

**CHAPTER 6****PROPHETIC ICONS: THE PROPHETIC PHENOMENON**

What is the essence of a prophet? What meaning is conveyed by the word *προφήτης*? How would one know a person to be a prophet should you encounter such a person in the street? But more importantly: Does the meaning of this word in any way express or capture the mission and passion of Jesus and his seismic influence of which we still feel the tremors today?

H L Ellison's statement (1977:14) that a prophet stands to God as Aaron stood to Moses sheds some light on the subject. He refers to Deuteronomy 13: 1, 2 and 18:21, 22 to remind the reader that, while foretelling would most certainly come to pass in the mission of the true prophet, this does not necessarily establish his credentials.

Maybe an investigation into the typical breeding ground for the ancient Israelite prophetic phenomenon would be a suitable starting point when seeking to answer these questions.

**6.1 Status quo typical for prophetic intervention**

Victor Matthews (2001:1), echoing the sentiments of Dunn (2003a,b) when he speaks of "default settings" and of Craffert and Botha (2005), writes:

Examining any text in the Hebrew Bible from a socio-historical perspective requires an understanding that this material has a particular place in history. Writers reflect their own period even when they are editing a narrative originating from an earlier time. Similarly, when prophets speak, they do so within the social and historical context of their own time. They are primarily concerned with current events, not future happenings. Therefore, as we explore the social world of the

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

Hebrew prophets, we must first recognize that these persons...spoke within their own time, to an audience with a frame of reference very different from ours.

He reminds us that the world of the prophets and their audiences, even when revolving around urban centers such as Jerusalem, Bethel and Samaria, had been agriculturally based, as is evident in the large number of pastoral and agricultural images employed by the prophets:

The life was not an easy one: the Mediterranean climate with which these people had to contend brought rain only during the winter months...and the land they occupied was hilly, badly eroded, and rocky. Thus their lives were hard, often short, and too often dominated by forces beyond their control. In addition, political and economic forces from outside their immediate area added to the pressures of their daily existence. Because we do not share these everyday aspects of ancient existence, one of the greatest challenges for modern readers has been to become acquainted with the social and historical forces that played such an important role in the lives of the prophets and their audiences.

(Matthews 2001:1, 2)

Are there certain situations or conditions in the state of Israel's affairs that make typical breeding ground for prophecy? This certainly seems to be the case. The following circumstances seem mostly to prevail:

- It is usually when some eventuality looms in the skies of international historical and political occurrences and the people of the covenant are drawn into this Spiel that prophets appear to interpret the coming threat to Israel. This is the action of God placing them under siege as punishment for their rebellion and unfaithfulness, God using the arena of world history to vent his wrath on their recalcitrance.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

- Prophecy also steps into times of gross social and economic injustice. For generation upon generation Israel had lived as farmers in the country within the social arrangement of the tribal orders. Now urbanisation was taking place and rich landowners were rapidly gaining control of the nation's purse strings. Soon they were the capitalists and the country dwellers pawns in their hands, weighed down by heavy tax burdens, treated unmercifully and marginalized to the extent that they were forced to relinquish their freedom and become slaves. The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people: "It is you who have ruined my vineyard; the plunder from the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people and grinding the faces of the poor?" (Is 33:14, 15). From Isaiah 58 I select a number of verses to illustrate:
  - "Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.... (3b).
  - Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen; to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and provide the poor wanderer with shelter - when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? (6, 7).
  - In Amos 8:4-6 we read: Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?" - skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat.
- Israel had forever been tempted to dabble in the religions of all neighbouring peoples and whomever she came into contact with. At times when syncretism was threatening to obliterate Yahwism

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

a prophet would step in to show God's people the error of their ways. The most dramatic example of this being of course Elijah and the prophets of Baal on the mountain in 1 Kings 18.

Passages such as Isaiah 57 and Jeremiah 10:1-9 also bear witness to this and Jeremiah 19:4, 5 reads:

For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent. They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal - something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind.

- Israel had also been trying her hand at forming alliances and considered herself adept at political strategising to the extent that God's protection and council had started to seem redundant: Ephraim feeds on the wind; he pursues the east wind all day and multiplies lies and violence. He makes a treaty with Assyria and sends olive oil to Egypt (Hs 12:1). Ephraim is like a dove, easily deceived and senseless - now calling to Egypt, now turning to Assyria (Hs 7:11).

All of these are reminiscent of the times of Jesus, fecund for prophetic intervention. The social injustices as spelt out clearly by Horsley (chapter 3 above), the abnormal circumstances, “eschatological and politico-religious fever” close to the “point of eruption”, the “hotbed of nationalist ferment” with which Vermes (2003:11) sketches of first-century Galilee, the religious marginalization of the people of God all indicate the perfect breeding ground for God’s messenger to appear.

## 6.2 The prophet

*“Prophet, n. Inspired teacher, revealer or interpreter of God’s will;...person revealing unexpected gifts...; spokesman, advocate; one who foretells events,....”* (The Concise Oxford Dictionary 1961).

Lindblom (1973:1) accurately sums up the phenomenon of prophecy:

The special gift of a prophet is his ability to experience the divine in an original way and to receive revelations from the divine world. The prophet belongs entirely to God; his paramount task is to listen to and obey his God. In every respect he has given himself up to his God and stands unreservedly at His disposal. There are *homines religiosi* to whom religious experiences as such are the essence of their religious life. Personal communion with God, prayer, devotion, moral submission to the divine will are the principal traits in their religious attitude.

In Micah 3:8 we read another apt definition: “But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin” and Weber (in Petersen [ed] 1987:111) sheds the following light on the subject: “The religious problem-complex of prophets of prophets and priests is the womb from which nonsacerdotal philosophy emanated, wherever it developed”.

If, in New Testament times, a search had been made for any true prophets in the style and tradition of the great prophets of old among the people of Israel, would anybody have been found to meet with all of the requirements? John the Baptist perhaps, or maybe Jesus? What follows is a study into the phenomenon of prophecy against the backdrop of which, with the wisdom of hindsight, we can study these prominent New Testament figures to see whether they could rightfully don the prophetic mantle.

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

The prophets of the Old Testament - thorn-in-the-flesh, dangerously subversive, influential, controversial, people of moral purpose who were the bane of many a king, who had a hotline to the God who had called him to his service and therefore held sway with the nation. Kings consulted them, wouldn't make any strategic moves without seeking their council, were severely punished if they did, sometimes hated both prophet and his council and massacred hundreds of them. No one is sure when or how exactly they appeared for the first time in Israel, these strange men, often wearing a tonsure and clothed in peculiar garments made of skins (marking of a special degree of holiness) or later a hairy mantle and loin cloth of leather, reminiscent of the garments worn by John the Baptist.

For more than three centuries Israel had the voices of prophets publicly announcing and preaching what they had to say, delivering messages for all and sundry to hear, appearing where people were gathered together or in places such as the sanctuaries where audiences were bound to be found, bringing them the guidance of their God, reminding them that neither allies nor calculated strategising but only faith in Yahweh could bring salvation.

H L Ellison writes: "The prophet is not defined or explained in the Old Testament; he is taken for granted. This is because he has existed from the very first (Luke 1:70; Acts 3:21 R.V.), and has not been confined to Israel, e.g. Balaam (Num.22:5), the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18:19). ...Amos makes it clear that the prophets of Israel are a special gift of God (Amos 2:11) without real parallel among the Canaanites" ([1952] 1977:13).

The monarchic period in Israel was the time in which prophecy flourished and classical prophecy continued flourishing well into post-exilic times. And then the voice of the prophets dies down and is not heard again until two figures appear in the New Testament looking and acting remarkably like prophets; one in the desert, the other walking the dusty roads of Galilee. What became of prophets and prophecy and were these two figures indeed prophets?

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

To the first of these questions Lindblom provides a possible answer:

In the time of the Maccabees prophets were rare or non-existent. In the early Christian church they came into existence again. Everywhere the history of prophecy shows periods of vitality and periods of decline. A rich cultic life is not unfavourable for prophetic phenomena, but the dominance of doctrine and law suppresses the prophetic spirit. The Torah-religion and the learned activity of the scribes during the last pre-Christian centuries did not stimulate vigorous prophetic activity.

(Lindblom 1973:218)

Each and every prophet was a child of his time. He was aware of standing at a specific time-junction with the events of his day cradling his message. The message he delivered was aimed at restoring faith in the God of Israel among the people of Israel at the specific time and in the specific situation in which he found himself. Thus while we shall investigate certain traits common among prophets in general, we must simultaneously realise that each prophet and his message is unique and has many time-specific "*Sondergut*" which need to be taken into account against the backdrop of the place he occupied on the time-line of his people's history.

According to Max Weber (in Petersen [ed] 1987:110, 111), "[t]he conflict between empirical reality and the conception of the world as a meaningful totality, which is based on a religious postulate, produces the strongest tensions in man's inner life as well as in his external relationship to the world" and he believes that this is where prophecy steps in to play an important role:

To the prophet, both the life of man and the world, both social and cosmic events, have a certain systematic and coherent meaning. To this meaning the conduct of mankind must be oriented if it is to bring salvation, for only in relation to this

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

meaning does life obtain a unified and significant pattern....Moreover, it always contains the important religious conception of the world as a cosmos which is challenged to produce somehow a “meaningful,” ordered totality, the particular manifestations of which are to be measured and evaluated according to this requirement.

(Weber, in Petersen [ed] 1987:110, 111)

Lindblom (1973:34) points out that it is generally characteristic of inspiration that ideas, images, emotions and impulses arise spontaneously in the mind of the prophet independently of reflection or meditation so that he perceives them to be emanating not from himself, but from a power from another realm. It would appear however that this mode of inspiration was in the later prophets complimented by reflection and meditation, rendering prophecy not a stagnant phenomenon but an art evolving and being refined by these messengers of God who gradually came to be what, for the profundity of their contemplations and teachings, may be called skilled theologians.

