King of Agar, after he takes Sarah to add her to his harem:

“Now return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die.”

Genesis 20:7

4 Aaron

Likewise, Aaron is only once called a prophet, and, again, it is God who uses the term:

“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet.’” Exodus 7:1

Earlier, God expressed a similar thought:

“You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth; I will help both of you speak and will teach you what to do. He will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him.” Exodus 4:14-16

Regarding the complaint that both he and Miriam voiced against Moses, see the following section on Miriam.

5 Miriam

Miriam is described as a prophet when she leads the women of Israel in a song of victory after God destroyed the armies of Egypt in the sea:

“Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.’” Exodus 15:20-21

The Hebrew term here takes a feminine grammatical form but retains the full force of a prophet, with the same force that the masculine form applies to her two brothers, Moses and Aaron. There is no indication that Miriam was the spouse of a “prophet.” (In contrast, compare Isaiah 8:3, where Isaiah uses the term to refer to his wife and the mother of his child.)

God judged Miriam later in her life, after she and Aaron complained about Moses marrying a woman from Cush. Both she and Aaron reinforced their complaint by saying, *“‘Has the LORD spoken only through Moses?’ they asked. ‘Hasn’t he also spoken through us?’”* (Numbers 12:2)

6 Deborah

From the period of the Judges, after God’s people had occupied the promised land:

“Now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time. She held court under the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went up to her to have their disputes decided. She sent for Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali and said to him, ‘The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you: “Go, take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun and lead them up to Mount Tabor. I will lead Sisera, the commander of Jabin’s army, with his chariots and his troops to the Kishon River and give him into your hands.”’” Judges 4:4-7

Again, the feminine form of the term is used, and there is no indication that her husband is a prophet. She serves as a political and military leader, as well as functioning in the role of prophet.

7 The Elders of Israel

*“So Moses went out and told the people what the LORD had said. He brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the tent. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took some of the power of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they **prophesied**—but did not do so again. However, two men, whose names were Eldad and Medad, had remained in the camp. They were listed among the elders, but did not go out to the tent. Yet the Spirit also rested on them, and they **prophesied** in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses, ‘Eldad and Medad are **prophesying** in the camp.’ Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ aide since youth, spoke up and said, ‘Moses, my lord, stop them!’ But Moses replied, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were **prophets** and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!’ Then Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.” Numbers 11:24-30*

8 Moses

A couple centuries before the time of Deborah, Moses anticipated this combination of roles. God call him not only to be the political and military leader, but also to be their spiritual leader, speaking through him as His prophet.

8.1 His Calling as a Prophet

“God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: “I AM has sent me to you.”’ God also said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, “The LORD, the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you. This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation.”’” Exodus 3:14-15

8.2 Biblical Statements Regarding His Significance as a Prophet

“The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then Moses would return to the camp, but his young aide Joshua son of Nun did not leave the tent.” Exodus 33:11
“(Now Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.)” Numbers 12:3

“Listen to my words: ‘When there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, reveal myself to them in visions, I speak to them in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?’” Numbers 12:6-8

“Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, who did all those signs and wonders the LORD sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel.” Deuteronomy 34:10-12

8.3 Moses, the Writer

Twice the LORD commands Moses to “write,” once referring to a series of laws (Exodus 34:27), and once referring to a song to be taught to the Israelites (Deuteronomy 31:19).

It seems, however, that Moses regarded this as an ongoing requirement:

“After Moses finished writing in a book the words of this law from beginning to end, he gave this command to the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD: ‘Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God. There it will remain as a witness against you.’” Deuteronomy 31:24-26; compare Deuteronomy 31:9

Moses is not simply the verbal communicator of God’s word but is also entrusted with recording it in written form as a testament for later generations. The New Testament uses phrases like “Moses wrote,” “said,” “commanded” or “told us” (i.e., in his writings) on some 12 occasions, 5 times by Jesus Himself (see Matthew 8:4, Mark 7:9; 10:5; Luke 24:44; John 5:46). Jesus also refers to a passage in Exodus as “the Book of Moses” (Matthew 12:26).

8.4 Moses as a prophet and type of Christ

“I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him.” Deuteronomy 18:18

“But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people.’” Acts 3:18-23

“He said to them, ‘How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” Luke 24:25-27

“Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. ‘Moses was faithful as

a servant in all God's house,' bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory." Hebrews 3:1-6

9 Samuel

9.1 Miraculous Calling

- Miraculous Birth, 1 Samuel 1:1-20
- Voice from Heaven, 1 Samuel 3

"The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions." 1 Samuel 3:1

"And the LORD said to Samuel: 'See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle.'" 1 Samuel 3:11

9.2 A Few Passages regarding Significance

"The LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD. The LORD continued to appear at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word." 1 Samuel 3:19-21

"Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who have spoken have foretold these days. And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers." Acts 3:24-25; Peter addressing onlookers at Solomon's Colonnade.

"All this took about 450 years. After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet." Acts 13:20, Paul speaking at a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch.

"And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised...." Hebrews 11:32-33

9.3 "Schools" of Prophets

"After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, timbrels, pipes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the LORD will come powerfully upon you, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person." 1 Samuel 10:5-6, Samuel predicts what will happen to Saul prior to his anointing.

"When all those who had formerly known him saw him prophesying with the prophets, they asked each other, 'What is this that has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the

prophets?’ A man who lived there answered, ‘And who is their father?’ So it became a saying: ‘Is Saul also among the prophets?’” 1 Samuel 10:11-12; compare the later story of both Saul and his army “prophesying” after they see a group of “prophets prophesying with Samuel standing there as their leader”. 1 Samuel 19:19-24

9.4 Transition to a Kingdom

“Then Samuel said, ‘Assemble all Israel at Mizpah, and I will intercede with the LORD for you.’ When they had assembled at Mizpah, they drew water and poured it out before the LORD. On that day they fasted and there they confessed, ‘We have sinned against the LORD.’ Now Samuel was serving as leader of Israel at Mizpah.” 1 Samuel 7:5-6

“So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, ‘You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.’ But when they said, ‘Give us a king to lead us,’ this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. And the LORD told him: ‘Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.’” 1 Samuel 8:4-9

Nevertheless, God commands Samuel to anoint both Saul (1 Samuel 10:1) and, later, David (1 Samuel 16:12-13) as kings of Israel.

9.5 His Death & Appearance beyond the Grave

“Now Samuel died, and all Israel assembled and mourned for him; and they buried him at his home in Ramah. Then David moved down into the Desert of Paran.” 1 Samuel 25:1

“Samuel said to Saul, ‘Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?’ ‘I am in great distress,’ Saul said. ‘The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has departed from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do.’ Samuel said, ‘Why do you consult me, now that the LORD has departed from you and become your enemy? The LORD has done what he predicted through me. The LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors—to David. Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the LORD has done this to you today. The LORD will deliver both Israel and you into the hands of the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The LORD will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines.’ Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of Samuel’s words. His strength was gone, for he had eaten nothing all that day and all that night.” 1 Samuel 28:15-20

10 What's the Point?

Both Moses and Samuel grounded their leadership in their humble service of God, listening and obeying His Word, as well as preaching it. God honored their service, even when others questioned their leadership.