

## BOOK DESCRIPTION

# ANCIENT PROPHECY IN ISRAEL

by

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This study seeks to describe the history of ancient Hebrew prophecy from its earliest beginnings, which are closely interwoven with the rise of the people of Israel in the 13th century B. C. E., up to the reign of Jehu (8th century B. C. E.); the Biblical passages examined range from the traditions of Moses to the Elijah - Elisha narratives.

The first chapter discusses in detail ancient Near Eastern material pertaining to phenomena of prophetic origin. The principal question considered is whether there can be discerned in these cultures religious types that bear any affinity to the Hebrew prophets whose main feature is the consciousness of having been sent by God. Analysis of Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Canaanite-Phoenician material discloses many important historical and literary ties with Hebrew prophecy, but the type of the spontaneous Divine messenger is completely absent from these cultures, with the exception of the city-state of Mari (18th-17th centuries B. C. E.), as may be inferred from the study of its extensive royal correspondence.

The letters from Mari pertaining to prophetic phenomena published so far total twenty-four. It should be stressed that only a few of them mention persons who claim to have been sent by a god with a message to the King. Moreover, only two of these spontaneous Divine messengers belong to the so-called muhhum-priests. Thus it still seems premature to claim that the muhhum-priests (prophets) are the spiritual ancestors of the Hebrew prophets in view of their consciousness of having been sent by a deity. Indeed, there is much force in the counter-argument that in times of turmoil and disturbance religiously sensitive types, which fortuitously happened in this case to include two muhhum-priests, tend to identify their deep concern for the future of their community with a Divine revelation or message received by them. Nevertheless, this is the first time in the cultural history of the ancient Near East, apart from Israel, that people – be they priests, prophets or laymen – are attested to have made concrete demands to their rulers on the basis of a Divine message, which they claim to have been delivered to them personally.

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The second chapter deals with the sources pertaining to Moses. The analysis accords with recent research, which has brought to light striking parallels in form and style between biblical passages and texts pertaining to the Sinai covenant and the international treaties between the Hittite suzerains and their vassal kings during the 14th - 13th centuries B. C. E., recovered mainly from the archives of Bogazköy (Turkey) and Ugarit, i. e. Ras-Shamra (northern Syria). Besides structural studies the writer deals also with special religious concepts (like *segula*, etc.), with literary and stylistic images (comp. Deut. 6:5, etc.) and with legal stipulations, commandments and customs, the political background of which has now become evident. These parallels leave no doubt that the literary sources relating to the Sinai covenant are based on very ancient traditions, which bear testimony to an experience whose impact can be described only in terms of myth and legend.

The "Kingdom of God", which was established by the Sinai covenant, seems to be Israel's challenge to a state of bondage and tyranny similar to that which she experienced in Egypt, "the house of slavery". In the course of history this unique theological-political concept developed into antagonism towards any kind of human ruler-ship (comp. chapter 3). The exclusiveness and intolerance of monotheism in respect of other deities appears against the ancient Near East cultural background as the religious version of one of the most common treaty stipulations found in Hittite sources, which forbids the vassal any allegiance apart from that which he owed to his Hittite suzerain. This explanation refutes the commonly accepted argument that attributes exclusiveness of monotheism to late metaphysical thought, which culminated in denying the existence of other deities. It should be kept in mind that monotheism was not born as a speculative belief or as an abstract philosophical system, but as the theological-political response to human tyranny, aiming at the creation of a unique interhuman framework, where every sphere of Israel's life was to be shaped by the exclusive will of the Divine King.

A short historical analysis of some motifs from the Book of Genesis corroborates the testimony of the sources which maintain that the beginnings of monotheism go back to the period of the Patriarchs, having been born and shaped during their wanderings from Mesopotamia to Canaan as well as during their sojourn in the Promised Land. The core of patriarchal religion, as perceived by the writers of *Genesis*, is the demand of absolute, complete devotion to the leadership of the God who accompanied and protected them during their wanderings. This personal relationship between the Patriarchs and their God, attested by ancient traditions, was translated by Moses into terms suited to the life of a whole community.

The third chapter analyses and evaluates the leadership of the charismatic judges and war heroes, whose individual success was based on the popular expectation that in times of extreme emergency, caused by foreign

intruders, God would send a war hero in order to save the nation. Indeed, the appointment of these judges is described in terms that relate them to the consecration chapters of the classical prophets, thus stressing the fact that they are prophetic leaders. Analysis of the Book of Judges shows that their sporadic activity was perceived by the redactor of the main source as the only legitimate human action; as this writer was an adherent of the utopian Divine-Kingship theory, he was fundamentally opposed to any established human ruler-ship. The utopian and anarchist nature of this theory is outweighed by the fact that the national shrine stationed at the cultic centre was conceived as the chariot of the Divine King who dwelt there.