The prophets had as foundation and common ground an unbelievably rich treasure of tradition. In the long and varied history of Israel many different accounts of God's interaction with his people had been born. In times when Yahwism seemed to be on a rapid decline and the people of Israel merely still going through the motions in an almost superstitious holding on to the old institutions as the last vestiges of their bond with Yahweh, the prophets would use their knowledge of these nearly forgotten traditions in surprisingly different, varied and innovative ways to resuscitate that which was so unique to the people of Israel; her existence in covenant with God. In their zeal for reformation they would often uproot tradition forcefully from its context and reapply it arbitrarily, stressing that the old laws and ordinances had lost nothing in its potency and immediacy but on the contrary had intensified. So extreme and radical was the effect of their

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

methods that Yahwism usually not only resuscitated but erupted.

Reminding Israel of whence she came was however not their only aim.

Preparation for a radically new action of God in the near future was of even greater portent.

Their message was dire, for Israel the elect, shocking. God was closing the book of the history of his involvement with them, the end chapter telling of doom and gloom as Yahweh rides out in wrath against his children, using foreign peoples as the executioners of his punishment of their sins.

But they are also the harbingers of good tidings for Yahweh stands ready to open a new book, a book of salvation, to alleviate the sentence of death passed onto his people. When there are no strongholds left, God's message of consolation and love brings hope and promise of renewal to the people in exile. How may a prophet be distinguished from common man? How did the people of Israel know that a prophet was among them? The following are a few of the qualities and traits which seem to have been characteristic of prophets through the ages:

### **6.3 The phenomenon “prophecy”: Conveyor of the word**

In the words of Von Rad (1972:73): "...God's thoughts and designs began their historical fulfilment at the point at which they became words on the lips of the prophet." "Interdependence", "inseparable", "absolute authority", "driving force in history of Israel" - all of these spring to mind when we think of the relationship between and partnership of the prophet and the word of God.

In Jeremiah 1:6 we read that the prophet felt himself ill-equipped to execute the task that lay before him. God, however, supplies him with what is needed to be a successful prophet: "Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, 'Now, I have put my words in your

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jr 1:9, 10). The implication is clearly that the words of the Lord are all that are needed to enable him to do all of the latter. It is interesting to note the statistics which Von Rad (1972:66) gives regarding prophet and word of God, namely that the phrase "the Word of Yahweh" occurs 241 times in the Old Testament and in 221 (92%) of these it is used in relation to a prophetic oracle. The typical phrase: "The word of Yahweh came to..." occurs 123 times.

"Word" was not to Israel a static concept or mere utterance of thought or emotion, but was seen to be a dynamic force possessing creative power. Not only in Israel was this believed to have been true but ancient eastern cultures applied the dynamism of the word in cultic life for spells, exorcisms, blessings and curses. In ancient Babylon and Egypt the word was seen as possessing physical and cosmic capabilities and in the time of Jesus, the concept that certain spiritual words give eternal life was not uncommon to Jewish spirituality. The above-mentioned phrase: "The word of Yahweh came to..." (which occurs so repeatedly in a book such as Jeremiah that it eventually falls on the ear like a line from a chorus) carries in itself a blueprint of what was seen by tradition, prophet and people alike to be the quintessence of the word-of-God-phenomenon. The use of this particular verb with this particular noun is one which, outside of the Bible, falls strangely on the ear and is rarely if ever used in this way in present time. It conveys something of the almost personal character that this "word" displays, but also of the dynamic power it is seen to possess. The word and therefore by implication the prophet as its conveyor / vessel / servant / illustrator / partner / dependant is seen as the power generator, the driving force behind the history of Israel.

We see proof of this in the particular emphasis placed on the naming of people and creatures, as well as in their re-naming when their circumstances change and their old names no longer capture the essence of their being. It is almost as though part of their being is contained within

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

their name and they are incomplete without it. In Ruth 1 it is of interest to note how the meanings of the names of Mahlon and Chilion foretell their early deaths and we read in verse 20 and 21 that Naomi asks people to call her "Mara" instead of "Naomi" for God had made her life bitter.

If human words carried this much import, how much did the word of Yahweh not carry? We read that the word of God does not return to Him without accomplishing that for which it had been sent out:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

(Is 55:10-11)

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.

(Is 40:8)

There is no better example of this however than the whole of Genesis 1 which serves to illustrate in a way unrivalled for its effect the perception of the creative power of God's word. Here priestly tradition relates how it transforms chaos into order, formless void into a creation worthy of God's approval. The beautiful, rhythmic repetition of "And God said...", "And it was so", "And God saw that it was good" imprints the supreme creative dynamism of this Word forever onto the mind of the reader.

As unthinkable as it is to refer to the spirit of Yahweh with an indefinite "a" instead of a definite "the", just as unthinkable would it be to refer to the word of Yahweh in this way. It seems as though the word was also thought to contain in it the essence of whence it came.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

The prophet as a vessel containing the word of God must have commanded awesome respect and even fear from their audience and the prophets themselves must have been acutely aware of the gravity of this message that they were carrying, as being the divine word in all its omnipotence. To prophet and audience alike Gods Word had absolute and unquestionable authority. Therefore the prophet, as carrier of this word, had the same kind of power and authority.

It is interesting to note that the phenomenon of creative power ascribed to the Word, which might easily and erroneously be regarded as remains of archaic magical beliefs, does not wane with time and increased theological reflection, but on the contrary waxes even upon - or maybe *especially* upon - the most sophisticated and ground-breaking thereof.

It would appear that the Word becomes *raison d' être* for the prophet and to the extent that he views it as sustenance. In Deuteronomy the words: "They are not just idle words for you - they are your life." (Dt 32:47a) and "...man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Dt 8:3b) are attributed to Moses. In Amos (8:11b,12) we read: "...not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the Lord. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it."

Ezekiel was ordered to eat the scroll which was offered to him:

Do not rebel like that rebellious house; open your mouth and eat what I give you." Then I looked, and I saw a hand stretched out to me. In it was a scroll, which he unrolled before me. On both sides of it were written words of lament and mourning and woe. And he said to me, 'Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.' So I opened my mouth and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, "Son of man, eat this scroll I am

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

giving you and fill your stomach with it." So I ate it and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth.

(Ezk 2:8b-3:3)

Jeremiah speaks of the joy derived from the word and how he gorges upon it like a starving man. In Jeremiah 15:16a we read: "When your words came, I ate them: they were my joy and my heart's delight". Von Rad (1972:70) refers to this last example saying:

When he speaks of eating the divine words, we should not take this in too spiritual a way and regard it as metaphor and hyperbole: it is perfectly possible that a prophet even felt physically dependent on the word and so, in a sense, was kept alive by it....Later on we shall have to consider how the entry of the message into their physical life brought an important change in the self-understanding of these later prophets. (We may ask whether this entry of the word into a prophet's bodily life is not meant to approximate what the writer of the Fourth gospel says about the word becoming flesh).

(Von Rad 1972:70)

When the prophet bows down before the absolute authority of *the Word*, when he applies fair means and foul and all in his power to bring it to the people in the best way possible, he seems to take for granted that the receptors would alike bow down to this awesome authority, as though all and sundry, either through personal experience or through knowledge handed over through tradition, knew of its unquestionable creative / destructive power. The prophet as carrier of this word must therefore have been regarded with awe and reverence by some and with hatred and fear by others as the harbinger of tidings that would change their lives and circumstances drastically.

#### 6.4 Symbolic actions

When a prophet bowed down before the word of Yahweh, he not only surrendered his words into its service but his whole life and even to some extent the lives of his family. They were sometimes under order to perform symbolic actions to convey the message of Yahweh, actions that seem to the modern reader to be totally bizarre and which heaped additional suffering on the shoulders of the man of God. The demands that these actions made on the lives of the prophets are sometimes so far-reaching that one cannot but wonder at their obedience and commitment.

Ezekiel was said to have been ordered to lie on first his left side for 390 days and then on his right for forty, thus carrying the sins of the people first of Israel and then of Judah. While obeying this command he had to cook his food on fire made with human excrement to symbolise the impure food that they would have to eat while in diaspora. He had to shave his hair and beard with a sharpened sword, weigh the shaved hair and divide it by three. Each third then had to meet with a different fate to symbolise different fates the people would meet with.

In Ezekiel 21:6, 7 we read:

Therefore groan, son of man! Groan before them with broken heart and bitter grief. And when they ask you, "Why are you groaning?" you shall say, "Because of the news that is coming. Every heart will melt and every hand go limp; every spirit will become faint and every knee become as weak as water.

Isaiah 20:2-44 reads:

...at that time the Lord spoke through Isaiah son of Amos. He said to him, "Take off the sackcloth from your body and the sandals from your feet." And he did so, going around stripped and barefoot. Then the Lord said, "Just as my servant Isaiah

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

has gone around stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush, so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old with buttocks bared - to Egypt's shame.

But perhaps Ezekiel 24:15-18 best of all serves as illustration:

The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, with one blow I am about to take away from you the delight of your eyes. Yet do not lament or weep or shed any tears. Groan quietly; do not mourn for the dead. Keep your turban fastened and your sandals on your feet; do not cover the lower part of your face or eat the customary food of mourners." So I spoke to the people in the morning, and in the evening my wife died. The next morning I did as I had been commanded.

Hosea 1 also tells of an order for symbolic action which not only involved the prophet. Hosea is told to take an "...adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness " to signify the unfaithfulness of the land. His children's names, "Jezreel", "Lo-Ruhama" and "Lo-Ammi", were all prescriptions from the Lord, chosen to highlight for the Israelites some aspect of their deteriorating relationship with their covenant-God.

All of this aided and abetted the prophet in delivering his message in a way that was sure to shock his audience into hearing and understanding. The symbolic actions were sometimes accompanied by a verbal message, but sometimes stood alone as self-explanatory. It was also a phenomenon not unknown to the prophet's contemporaries, because it was a practice not used exclusively by the prophets. Cult, rite, dance and sacral medicine alike could make effective use of this means of conveying a message of unrivalled visual impact.

