

14 November 2021

Prophets and Kings: The Prophetic Voice

Numbers 11:26-30; 1 Kings 13-16

As we think about prophets in our Bible Story Journey, we begin with Moses. For many, Moses is the model for every prophet: one who, through God's Spirit, spoke for God. We read from the Book of Numbers, chapter 11, verses 26-30:

²⁶Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷And a young man ran and told Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' ²⁸And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, 'My lord Moses, stop them!' ²⁹But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!' ³⁰And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Some historical context before we start telling the stories of the prophets. In the early 20th century, French archeologists discovered an ancient city in Syria, buried in the desert sands. It was the city of Mari, that had been mentioned in old inscriptions but not since the time of Abraham. In that city, they found the royal archives on clay tablets. Most were government records and, unsurprisingly, were mind-numbingly dull, but they also found the king's correspondence, in which there were multiple references to a class of people called the *apilum*. These were the men who spoke for Mari's God, Dagon. The king would summon the *apilum* before him when he had some important question of state – like whether to go to war with Hammurabi, down the road – and they would consult the oracles and give Dagon's answer to the king. But there were some others who spoke also spoke for god, strange figures called *muhhutum*, who were usually common, uneducated people, and might be either male or female, who would suddenly appear unbidden with a message from the heavens. The *apilum* were respected members of society. The *muhhutum* were frankly a little scary, wild outsiders who showed up with messages from God that no one had asked for or even wanted. All the same, the people of Mari clearly took them very seriously indeed.

A few centuries later, southwest of Mari, a new nation appeared, called Israel. For several centuries, it was a loose confederacy of independent tribes, sharing little besides a common ancestor and a God, but then those tribes joined together and crowned a king, like all the other nations. That king, named Saul, didn't work out, and his line ended with his death, but then Israel crowned Saul's most gifted commander, named David, and under David and his son Solomon, the nation of Israel became a world power. Israel's own records of these times make occasional references to figures called *navi'im*, who were generally strange figures, wild outsiders, who would be filled with the Spirit of God and deliver messages, unbidden, to kings and priests and the people. Like the Marian *muhhutum*, these *navi'im* were often common people and could be either male or female. They were, frankly, a little scary, often unwelcome, but always taken very seriously. Our English Bibles translate the word *navi*, "prophet." Today our story journey through scripture becomes their story.

We've actually met one of these birds before. Earlier in our story, as the Empire of Solomon was getting creaky under the weight of its own oppressive demands on the people, one of these prophets appeared out of the desert to a young royal official named Jeroboam. This prophet, named Ahijah of Shiloh, took off his robe, tore it into twelve pieces and gave ten of them to Jeroboam. "Thus says the Lord, 'In this way shall the twelve tribes of Israel be divided, and you, Jeroboam, shall be king over ten.'" The words of Ahijah came true. After Solomon's death, the fragile coalition of tribes collapsed, and when the dust cleared, Jeroboam was king over Israel in the north, consisting of ten tribes, and Solomon's son Rehoboam retained only a fragment of his father's domain, the two southern tribes adjoining Jerusalem.

Obviously, Jeroboam came out on top. He ruled far more territory and many more people and had a much bigger army, but there was one problem. Jerusalem – and most importantly, the temple to the Israel's God – were in the southern kingdom of Judah. Jeroboam saw the problem at once. He couldn't have his subjects making their religious pilgrimages to the rival nation, as if the Lord belonged to Judah. So Jeroboam built his own temple – two of them, in fact. One was in Bethel, a southern city on the road to Jerusalem, and the other was at Dan, Israel's northernmost city. And to make his new temples special, he had two golden calves made, one for each shrine.

Yeah, golden calves. Where have you heard that before? It's possible, of course, that King Jeroboam intended the calves to represent the God of Israel, that they weren't idols to another God, but that doesn't really help. Worshiping a golden image of the God who commanded that there should be no carved images is a mixed message, to put it mildly. Jeroboam then appointed a bunch of his loyalists as priests to run the temples and went to Bethel to dedicate the new altar with sacrifices, as Solomon had dedicated the temple in Jerusalem. While he stood there at the altar of sacrifice, a rough, shaggy man in coarse clothing appeared in the temple. The intruder ignored the king at first, raising his hand over the brand new altar: "Altar! Altar! Thus says the Lord, You will be destroyed, torn down stone by stone, and the bones of your priests will be burned on your rubble!"