The centrifugal force of these cultic centres, with their festivals and liturgy, decisively influenced the shaping of the national and religious consciousness of the Israelite tribes. However, against the widely accepted view of M. Noth, who overrates the significance of these amphictyonic centres by claiming that they were the birth-place of Israel's religion, the present writer stresses that the formative age of Israel was the period of Moses. These centres only counteracted the wide influence of Canaanite idolatry, which then threatened the unique character of Israel's religion.

The fourth chapter briefly sketches Samuel's historic profile, mainly by indicating the measures he adopted to save the ancient concept of the Kingship of God after the tragic defeat near Eben-ha'ezer. These were: a) the decentralisation of the cult by encouraging the establishment of high places (*bamot*) all over the country; and b) the promotion of the activities of the prophetic bands that aimed at creating a psychological atmosphere congenial to the revival of charismatic leadership, which had disintegrated under the blows of Philistine assaults. The foundation of the monarchy, in response to the strong demands of the elders of Israel, brought about the collapse of the utopian anti-monarchic idea of Divine Kingship, which had to be abandoned on account of the hereditary principle of monarchy. The influence of the ancient ideal was, however, preponderant in shaping the nature of the young Hebrew kingship.

The fifth chapter is concerned with prophecy during the United Monarchy. Whereas the very establishment of the ancient state of Israel meant the abolition of prophetic charismatic leadership, the powerful personality of King David limited its role even more, when he accepted prophets as officials at the royal court, thus estranging them from any direct involvement with the daily problems of the common people. Nathan, the outstanding representative of this new prophetic type, lent the full weight of his prestige to the legitimisation of the Davidic monarchy by depicting it as the ideal expression of Divine mercy towards Israel. His idealising attitude towards monarchy culminated in his promise of eternal kingship to David and his posterity. This revolutionary change of the prophetic outlook can be fully

appreciated only against Samuel's hesitating, indecisive confirmation of Saul's kingship.

The sources pertaining to Solomon reveal that the critical approach of the prophetic redactor is focused on its condemnation of the king's foreign wives and their idolatry. Such writers, whose whole interest was concentrated on the affairs of the royal court, were completely lacking in any understanding of the social and religious repercussions of the tremendous changes that were taking place during Solomon's reign.

The sixth chapter rounds off the historical survey by a detailed analysis of prophetic literary sources from the northern kingdom. The first part deals with the sources from the reign of Ahab, the second with the Elisha narratives, which reflect the fall of the Omri dynasty, and the rise of Jehu. The historical analysis of I Kings chs. 20 and 22 leads to the assumption that ch. 20 mirrors events that occurred at the beginning of Ahab's reign; that is to say, the Elijah stories (I Kings chs. 17-19, 21, II Kings chs. 1-2) refer to happenings that occurred between those mentioned in I Kings ch. 20 and those mentioned in ch. 22. It may be inferred that the differences of opinion between the king and the prophets arose already after Ahab's first war against the Aramaeans, when some of the prophets severely criticised the king's lenient treatment of Ben-Hadad and demanded his execution according to ancient war regulations. The legendary appendix of I Kings 20 shows, however, that this problem turned out to be a bone of contention between the prophets themselves. But this first dispute between the king and the prophets was quickly forgotten, when the foreign queen began to usher in the cult of the Tyrian Baal. It seems that Ahab's liberalism towards Jezebel's behaviour was the calculated price he was ready to pay for Israel's political integration with the adjacent countries, a trend which was in line with Solomon's political aspirations. On the other hand, Elijah and his followers saw in the influence of Phoenician fertility cults a deadly danger to Israel's unique historical mission. These diametrically opposed opinions were the cause of the bloodthirsty civil war which brought about the extermination of the house of Ahab by Jehu, whose revolt was instigated by Elisha and his prophetic disciples. The Elijah cycle is influenced by the patriarchal stories and the historical traditions of the Book of Exodus, whereas the Elisha cycle lacks this deep affinity with old traditions.

Again, the Elijah cycle reveals theological features, whereas the Elisha legends are steeped in magic and mantic elements stemming from popular circles that sought to picture the great master as a sorcerer and miracle-maker endowed with supernatural powers. The confrontation with the magical and mantic concepts inherent in ancient prophetic traditions like these defines the theological orbit of classical prophets. The disillusionment following on the violent struggle of the prophetic movement hinted at in the literary structure of II Kings chs. 9-10 seems to have given rise to a spiri-

tual crisis, which resulted in a fundamental change in prophetic policy, for all classical prophets completely abstained from the use of violence, concentrating solely on educational activity.

The seventh chapter contains an investigation into the magical and mantic elements of ancient prophetic tradition, stressing the fluctuating attitudes of the various writers when trying to absorb these elements into the structure of montheistic beliefs.

Summary by the author

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