## 6.5 Visions

Prophets were people upon whom the divine had lain claim and were "... entirely devoted, soul and body, to the divinity. They are inspired personalities who have the power to receive divine revelations." (Lindblom 1973:6). Unlike mystics, prophets did not seek contact with the deity but visions came upon them, or more accurately and more frequently, overcame them.

Lindblom (1973:181) says that the great prophets never sought revelatory experiences through ecstatic exercises. Although there were prophetic schools of teaching, their object was knowledge of Yahweh (*da'at Yahweh*) and the preservation of prophetic revelations. The presupposition in prophecy was always that Yahweh sent His word and that the sovereign Lord did this when it pleased Him. The passive state of the prophet and dynamic action of the divine possession are clearly illustrated by passages such as Ezekiel 40:1: "...the hand of the Lord was upon me and He took me there," and Ezekiel 37:1: "The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley."

In Daniel we read of some form of preparation, for example in Daniel 10:2, 3: "At that time I, Daniel, mourned for three weeks. I ate no choice food; no meat or wine touched my lips; and I used no lotions at all until the three weeks were over."

The inspiration which they experienced had a tendency to develop into real ecstasy. Lindblom (1973:4) explains that, in religious ecstasy, the consciousness is completely saturated with the presence of God and with ideas and feelings emanating from the divine sphere. The soul of the ecstatic is lifted up and transported into the exalted region of divine revelation, and the "lower world" with its sensations momentarily disappears.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

Ecstasy never comes alone. Lindblom (1973:50, 51).explains that all ecstasies are expected to have the faculty of miracle working and the prophets of ancient Israel were no exception. To illustrate he list powers that could be expected of the prophet:

- A prophet can ensure that a meagre supply does not run out.
- With the barest minimum of provisions he provides a meal for a multitude of people.
- At his command a little oil in a flask fills many vessels.
- He resurrects the dead.
- He renders poisonous food innocuous.
- He has the power to cleanse bad water, making it sound.
- He can defy the forces of nature to make iron float on water.
- On his word, men are struck with leprosy and blindness.
- He prays to God and fire comes down from heaven.
- Even his dead body has a wonderful effect and is imbued with power. Everything that belonged to him was, so to speak, charged with power. Even his clothes possessed power, for example Elijah's mantle.

But although all of these may suggest mysterious forces working through the prophets, it was God who stood behind them and worked through them and the importance of prophetic prayer and personal intercession cannot be over-emphasized.

Lindblom (1973:48-50) further distinguishes between orgiastic and passive or lethargic ecstasy. Of collective, contagious orgiastic ecstasy he mentions I Samuel 10:5-8, 19:22-24 and 1 Kings 22 as examples. He likewise classifies 1 Kings 18:46 where Elijah runs ahead of Ahab's chariot from Mount Carmel to Jezreel as orgiastic ecstasy.

John J Pilch (2003:708-720) investigates the possibility that Tascodrugite practices during prayer could induce altered states of consciousness. The

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

Church Father Epiphanius describes in his *Panarion* (in Pilch 2003:708, 709) a practice common among the Tascodrugite sect of putting their forefinger on their one nostril while praying. Pilch (2003:709-711) describes the physiological and psychological effects of circadian and ultradian rhythms, as well as of the nasal cycle. He investigates the link between the olfactory faculties and trance and reports on several South African rock paintings ostensibly depicting a hand raised to the nose as technique for facilitating or inducing trance and experiencing altered states of consciousness.

Based on this information Pilch (2003:716, 717) concludes that Jesus in the Garden, as reported on in Luke 22:43-44 (which in turn drew upon Mark) assumed a posture which could stimulate the nasal cycle. He writes: Luke's source in this scene is Mark who reports that "Jesus fell on the ground" (Mk 14:35; also Mt 26:39 even more explicitly: 'he fell on his face and prayed' – again a supine position with the possibility of blocking the left nostril)" (Pilch 2003:716). He elaborates that the sweat like drops of blood could have been a nose-bleed that sometimes accompanies intense trance. As further proof he maintains that Luke was no stranger to trance, reporting more than twenty in the Acts of the Apostles.

A couple of thoughts on his theories would be:

- The evidence seems rather diaphanous to allow for such a conclusion. If one were merely to subject this conclusion to the test of memory and impression and ask if anyone familiar with the Jesus of the sources available to us would describe him as a person who experienced or induced trances, the answer would probably lead away from the conclusion.
- What ecstatic practices the early church indulged in or were reported on in Acts are not of great value in determining the praxis of Jesus.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

- The scholar searches in vain for Jesus among those who sought or induced trance-like states in an active fashion. It is clear in prophetic scholarship that the prophet of repute and refinement was the one who was overcome by ecstasy in a passive state. There can be little doubt that Jesus represented the pinnacle of his practice, a man who is remembered vividly as gaining access to the divine through prayer. There are two totally diverging and disjunct ecstatic paths; the one seeking stimulant trance and ecstasy, of which no-one can seriously suspect Jesus on the grounds of any firm evidence; the other quieting the mind and being overcome by depressant ecstasy or altered states of consciousness. The latter of the two is the result of either prayer or meditation and the road less trodden because it guarantees no quick fixes or histrionic results. It is, however, a perfectly logical and cerebral path: The brain is known to be a pattern-former, like water coursing through and eroding soil, and regular prayer or meditation or slow baroque music facilitates access to the alpha rhythms of the brain and the sub-conscious (which is more powerful than the conscious), both facilitating openness to passive altered states of consciousness.<sup>55</sup>
- It is clear from the quotations of the work of Epiphanius that the Tascodrugite sect and their practices were held in no great esteem by the Church Father. Surely if this practice had been the wont of the professed Lord of the Church the sentiment regarding it would have been different.

2 Kings 8:7-11 is cited as example of a passive trance and Lindblom (1973:49) concludes: "Throughout the world prophetic persons are reputed to be endowed with the gift of clairvoyance, thought-reading and telepathy. It is something like this that is attributed to Elisha in this story." He adds that foreseeing, foretelling and clairvoyance were ascribed to the prophets of the earliest phase of Old Testament prophecy.

---

<sup>55</sup> See Grové (1994).

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

This is a far cry from the frenzied ecstasies, chanting and self- or substance-induced trances we read of in mystical practices. Divine response is, in the case of the prophets, like the answer to a prayer. Neither is there ever any mystical unification with the godhead.

There is, however, the essentially theological sense of the prophet, servant of God, in submission before the Divine, surrendering to the commission laid upon him. This brought with it an intensification in his sensory perception and an empathic awareness of the divine emotions in this temporary state of consciousness:

He became in a strange way detached from himself and his own personal likes and dislikes, and was drawn into the emotions of the deity himself. It was not only the knowledge of God's designs in history that was communicated to him, but also the feelings in God's heart, wrath, love, sorrow, revulsion and even doubt as to what to do and how to do it. Something of Yahweh's own emotion passed over into the prophet's psyche and filled it to bursting point.

(Von Rad 1972:42)

Furthermore we find in the words of the prophets no exhortation or encouragement to the people to seek this kind of experience of God, a fact which enhances the uniqueness of the experience and office of the prophet - emissary of God.

## **6.6 Suffering**

Being a prophet involved totally abandoning one's being into the hands of God to become an instrument in conveying his message. God's calling lay hold of the personal life of the prophet to such an extent that it all but disappeared. Lindblom (1973:2) writes:

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

As one compelled by the divine power, the prophet lives under a divine constraint. He has lost the freedom of the ordinary man and is forced to follow the orders of the deity. He must say what has been given him to say and go where he is commanded to go. Few things are so characteristic of the prophets, wherever we meet them in the world of religion, as the feeling of being under a superhuman and supernatural constraint.

It is as though he underwent a total change of personality through his calling. It changed his way of interacting with people. His life became ever more focused on God so that he almost seemed to be more aware of the presence and conversation of God than that of the people around him. His feet clearly walked a different path to that of his fellow-humans; the path of God's will and vision for his people. This already becomes clear when we look at the lives of Moses and Elijah.

From the very first we come to realize that being a prophet entailed suffering. The prophet may have suffered because the way ahead seemed to be more than he felt humanly equipped to deal with. It was possible that the message he had to deliver was one that filled him with horror and dismay or that was contrary to his own personal beliefs and aspirations, or that his person and message met with animosity to the extent that he was seen as a threat to his own people and shunned by them, or even that he met with bodily harm at their hands or the hands of their leaders. He saw his people suffering when the punishment God announced through him broke over them. He understood something of the sorrow of Yahweh over his recalcitrant people: "Since my people are crushed, I am crushed; I mourn, and horror grips me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?" (Jr 8:21, 22).

So characteristic is suffering of the office of prophecy that the phrase "the fate of the prophets" / "*Prophetenschicksal*" has been coined.

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

As servant of the Almighty he became agent, and if necessary, martyr, in the cause of the justice required by Him/Her who sent his/her prophet in among his/her people to execute his/her will.

But above all he was a man who stood in complete isolation before God. In pre-exilic times in particular he was the sole conveyer of God's message. He alone bore the burden of carrying the revelation of God to his people. Not only must a mere human have buckled under such responsibility, isolation as well as under the magnitude of the knowledge imparted to him, but he was forced to defend his exceptional exclusivity in the eyes of the people. And if God deemed it necessary, martyrdom could lie at the end of this road for him.

To highlight the desolation, despair and danger faced by just one of the prophets, we recall a few passages from the book of Jeremiah:

- “Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth, a man with whom the whole land strives and contends! I have neither lent nor borrowed, yet everyone curses me” (Jr 15:10).
- “Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?” (Jr 15:18).
- “But when he reached the Benjamin Gate, the captain of the guard,...arrested him and said, ‘You are deserting to the Babylonians.’ ‘That's not true!’ Jeremiah said. ‘I am not deserting to the Babylonians.’ But Irijah would not listen to him; instead, he arrested Jeremiah and brought him to the officials. They were angry with Jeremiah and had him beaten and imprisoned....Jeremiah was put into a vaulted cell in a dungeon, where he remained a long time” (Jr 37:13-16).