"Hey!" said Jeroboam. "Who let this guy in?" He stretched out his hand and called to his guards, "Seize him!" But no one moved. They were all staring at Jeroboam's outstretched hand. Like a roll of paper in a candle, it had darkened and withered and curled into itself. Terror filled every frozen face.

The stranger slowly turned to look at the king, contempt in his eyes, then began to leave.

"Wait," said Jeroboam. "Help me. Please. Pray to the Lord for me."

The stranger thought about this for a moment, then nodded and raised his hand again. King Jeroboam's hand untwisted and filled out again and was restored. Gasping with relief, Jeroboam said, "Thank you! Please, come to my palace and dine with me, and I will pay you."

The stranger's lips curled again. "Pay? You think I prayed for you for a reward?" He hawked and spat on the floor. "I want nothing from you. Not your gifts, not your power, not your favor. I serve the Lord." Turning his back on the king, the stranger walked away.

That was Jeroboam's second encounter with a prophet, but not his last. He ruled Israel for over twenty years, and near the end of that time, his son grew gravely ill and was near death. The

king called his wife. “Go to Shiloh,” he said. “I hear that Ahijah still lives there, the prophet who foretold that I would be king. Take these gifts with you and ask for his blessing on your son. *But don’t tell him you’re my wife!* For some reason, the prophets don’t like me.” Jeroboam’s wife took the gifts and hurried to Shiloh, where she found the Ahijah’s house. The old prophet sat in darkness – he was blind now, so it made no difference to him.

“Are you Ahijah the prophet?”

“Come in, wife of Jeroboam,” the old man said. “I’ve been waiting for you. Tell this to your husband. Thus says the Lord, ‘I raised you up and made you king over Israel. I took part of the kingdom of my servant David and entrusted it to you, that you would lead them in my commandments. You have not. You have done more evil than Rehoboam, and that’s saying something. Therefore, your line will not last. Your descendants will be destroyed, and one of your servants shall sit on your throne.’”

Jeroboam’s wife said softly, “And my son?”

“I’m sorry,” Ahijah said.

It all came to pass. As Jeroboam’s wife stepped into the capital, her son breathed his last. Shortly thereafter, Jeroboam himself died, to be succeeded by another son, Nadab, but shortly after that, one of Nadab’s generals, Baasha, assassinated him and claimed the throne for himself. Baasha then set about systematically exterminating everyone who was even remotely related to Jeroboam, in order to secure his throne.

I’m not going to go into details on all the different kings and dynasties that follow. The book of 1 Kings manages to squeeze them all in there, but it’s not easy to follow. The text jumps back and forth from Judah to Israel, so sometimes you lose track of which country you’re in, and to make things worse, some of the kings in Judah and Israel had the same names at roughly the same time. I’m not going to try to sort it all out in these stories. If you really want to know all the details of all the kings of Israel and Judah . . . then you probably have too much time on your hands. Maybe you should take up knitting.

But in general the story of the two Israelite nations went like this: the little nation of Judah stayed relatively stable. At least they continued to be ruled by an unbroken line of kings descended from David. They had some unfortunate kings, who led the people away from the Covenant of the Lord, but they also had a few who tried keep God’s commandments. Israel, on the other hand, much stronger and much richer, was a rolling disaster of assassinations and rebellions and *coup d’états*. At one point they had three different dynasties in the space of two weeks, and none of those kings cared a flip about the Covenant with the God of Abraham or about the Law given through Moses. Officially, they still worshiped the Lord, but shrines to other gods flourished, and no one cared.

But no matter how much the people turned away from God, God did not forget the people. The kings and priests no longer called people to follow God, so God spoke through the voices of outsiders. Fierce, frightening, wild men. Bands of men and women who formed communes in the desert. Fiercely independent, incorruptible, dedicated to God before king and country. They stood in the gap, calling people back to the Lord, sometimes beseeching,

sometimes threatening. These were the prophets, who dared to proclaim, “Thus says the Lord.”