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

- “So they took Jeremiah and put him into the cistern of Malkijah, the king's son, which was in the courtyard of the guard. They lowered Jeremiah by ropes into the cistern; it had no water in it, only mud, and Jeremiah sank down into the mud (Jr 38:6).

The whole of Lamentations (see especially 33:1-20) bears witness to the torment which formed part of the lives of these men of God. This selection of phrases abstracted from Lamentations, speaks for itself:

- “From on high he sent fire, sent it down into my bones.” “This is why I weep and my eyes overflow with tears.”
- “No one is near to comfort me, no one to restore my spirit.”
- “See, O Lord, how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart I am disturbed....”

However, it was probably Baruch the scribe, who opened our eyes to the fact that suffering had become one of the dimensions of the prophet's witness-bearing as much as was words and symbolic actions. Von Rad ascribes this to what he calls a critical phase in the existence of prophecy in the time of Jeremiah who walked his own "Via Dolorosa" and says: "There was more to being a prophet than mere speaking. Not only the prophet's lips, but his whole being were absorbed in the service of prophecy. Consequently, when the prophet's life entered the vale of deep suffering and abandonment by God, this became a unique kind of witness-bearing" (Von Rad 1972:18).

Interesting is the personal interaction between prophet and God in times of suffering (cf. Jr 15; Hab). When the prophet unburdens before the One by whom he was sent, he receives answers, though the answers are seldom what he wants to hear.

Von Rad (1972:50) also states that the prophet had a certain freedom in his calling and what it demanded of him, a choice which, when executed,

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

means that he has withstood the testing of God. It seems however that it was this very "choice", if choice it indeed be, which caused the prophet the most internal conflict and spiritual turmoil of all. Lindblom (1973:45) captures something of the torment they suffered:

They are servitors of God, runners carrying the letters of a mighty lord, messengers from a great king, mouthpieces by which God seeks, instruments by means of which God acts. To fail or desert would be a crime, but also something that brings its own revenge in both the external and the inner life. It happens that they feel tempted to slip away, but immediately they begin to yield to this temptation they become victims of anguish and agony, pains and torments. Then they turn back, submit to the yoke and begin to walk the ordered way again.

### **6.7 The prophetic message – valid for ever?**

The messages conveyed by the prophets were without question situation-specific. They were meant for that specific moment in time, which usually entailed some kind of crisis on a national scale. They addressed the issues of the days of the prophet and spoke to the people, kings, priests and other contemporary prophets.

However, later generations show no qualms of conscience in using the words of earlier prophets, shaping them and adding to them to make them speak anew in a different time and circumstances.

It seems *sine qua non* to the users thereof that the validity of prophetic utterances should transcend their own time. Moreover Von Rad speaks of a real sense of continuity in this type of 'exegesis' as though God speaks the same words to the same people in different episodes of the same history. He cites as example the messianic prophecy in Isaiah 11 being taken up and added to by Paul in his letter to the Romans 15:12 to make it applicable to the world of the Gentiles.

### 6.8 The prophetic message: Divine wrath, divine love

Israel the ingrate, Israel the recalcitrant, Israel the whore, the disobedient - this was what Israel the elect had become; the prophets were not known for their tact. They pointed out that the fact of her election was no mitigating circumstance as they had believed. On the contrary: Time and time again they would take the old divine law out from under the dust-covers where Israel had conveniently stashed it and apply it to the gross social injustices, the economic malpractices, the misappropriation of the cult and Israel's placing faith in her feeble attempts at militarising and strategizing in politics instead of in God.

Judgment would break because they had severed their relationship with God. It would mean destruction and exile and would bring an end to many things, the cult amongst others. "Moreover, the devastating force and finality of the prophetic pronouncement of judgment can never have had a cultic antecedent, for it envisaged the end of all cult itself" (Von Rad 1972:148).

In times when the prophets pronounce the wrath of Yahweh on his people, it is common for them to use the image of God as judge, for example: "The Lord takes his place in court; he rises to judge the people. The Lord enters into judgment against the elders and leaders of his people...." (Is 3:13, 14a). However, the love of God for his rebellious child always emerges to overshadow all pronouncements of wrath. Clear as the latter rings fiercely and inexorably from the words of the prophets, clearer still are the breathtakingly tender declarations of divine love that speaks through these servants of Jahweh. God the omnipotent, who whistles for those empires before whom Israel trembles, as though they were flies or bees and they obey, stoops down in pity before his beloved child. Examples abound: Isaiah 30:18-21, 26; Isaiah 35, Isaiah 41:1-16, Isaiah 43:1-7, Zephaniah 3:17-20, Hosea 11:3-5, 8.

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

The prophets often used the imagery of a father or shepherd to depict God and of a vineyard to depict his people:

- He tends his flock like a shepherd; He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.  
(Is 40:11).
- A son honours his father and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honour due to me?  
(Mi 1:6a).
- When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.  
(Hs 11:1).
- It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize that it was I who healed them.  
(Hs11:3).
- I myself said. "How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation." I thought you would call me "Father" and not turn away from following me.  
(Jr 3:19).
- Israel was a spreading vine; he brought forth fruit for himself. As his fruit increased, he built more altars;  
(Hs 10:1a).

### **6.9 Speaking with divine authority**

The calling of a prophet by God bestows a huge amount of creditability and divine authority upon him. The divine calling is therefore usually reported on in descriptive detail to portray the metamorphic profundity of the experience but also to convey to the prophetic audience the validity and legitimacy of his office.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

Lindblom (1973:46) writes that the prophet obtains an inner certitude of a religio-ethical nature that he is chosen by God to mediate his/her message to men and elected to perform a particular task given him from above. In this case the call is often experienced in a mysterious nature by means of, for example, auditions and visions.

The prophets often "clothed" themselves in the authority of God by adopting the "messenger-formula" (Von Rad 1972:18) in a way reminiscent of the angelic messengers of God. In these instances it is as though the personality of the prophet evacuates his body to allow God to use his body as vessel through which to speak his message.

Lindblom (1973:112, 113) quotes Amos 3:7 when speaking of the prophetic consciousness: "Surely, the Lord Yahweh does nothing without revealing His *sôd*... to His servants the prophets." and adds: "Thus the words of the prophets are words which they have heard directly from Yahweh. So great is the privilege of the true prophets, so high their mission, that Yahweh does nothing at all that He has not first revealed to the prophets."

### **6.10 The prophetic formula**

In the earlier stages of prophecy one might be pardoned for thinking that the emphasis seems to fall on the miraculous deeds of the prophets and that their words and utterances to seem to have been of lesser importance seeing that so much of the former and so little of the latter are reported to us. The scarcity of teachings from the mouths of the earlier prophets could however be merely the result of its being lost in the oral transmission thereof.

The revelation received by the prophet often determines the literary form into which the prophetic message is cast: Revelations received in the revelatory state of mind are of various kinds. Nearly all formal stylistic categories occur. We encounter messages communicated in specific situations as well as forms ranging from exhortations, admonitions,

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

denunciations and predictions to prayers, poetry, songs of praise and dogmatic expositions. Sometimes thoughts and ideas are revealed, sometimes things are seen or heard. The former experience may be described as an intellectual illumination within the soul, the latter as visual and auditory revelation (Lindblom 1973:36).

Lindblom (1973:42, 43), in distinguishing between different types of revelation, says about a type which he calls "revelatory fancies" or "literary visions": "Revelatory fancies which form a coherent tale and demand to be interpreted in detail may be called 'revelatory allegories'". And we find a parable in the real sense of the word in 2 Samuel 12:1-4.

In the times of prophets like Amos groups of followers / students / disciples attached themselves to prophets and they, or scribes, or the prophets themselves wrote down prophetic utterances. Now the emphasis seems to shift more towards their words than their deeds, although whichever way a prophet chose to express the god-given message is always of the greatest import.

Prophets used whatever literary forms they deemed suitable to their purpose of shocking their audience into awareness and obedience; dirges, popular songs, cultic hymns, salvific oracles and sacrificial prescriptions formerly only heard from the mouths of priests, formulae used exclusively by teachers of wisdom, legal declarations from courts of justice.

All of these were used with no regard whatsoever as to the time-honoured sanctity or the incongruous mixture of sacred and profane. Whatever served the message was employed with callous authority which seemed to say that the prophet as mouth-piece of God transcended previous taboos, authorities and sanctities of Israel's cultic, legal and monarchic institutions.

Von Rad draws attention to the fact that either the prophets themselves or their disciples assembled their oracles and hymns in "divans" (Von Rad 1972:21). He is of the opinion that the possibility of the oracular series of

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

sayings in Isaiah 5:8-24 being a unit is just as slight as this being the case in Matthew 23:13-34. It has to be an editorial grouping-together of sayings.

### 6.11 Prophet and Spirit

Lindblom (1973:179) explains the symbiosis between prophet and Spirit as follows:

...the prophet is filled with the spirit or anointed with the spirit. Two features in the conception of the spirit must be kept in mind: first, the spirit does not come from within the human soul; it comes from outside, surprisingly, wonderfully, impressively -'the spirit fell upon' the prophet; secondly, the spirit was never thought of as an independent power... but always as a power emanating or rather sent from Yahweh.

In 2 Kings 2:9 we read that Elijah grants Elisha one favour before he leaves him. At a request from Elisha he conditionally grants him to receive his share of the *ruach* which would make Elisha his successor when Elijah leaves him. He makes it clear that it is not in his (Elijah's) power to command the spirit but that it is the spirit who makes the choice in the matter of the prophet's successor.

The "Spirit of Yahweh" is a *sine qua non* in the make-up of a prophet, a prerequisite which in later years seemingly faded into obscurity as prophecy evolved into something akin to preaching.

Ezekiel 37:1-14 must surely serve as the classic example of the prophet-spirit-symbiosis, while Ezekiel 8:33 and 11:1,5, amongst many other examples in this book, illustrate how the Spirit of God transported the prophet to where God wanted him and, akin to the word of God, equipped him for the task ahead:

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem,...

(Ezk 8:3a)

Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon me, and he told me to say: "This is what the Lord says:..."

(Ezk 11:5a)

The following passage from Isaiah further illustrates this symbiosis: "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor..." (Is 61:1). Joel 2:28, 29 tells of things that are expected to come to pass with the arrival of the Day of the Lord; that everyone will receive the spirit - indeed it will be poured out on them - that some will proclaim Yahweh's message, others have dreams, yet others see visions. In Numbers 11:23-30 we read the interesting account of how some of the Spirit of Yahweh was taken away from Moses to be given to the seventy leaders, causing them to "...shout like prophets." Moses is then said to remark: "I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" Testimony not only of the Spirit of God rendering people prophets but also, once again, of prophecy at times being almost too much to bear for the human bent under the weight of the responsibility of this burden, so that he may come to wish that others may bear it for him.

The verses from Isaiah which find their echo in Revelations, pay homage to the workings of the Spirit:

The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him –  
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
the Spirit of council and of power,

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)  
 the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord –  
 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

(Is 11:2, 3a)

## 6.12 “I”

When a prophet used this personal pronoun, it was laden with meaning and implication. His use of this pronoun was also closely related to the indwelling of the Spirit. Spells of "becoming silent", or prayer, or passive meditation, or contemplation before God induced an emptying out of the self and an overwhelming awareness of unity with God. Amidst all the suffering, the awareness of the charisma taking possession of their being seemed to have been intoxicating and exhilarating beyond belief, causing an exuberance of spirit in them and eliciting strangely compulsive behaviour reminiscent of that of an addict. They were aware that it transformed their very being and set them apart from the rest of humanity.

## 6.13 Disciples

The classical prophets seem as a rule to have been surrounded by a group of followers, friends or disciples. These circles of *benê hannebî'im* may have been a continuation of the earlier prophetic guilds. The earlier *benê hannebî'im* were trained mainly in the arts of ecstasy and the delivery of oracles, but in the times of the classical prophets this made way for the training in matters considered to be of more importance for that particular time. They surrounded the prophet to listen to him (Is 50: 4), learn from him and receive instruction in the *da'at Yahweh*. The prophet might choose to share with them what was imparted to him and they were instructed what to do with this knowledge; keep it to themselves perhaps (Is 8:16), or preserve it by memorising it or by writing it down.

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

Everything received by the prophet in a form perceived by him to be a revelation was considered to be word of God and thus precious. Moreover it was considered to be not the property of the prophet alone, but of all men. It was of the utmost importance that everything had to be preserved, made known and handed down to later generations.

Oracles were sometimes delivered by the prophets in the form of poetry or dirges which, once heard, were easy to remember, sometimes hard to forget. However lengthy discourses or private and personal instructions or disclosures in the intimacy of the prophetic circle were another matter altogether. The prophet himself sometimes wrote down a divine message, indeed was sometimes instructed to (Is 30:8, Jr 30:2, Hab 2:2), some had a secretary, such as Jeremiah, to write down what was uttered by the prophet, but the disciples of the prophets played an extremely important role in preserving for posterity the words of their masters. They memorized an astounding number of speeches and information so that they might accurately be passed on from generation to generation and Lindblom (1973:159) is of the opinion that a large quantity of the prophetic utterances have been preserved for us in their original form.

#### **6.14 Guardian of God's people**

"I have made you a tester of metals and my people the ore, that you may observe and test their ways." (Jr 6:27) "A prophet, being a man of God, was expected to see through a person, find out his secret sins, and then bring punishment upon him" (Lindblom 1973:61).

Not only did prophets impart visions to the people of God, but it was also seemingly understood that they were to act as guardians over them. Here visions could have been of no avail. Prophets must therefore have had wisdom beyond mere human understanding, a profound insight into human nature, unshaken integrity in matters of wisdom, intellectual and theological versatility enabling them to stand guard over all spheres of life, as well as a

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

deeply grounded knowledge of and insight into the laws of God, religious tradition and the history of Israel; in short, men whose proximity to God lent them a totally new way of interacting with people. But apart from having to act as watchman over his people, separating good from evil, "scrutinizing and investigating" and being answerable in all of this to Yahweh if he failed, (Ezk 3:17-27, 33:7-9), Lindblom (1973:204, 205) adds that the prophet also had to intercede for his people with Yahweh. Although the patriarchs counted among the great intercessors of the Old Testament, he says that the prophets are unrivalled in this respect and names them intercessors par excellence. He cites as examples Amos 7:2-6, Hosea 9:14, Isaiah 22:4, 37:4, adding that Isaiah had felt for his people the depth of compassion which had always been a condition for intercession and naming Jeremiah supreme intercessor among the prophets.

The prophets made liberal and frequent use of quotations from tradition in order to illustrate their point and they did this with an ease and dexterity which illustrates keen understanding of their time as well as the extent to which the traditions formed part of their frame of reference. "The frequent quotations which the prophets wove into their utterances and used to characterize their audience and its way of thinking and to hammer home its collective guilt, were one of the fruits of their acute observation of mankind" (Von Rad 1972:55). They did not hesitate to draw caricatures, make sweeping statements and drop all pretence of objectivity in order to expose the evil of the ways of the people.

What was it that they expected from their people, who were first and foremost God's people, God's partners in covenant?

- Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord,....

(Is 55:6, 7a)

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

- This is what the Lord says: "Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed. Blessed is the man who does this, the man who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath without desecrating it, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.

(Is 56:1, 2)

- And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to serve him, to love the name of the Lord, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant...

(Is 56:6)

- But you must return to your God: maintain love and justice and wait for your God always.

(Hs 12:6)

In brief thus a renewed call for the essence of all the old laws to be upheld. The prophetic word, being teachings about the will and nature of God, is also sometimes called "prophetic torah". In this respect the great prophets arrogated to themselves the function of the priests, who were the real custodians of torah and also were regarded by the prophets as authentic transmitters of torah.....In controversy with the priests they accused them of having mismanaged and neglected their important task and yet claimed to be the true imparters of the torah of Yahweh (Lindblom1973:156,157).

Later on it is as though a despondency drops onto the prophets with the realisation that it is impossible for these people to do what God wants them to do. In Isaiah 32:15,16 it seems that the Spirit is seen as prerequisite for justice and righteousness to live among his people: "...till the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest. Justice will dwell in the desert and

righteousness live in the fertile field.”

## 6.15 Aspects of the phenomenon “prophecy”

### 6.15.1 Eschatology

“Eschatology” in the sense of the study of all pertaining to the strict sense of the *eschaton* as the end of history, the world and mankind as we know it, is absent in Old Testament prophecy. If one wishes to apply the term to the teaching of the prophets, it must be done in an adapted sense, taking into account the general character of their thought instead of indiscriminately seeking eschatological traits in the nature of Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic.

This would include the idea of the two ages – “this age” and “the age to come” - instead of the end of all things. Prophetic expressions such as the typical “on that day” and “at the end of the days” do not refer to the passing away of this world and the creation of a new one, but rather to a time when the existing would undergo a transformation so complete that in all appearance a new epoch seems to have dawned. In this sense can one speak of an eschatological dimension in the teachings of the prophets of the Old Testament, providing one bears in mind that normal historical events may also be described as of such portent that they simulate events of an eschatological nature.

Lindblom (1973:362) distinguishes between a “positive” eschatology, which speaks of the new age which would dawn, a “negative” eschatology which speaks only of the end, a “national” one referring to the whole Israelite nation, a “universal” one referring to all of mankind, one of salvation (*Heilseschatologie*) and one of misfortune (*Unheilseschatologie*).

But even when “eschatology” is awarded this broader scope of meaning it isn’t as essential a part of prophecy as has often been surmised. The prophets were first and foremost emissaries with messages for their own

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

time, calling their people to repentance and denouncing their sins. Certain characteristic traits within the prophetic utterances such as the typical oracular style with its “elements of obscurity and mysteriousness” may have given rise to the exaggerated importance attached to eschatology in prophecy (see Lindblom 1973:362, 363).

The element of eschatology which is present and even characteristic contributes to the urgency of the prophetic message. Israel had for long been resting on their laurels as having been God's chosen people and thus escaping his wrath. Although they had drifted away from Yahweh through passive negligence and even actively turned their backs on the God of the covenant, they still looked toward the old saving institutions which reminded them that they were the invincible people of the covenant and lulled them into a false sense of security.

When the prophets came to the people of Israel as messengers of the Divine, they still stood within the Israelite election traditions (Hosea e.g. within the Exodus-election tradition, Isaiah within the David-Zion tradition) but they introduced through their messages a trademark element; something totally unique and hitherto unknown. For the prophets did not merely look towards the past to remind them of the covenant and their God's saving acts in history and to exhort them on these grounds to return to God and all would be well. On the contrary - they reminded Israel of the scorn and disdain with which they had treated both covenant and Yahweh and uprooted all false securities by proclaiming God's wrath and judgment not over the *gojim*, but over his people. They foretold the day of Yahweh which would bring with it an act of destruction of cosmic import (e.g. Zph 1:14-18). This day would signify an amputation from all that went before, a complete break with the savings traditions of the past and the festering, cangrenous limb that the people of the covenant, Israel the elect, had become.

One could almost speak of a post-election state so complete was the break that God announced through his servants the prophets. This was the first

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

act of the eschatological drama that the prophets outlined to what must have been a profoundly shocked, even disbelieving people. Then would dawn the day of the Lord when Yahweh would enter into battle with cosmic consequences. Of this day Amos says:

Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light.

(Am 5:18)

In Joel we read:

Alas for that day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty.

(Jl 1:15)

and:

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble, for the day of the Lord is coming. It is close at hand - a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and blackness.

(Jl 2:1, 2a)

and in Jeremiah:

How awful that day will be! None will be like it. It will be a time of trouble for Jacob, but he will be saved out of it.

(Jr 30:7)

The second act of this drama would be when Yahweh created an existence so new that nothing that went before could have hinted at it:

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.

(Is 65:17, 18. See also 19-25)

Von Rad (1972:91) aptly describes this “day of the Lord”: "It is as if Israel and all her religious assets are thrown back to a point of vacuum, a vacuum which the prophets must first create by preaching judgment and sweeping away all false security and then fill with their message of the new thing". Von Rad here also points out that although there would be no continuum with the era they pronounced as having come to an end, there would be certain similarities: Hosiah announced how the new elect would enter into a promised land, Isaiah announced a new David and a new Zion, Jeremiah a new covenant and Deutero-Isaiah a new exodus. Because the break with the past was so complete, God had to re-enact his former deeds.

With the institutions of the old era becoming increasingly obsolete and devoid of the salvific powers ascribed to them by a people who had lost all contact with the God to whom they pointed, Israel would have to brace themselves to let go their superstitious hold on these and take a leap in faith to the salvation offered in the future action of God. Through this action God would be known not only as the God of Israel, but of the whole world.

There are also widespread prophetic rumours of the “Day of Yahweh” which, according to widespread expectation would bring war in its train. This seems to suggest a concept firmly rooted in eschatological tradition, but in actual fact this term is also applied to past events. It seems to be the case that this term is in no way eschatological by nature, but rather part of the firm grounding of the prophets in the old Yahwist tradition.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

However, in the opinion of Von Rad (1972:99), the prophets also believed that Yahweh's final uprising against his foes would take the same form as it had done in the days of old. He believes it to be beyond question that the prophetic vision of the concept of Yahweh's intervention in war became greatly intensified. For this war would leave no nation, not even Israel herself, nor yet the fixed orders of creation unscathed. Von Rad (1972:99) reports on the universal proportions this coming day has assumed and on how the event has been expanded into a phenomenon of cosmic significance.

### 6.15.2 Wisdom

A much less discernible trait in prophecy is wisdom in its formal, structured nature. The essence of wisdom – the fear of God – underlies all the prophetic teachings, but mere remnants of the formal teachings of the old Wisdom schools are to be found. In Amos 7:7-9 in the vision of the plumb-line, the question and the prophet's answer form a stylised feature which is repeated in the vision of the basket of ripe fruit in Amos 8, as well as in three visions in Jeremiah (Jr 1; 24:1-3) and one in Zechariah 5:1, 2.

Lindblom (1973:126) finds this reminiscent of the didactic practices in the old schools of wisdom "...where we can suppose the teacher to have been in the habit of pointing to an object in nature and connecting it with his instruction about spiritual matters in order to illustrate and elucidate them."

Traces of the ideologies and terminology used by the Wisdom school is also to be found in Jeremiah. In for instance Jeremiah 17:5-8, 9, 10,11 the images of a tree planted by the water as symbol of the righteous man, the deceitful heart and the partridge are suggestive of the Wisdom teachings. Similarly the typical wisdom phrase "receive correction" (*lakah musar*) appears frequently in the Book of Jeremiah. "The fact that reminiscences of Wisdom are spread over the whole book suggests that Jeremiah himself as well as his disciples had special connections with the Wisdom school" (Lindblom 1973:238).

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

If the conclusion to the Book of Hosea was not the work of a later copyist it is possible that the final redactor belonged to the Wisdom circles: “Who is wise? He will realize these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them” (Hs 14:9).

This seems to imply that, over and above the general grounding of the prophets in matters of wisdom albeit less than in that of the law, certain prophets, to a much greater extent than the others, show definite strains of influencing by the thoughts and terminologies of the schools of Wisdom.

### **6.16 Venturing outside of theology: Sociology**

In 1913 William Foxwell Albright (in Long 1996:153,154) writes to his mother of his new discovery that biblical criticism is intimately linked to the social gospel or “new Social Movement”. The key to this insight, according to Albright, is the hermeneutical construal of the biblical prophets. He sees, on the one hand, the conservative who view the prophets as merely religious preachers, leaving no room for social reform. But on the other hand there are those, with whom he avidly aligns himself, who see the prophets as primarily social reformers whose inspired and ardent words had been smothered under blankets of eschatology, optimism and other such things. But he believed that the prophets had tackled social injustice with ungloved hands in remorseless logic and “bolts.”

Bainbridge writes from a sociological perspective that a religious movement is an organized attempt by a number of people to cause or prevent change in a religious organization or in religious aspects of life - they are collective human attempts to create or to block change (Bainbridge 1997:3). Both of these possibilities fit in with what Jesus set about to accomplish and form a suitable introduction to a foray into what light sociology might cast on the life and work of Jesus.

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

Max Weber connects charismatic authority particularly with the kind of people he calls prophets and defines a prophet as a person who binds his followers into a personal allegiance to himself as bearer of some mission or new revelation. Dorothy Emmet (in Petersen 1987:14) warns however, that this definition is restrictive and indicative rather of messianic or millenarian preachers or religious revolutionaries than prophets, and that it excludes many who are generally known as prophets, for instance the Hebrew prophets.

When Weber, a sociologist, holds up the mirror of his discipline to reflect the phenomenon of prophecy, it reveals a wide range of figures from various religions and cultures, all meeting the requirements that sociology sets for someone to qualify as prophet.

One of these prophetic figures is Jesus. His definition of “prophet” is as follows: “...a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment” (Weber 1966:46). He claims authority on the grounds of personal revelation and charisma and exerts his power through his personal gifts. They are often skilled in divination, magical healing and counselling and render their services unremunerated. At the heart of his mission lies doctrine or commandment and in the case of Hebrew prophecy, a unique concern for social reform with religion at its root. Weber (1966:51) maintains, however, that

...their primary concern was with foreign politics, chiefly because it constituted the theatre of their god’s activity. The Israelite prophets were concerned with social and other types of injustice as a violation of the Mosaic code primarily in order to explain god’s wrath, and not in order to institute a program of social reform....Finally, Jesus was not at all interested in social reform as such.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

He ascribes the distinctive character of prophecy to "...the pressure of relatively contiguous great centers of rigid social organization upon less developed neighboring peoples. The latter tended to see in their own continuous peril from the bellicosity of terrible nations the anger and grace of a heavenly king" (Weber 1966:58). Thus the release of Israel from bondage in Egypt and their subsequent establishment of a secular monarchy had been declared a declension from Yahweh, their true monarch. In this way the great political powers and kings of the day in Hebrew prophecy first became rods of God's wrath on Israel to destroy them and subsequently, as the direct result of divine intervention on their behalf, release Israel from exile to return to their land.

The figure of the prophet has times of marked association with the teacher of ethics who, having been endowed with a new or revived understanding of ancient wisdom, has gathered around his person a group of disciples who regard him as revered master and with whom he shares an uncommonly strong bond, while he gives counselling on matters private and public and moulds ethical ways of life. Similarly, if the mission of the prophet meets with success, will he win permanent helpers called apostles, disciples or followers as their "personal devotees"?

Weber (1966:55) distinguishes two types of prophets, namely "ethical prophets" who, "[P]reaching as one who has received a commission from god, ...demands obedience as an ethical duty" and the "exemplary prophet" who demonstrates the way to religious salvation by means of personal example. But regardless which type of prophet, Weber (1966:58,59) says that

...prophetic revelation involves for both the prophet himself and for his followers ...a unified view of the world derived from a consciously integrated and meaningful attitude toward life. To the prophet, both the life of man and the world, both social and cosmic events, have a certain systematic and coherent meaning. To this meaning the conduct of mankind must be

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

oriented if it is to bring salvation, for only in relation to this meaning does life obtain a unified and significant pattern.

It was, according to him, common for tension to exist between prophets and the representatives of the priestly tradition. “To what degree the prophet would succeed in fulfilling his mission, or would become a martyr, depended on the outcome of the struggle for power, which in some instances, e.g., in Israel, was determined by the international situation” (Weber 1966:66).

He writes that all the prophets put to good use the prestige of their prophetic charisma among the laity as opposed to the charisma held by the “technicians of the routine cults” (Weber 1966:66). To the priesthood it fell to codify either the victorious new doctrine or the old one which had prevailed despite the attack by the new one and this produced canonical writings – the revelations and traditions themselves - and dogmas – the priestly interpretations of their meaning. Collections of prophetic religious revelations may be oral or scriptural in nature and in the end usually closes sacred collections against secular or unwelcome additions from groups competing with the prophet to gain a majority following among members of the community. In this process a decline or petrification of the original prophecy is unavoidable.

Two influences, namely the power of the prophetic charisma and the hyperbolic tendencies of the masses, influenced the work of the priests in their systematisation. Weber (1966:78, 79) writes:

The prophet himself is normally a righteous lay preacher of sovereign independence whose aim is to supplant the traditional ritualistic religious grace of the ecclesiastical type by organizing life on the basis of ultimate ethical principles. The laity’s acceptance of the prophet, however, is generally based on the fact that he possesses a certain charisma. This usually means that he is a magician, in fact much greater and more

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

powerful than other magicians, and indeed that he possesses unsurpassed power over demons and even over death itself. It usually means that he has the power to raise the dead, and possibly that he himself may rise from the grave. In short, he is able to do things which other magicians are unable to accomplish. It does not matter that the prophet attempts to deny such imputed powers, for after his death this development proceeds without and beyond him. If he is to continue to live on in some manner among large numbers of the laity, he must himself become the object of a cult, which means he must become the incarnation of a god.

Thus a sociological phenomenon develops around a charismatic figure such as a prophet much like a pebble tossed into a pond, creating ever widening circles; first giving rise to a charismatic movement which later solidifies into an institutional church. The teachings of the charismatic figure is experienced and received by his followers, solidified in tradition, interpreted and codified.

Malina (1984:55-62) first puts Weber's charismatic leader under the spotlight. Weber (in Malina (1984:56) has endowed him with the type of charisma which entails a quality of extraordinariness which is ascribed to and consequently recognized in this person by a collectivity of people sharing "an emotional form of communal relationship" (Weber, in Malina 1984:56).

Next Malina (1984:56) dissects Weber's definition and use of the term "leadership": "Leadership is dependent upon an achievement on behalf of a group in need of some quality, activity or object at a given time and place." This means that "leadership" becomes a sort of crisis management, a role dependent upon a set of variables, not least of these being the need of a specific group, rather than a quality inherent in the individual. Malina (1984:56) sums up the Weberian charismatic leader: "[A] great man of authoritarian bent who is dedicated exclusively to radical change on the

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

basis of his own personal virtuosity...in a situation of social crisis, especially one of political and/or normative vacuum.

When Malina (1984:61) examines the life and role of Jesus as possible charismatic leader, he finds a “first century reputational, legitimate leader and the very antithesis of Weber’s charismatic leader.” Malina (1984:56) expresses the opinion that the initial phase of Jesus’ career as Jewish symbol was “role based” – the “excited expressions of honor” elicited by Jesus preceded any claims to power on his part and therefore Malina assumes that any successful healer and teacher would have been venerated as Jesus was. But, writes Malina (1984:61), it does not remain a “role based” career: “Jesus’ honorable ‘passive’ role in interacting with people, his ‘disinterestedness’ in power, and his inevitable accumulation of honor stand out all the more clearly. In this sense the second phase of Jesus’ veneration was ‘performance based,’ and significantly, God’s performance with Jesus passive.”

Malina (1984:61) sets Jesus as embodiment of a great reputational, legitimate leader, who affirms the traditional values and structures of his society by repudiating personal power, over against Weber’s charismatic leader who, according to Malina (1984:61), “exudes confidence in his extraordinary abilities, thrives on power and glorification and, lacking ties to the established social order, seeks to effect its radical change.”

Thus Jesus, according to Malina, had been the great, reputational leader. In antithesis, according to Weber, he had been the charismatic at the centre of the sociological phenomenon of the type of movement which develops around such a leader and in the Gospel of Mark we have an early phase of the interpretative phase of memories being transformed into tradition. In the latter option he is already interpreted as having been a prophet, but this need not be the case. Had Jesus in actual fact been a prophet or had he been remembered and interpreted in this way while in reality being a visionary of a different kind?

### 6.17 Spirit persons

Geza Vermes, in a quote from the Berakoth in the Babylonian Talmud, tells of a miraculous deed by Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, a compatriot of Jesus: When a boy fell ill, he was summoned to pray for the boy. He duly arrived, went to the upper room and prayed for the boy. When he came down again he told the gathering that they may go, because the fever had left the boy. When they asked him whether he was a prophet, he replied: “I am no prophet, neither am I a prophet’s son, but this is how I am blessed: if my prayer is fluent in my mouth, I know that the sick man is favoured; if not, I know that the disease is fatal” (*bBer34b*, in Vermes 2003:7).

This answer of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa gives rise to the question that if he, who through his miraculous act of healing had immediately been perceived by the crowd to have been a prophet, denied being one, as what else may he then be classified? Reputed to have been a healer and sufficiently renowned for this reputation to be immediately summoned in the case of illness, he was clearly endowed with the spiritual gift of healing. Were other categories of spirit-endowed people in existence and if so, what were they?

Marcus Borg calls Hanina ben Dosa one of the best-known “spirit persons” at the time of Jesus (Borg [1994:42, 43]). The conclusions reached by Borg on “Spirit persons” seem to supply answers to questions such as these. He writes that, in the time of Jesus, a number of Jewish “holy men” or “Spirit persons” made their appearance. “Spirit persons” or visionaries such as these had been, are in touch with and communicate intimately with “the holy” or “the sacred” through means such as prayer and fasting, so that they experience temporarily an altered state of consciousness. These may take on different forms: There may be the experience of entering into a different dimension of reality (this is the typical shamanistic experience). Alternatively, as is expressed in the words: “The Spirit came over me” there is the experience of being overcome by an out-of-the-ordinary reality. There may be the experience of nature or something in nature changing shape to allow “the holy” to radiate through it. Or the person might even be

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

transported spatially by the Spirit. “Mystics, as I use the term, are people who have decisive and typically frequent firsthand religious experiences of the sacred” (Borg, in Borg & Wright 1999:60).

William James (1902:380, 381) describes four defining characteristics of mystical experiences, of which the first two are more marked:

- *Ineffability*: These experiences defy expression and the subject has to resort to metaphor in order to describe it.
- *Noetic quality*: Borg follows James in emphasizing that the visionaries are more than mere conductors of divine power; they experience “states of knowing” of the primordial power. “They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time” (James 1902:380, 381).
- *Transiency*: These experiences cannot be sustained for long, half an hour to at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit.
- *Passivity*: Spiritual practices may help achieve them, but they are beyond the control of the subject - “...the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance” (James 1902:381).

Borg (1998:88) adds to these that the experience transforms the being and seeing of the mystic. He sees the world as if bathed in the radiant presence of God, he is free from conventional anxieties and inhibitions and he is able to relate to the world in great compassion. So intimate is this communion that it is as though the borders between the own being and God disappear and the two merge indistinguishably. Because of this direct relationship it is as though they conduct power from this sacred world into the mundane by means such as miracles, and especially healings and exorcisms. As a result of the communion they experience with the sacred, they are

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

endowed with power and speak with authority and a numinous presence when acting as mediators for “the holy” and as delegates for the tribe.

Essential to a Spirit person’s experience is the “breaking of plane,” frequently expressed as movement in a vertical direction. This involves both alteration of consciousness and movement in a new dimension, often symbolized by a “celestial pole” which permits mystical ascent to the heavens. As such, a Spirit person’s experience is one form of mystical experience, a union or communion with God, or even with “god beyond god,” i.e., with Reality-Itself, that which lies behind all conceptualizations, including all conceptions of God. Those who have such experiences speak of them as ineffable, incapable of being described precisely, for the experience is beyond thought....

(Borg 1998:240)

Borg distinguishes between visionary experiences with “eyes closed” and with “eyes open”. “Eyes closed” mystical states, also referred to as introvertive mysticism, involves a deep sense of communion with “the holy” and often occurs in states of deep meditation or contemplation. In “eyes open” visionary experiences or extroverted mysticism the person sees what everybody else does, but everything looks different, exquisite, luminous, suffused with light. “Moreover, the boundary between self and world, which defines our ordinary subject-object state of consciousness, becomes soft, indeed, less pronounced than a deep sense of connectedness and reunion” (Borg & Wright 1999:61). A quality they all seem to share is that they form some kind of portal or channel through which the power or wisdom of God may enter the world (Borg 1994:48).

All of this he feels justified in applying to Jesus, saying that the most crucial fact about Jesus is that he was a “spirit person”, a mediator for the holy, one of the people in the history of mankind for whom the Spirit had been an experiential reality (Borg 1994:46, 47) and if he had to describe Jesus with

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

as much brevity as possible, the term “Jewish mystic” would comprise half of that description (Borg, in Borg & Wright 1999:53).

In applying this term to Jesus, Borg identifies five facets of Jewish mysticism that could all be applied to Jesus, namely that of Spirit person, healer and exorcist, wisdom teacher or sage, social prophet and movement initiator. He adds that in his understanding, these terms all apply to the pre-Easter Jesus. The following is a brief description of what he understands to be the identifying traits of these five subdivisions of Jewish mysticism:

- About the term “Spirit person” enough has already been said. In my understanding of Borg’s theory, he sees being a Spirit person as a prerequisite for the other facets.
- Not all Spirit persons become healers and exorcists but some channel the power of God by means of healing or exorcism (Borg 1994:48).
- A sage, or teacher of wisdom was an important feature in traditional cultures. There are two categories of sages:
  - Teachers of conventional wisdom hand on received traditions or conventions of a community or group, maybe elaborating on it here and there.
  - Teachers of alternative or subversive wisdom, grounded in their personal experience of the sacred and challenging the conventional wisdom of their day.
- “The type is most clearly found in the social prophets of ancient Israel. They were known for their direct experience of the sacred and for their radical critique of the social-political order. They were God-intoxicated advocates of social justice....Those who know the immediacy of God are typically on the side of the marginalized” (Borg & Wright 1999:71).

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

- The movement initiator brought about a movement of renewal or revival, challenging and overstepping the social boundaries of their time.

Among all five these categories of “Spirit Persons” a vast number of scholars choose that of the prophet to typify Jesus. Why do they choose this category? If not all visionaries were prophets, is it possible that Jesus might have been another type of charismatic figure and what, in the behaviour and words of Jesus, allowed people to classify him as prophet? When did this interpretation take place? The source generally taken to represent our earliest available and extant Jesus-material, the Gospel of Mark, already seems to portray him as prophet. What kind of Spirit person could the pre-Easter visionary Jesus, the Jesus behind the Gospel of Mark have been?

On the surface there seems to have been so many similarities between Jesus and the traditional role of the prophet that it is easy to understand why he had been so interpreted. If, furthermore, people had been expecting a prophet to come in some kind of salvific role, the public meaning of those harbouring the expectation could easily have wanted to see Jesus in the role of this long-awaited prophet. A look at the different types of prophets, true and false, as well as at the expectations of the people in the time of Jesus might aid us in answering these questions and in trying to determine whether Jesus displayed some or all of the characteristics which might classify him as prophet.

### **6.18 Prophets: Messengers from God or Ventriloquists for kings?**

The researcher reading the writings of Josephus can have little doubt in his mind that prophecy was a phenomenon to be found among the Israelites at the time of Jesus. For the study of this phenomenon it is important to distinguish between the different types of prophets who operated at the time, to understand something of the reactions their various messages met

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

with and to know what kind of prophet was expected by the people and which were seen as the true and which the false messengers of God.

Like many other scholars, Horsley and Hanson (1985:135) deduce from the evidence available to them that Jesus was perceived to have been a prophet and they refer to Mark 6:15-16 as evidence. Several reports by Josephus, whom they dub a hostile witness, lead them further to conclude that Jesus had not been the only prophetic figure of his time but that a number of figures fitting the prophetic mould made their appearance among the people round about that time. Even given the animosity of Josephus as witness and the fragmentary nature of other sources, one may safely assume that they could be divided into two distinct groups: “The principal function of the one, the oracular prophet, was to pronounce the impending judgment or redemption by God. The characteristic feature of the other, the action prophet, was to inspire and lead a popular movement to vigorous participation in an anticipated redemptive action by God” (Horsley & Hanson 1985:135).

Van Aarde (1994:149) adds to the description of the latter type that they moreover envisioned participating in and contributing to God’s coming judgment to be executed on the unjust.

Both of these prophetic types as social forms are distinctive to Jewish society. To understand why prophecy diverged into separate types and how prophetic prototypes from biblical history, as well as the continuation of prophetic traditions in the postexilic period may have influenced popular prophets and prophetic movements in the time of Jesus, it would therefore be helpful to study “...the distinctively Jewish historical traditions out of which they responded to their situation” (Horsley & Hanson 1985:136). So Horsley and Hanson suspect that the oracular contemporaries of Jesus who went about announcing either judgment or redemption through their prophecies, perpetuated the archetype for this form of prophecy established by prophets such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, prophets featured in the Israelite traditions which were reflected in the Hebrew Scriptures.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

Likewise the activist prophets expecting God's new redemptive intervention were at the very least familiar with the great liberation movements of old, led by Moses, Joshua and the judges, alive in the memories of the people they led and their descendants. The two authors even speculate that they may be a revival of older prophetic movements such as those of Elijah and Elisha.

A distinctive feature of Ancient Israel was their lack of a secular government institution and their adherence to the covenant of Yahweh as their only governing and cohesive element. Horsley (in Horsley & Hanson 1985:137) qualifies: "For the independent Israelites, Yahweh was their true and only king. All of them, individually and collectively, were directly responsible to God as servants of the divine King."

But in times of political crisis "the Spirit of Yahweh" would take hold of certain charismatic leaders who would exhort Israel to revive their Yahwism and would summon the peasant militia. To the people of Israel Yahweh Himself seemed to be acting on their behalf, liberating them and defending their liberty, through the responses of these leaders to times of crisis. They were known as "*shofetim*" (judges) and combined the offices of being God's messenger announcing what action Yahweh would be taking (messenger) and of being the leader of the people of God following God's chosen course of action in obedience to defuse a crisis through religio-political intervention (action). Their authority was situation-bound and not hereditary and several examples of these *shofetim* are to be found in the book of Judges and during the 200+ years of Israel's existence prior to the rise of the monarchy. The most prominent examples of these movements within biblical tradition were of course Moses and Joshua who, through their visions and direct communication of God's will in liberation of and conquests on behalf of Israel, became prototypes for the rest. Horsley and Hanson (1985:138) remind their readers of the declaration of Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him."

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

It was the rise of the monarchy that split up the prophetic offices. Samuel was the last charismatic *shofet* to combine the offices of messenger for the divine, and political and military leader. The king now assumed military and political leadership and Nathan the prophet, for instance, was messenger of Yahweh only. By the time the great prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries such as Amos, Isaiah, Hosea and Jeremiah came into office, the prophet's sole function was that of messenger conveying to the people the word of Yahweh in oracular form.

Horsley (in Horsley & Hanson 1985:138, 139) writes, however, that the covenantal traditions and social forms of early Israel were not immediately and completely suppressed by the monarchy. "The biblical narratives about Elijah and his successor Elisha are proof that prophets as both messengers and leaders of movements continued long into the monarchical period of the northern kingdom of Israel, if not in the kingdom of Judah" (Horsley, in Horsley & Hanson 1985:138,139).

After standing in Yahweh's heavenly council, these prophets were sent to deliver oracles to the people and their king, conveying the will of God. Often, such as in the cases of Elijah and Elisha, they had the unenviable task of pronouncing judgment and sentence on king and court for breach of covenant, mostly the result of having been swayed in their loyalty to Yahweh by foreign cultural and religious influences. The kings of Israel and Judah were infamous for the way in which they flouted the will of Yahweh and their recalcitrance led to popular prophetic resistance movements aiming to restore a monarchy which ruled according to the will of Yahweh and to purge Israel of the existing one.

Even though by now the monarchy provided both institutionalised government and political-military leadership, from time to time some prophets still acted as "leaders" of these resistance movements "with a popular social base and a distinctive social form" (Horsley & Hanson 1985:140). There were prophetic groups or guilds or "sons of the prophets" living in or around major towns such as Gilgal and Jericho under the

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

leadership of a prominent figure such as Elijah or Elisha. In the time of these two prophets the prophetic guilds had developed into popular movements. These movements opposed the monarchy which had become oppressive and regularly violated the Mosaic covenant, killing and persecuting the prophets of Yahweh and supplanting them with the prophets of Baal in the case of Ahab and Jezebel. In these troubled times symbolic prophetic acts are reminiscent of earlier times of liberation under leadership of Moses and Joshua. So, to name one example, does Elijah withdraw into the wilderness to Mount Sinai-Horeb, the mountain of revelation, where he is strengthened and receives "...a prophetic commission to return to his people as agent of revolution against an oppressive regime" (Horsley, in Horsley & Hanson 1985:140):

At the time of Elijah and Elisha, however, the prophets also performed one of the traditional functions of the judge (*shophet*) in communicating Yahweh's redemptive action, his protection of his people against foreign invasion and domination....An important component of such prophecy was the vision of Yahweh's heavenly armies.

(Horsley & Hanson 1985:139)

So strong was the revolutionary element in the prophecy at this time that their actions culminated in overt revolution led by Jehu who, as military commander, was later anointed new king by the prophets.

Horsley (in Horsley & Hanson 1985:141) reports:

What began as a movement led by the prophets gave rise to a popular messianic movement led by the prophetically anointed Jehu. However, it is significant that it was not the new messiah Jehu but Elijah (2 Kings 2:11-12) and Elisha (2 Kings 13:14) who were associated closely with the heavenly armies and the great saving acts by which Yahweh liberated his people anew.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

The abovementioned oracular prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries whose oracles are found in the Bible, were the messengers of Yahweh and his covenant, interpreting the significance of the actions of Yahweh, but not gathering or leading groups or movements. They were also the spokespersons for the peasantry and the socio-economic covenantal decrees which protected their interests and were therefore well-versed in the Mosaic covenant which, as in the days of the *shofetim*, continued to "...inform and determine social relations among the peasantry..." Horsley and Hanson describe their utterances as "...fragments of 'covenant lawsuits'" with Yahweh residing as both prosecutor and judge, accusing and sentencing people and kings for their breach of covenant (Horsley & Hanson 1985:141, 142). Failure to maintain the egalitarian economic and social relations, justice and trust demanded by the covenant and blatant exploitation of the poor and weak by the powerful were rife. The prophets were compelled to oppose the ruling classes and pronounce judgment over their people and the monarchs. Their oracles of punishment and judgment were often accompanied by desperate pleas for a change of heart and dramatic, attention-grabbing symbolic actions by which they, according to their own point of view, conveyed Yahweh's continuous attempts to redeem and care for his people, just as He had liberated them from slavery in Egypt.

The brunt of the judgment was mostly intended for Jerusalem, the temple (Zion) and the expensive military forces, and for kings, princes, priests, the wealthy and the "powerful", with utterances of judgment escalating in vehemence towards the end of the classical prophetic period. One can't feign surprise, therefore, at the animosity, hatred even, for and suppression and persecution of the prophets by kings and ruling parties. But covenantal digressions by the ruling classes did not spell hopelessness for the future of the people in a cause-effect relationship and even when judgment is announced over the former, the latter would still be protected by God in, for example, a military siege.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

There is little information to be found on the social status of these prophets. That they were not professional court or cultic prophets is certain and their heated defence of the common against exploitation by the privileged, gives rise to the suspicion that they were probably themselves peasants and at the very least spokespersons for the peasantry.

There were, on the other hand, also professional prophets who were attached to the court or temple cult without any apparent base among the people and they were known to pronounce oracles of salvation and victory for king, capital city and temple. The authors warn, however, that the paucity of oracles of salvation among the classical prophets did not mean that all favourable prophecy should be regarded as false, but that the criterion for discerning between true and false prophecy should be whether it offers a covenantal interpretation of socio-economic conditions and political and military events. Admittedly this would tip the scales of veracity towards the popular prophets rather than the official cult or court prophets.

When Israel was defeated and exiled by their enemies and Jerusalem and its temple laid waste, it did not spell the end of prophecy but rather confirmed and underlined the oracles of judgment which had been uttered by pre-exilic prophets. The need arose among God's people for an interpretation of the new situation in which they found themselves; had Yahweh deserted them or was He still their covenant God? There simultaneously arose an expectation of a figure who would liberate them, but with the failure of the monarchy, people looked to a prophetic rather than a kingly figure as the means of their salvation.

During the exilic period there seems to have been no actual prophetic movement, but the authors mean that this might be ascribed to the extreme lack of evidence for this period in general. But during this period the biblical narratives such as the Priestly edition of Moses and the Deuteronomic history (from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings) were given their final form and this ensured that Yahweh's great acts of salvation, such as the exodus (which to a great extent had become the symbolic prototype of purification,

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

renewal and God's renewed acts of redemption), the trek through the wilderness and the conquest of the holy land and the holy wars under leadership of the judges, lived on in the memory of the Judean society from the Persian period onward. Moses seems to be depicted herein as the prophetic prototype of a future leader who was to become messenger of Yahweh and would liberate his people. These memories spoke of Yahweh's care for the people in the past, reminded them that He had given them freedom and a land of their own and once again exhorted the people of Yahweh to make loyalty to the covenant the basis of their lives. In the mid 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE these memories had become the roots of a national anticipation of God's acts of liberation in the future and "...a fundamental pattern of Judean historical-eschatological thinking" (Horsley & Hanson 1985:150, 151). On the topic of this historical-eschatological thinking pattern, Horsley (in Horsley & Hanson 1985:151) gives what he calls a "significant illustration of this pattern", namely the familiar opening oracle of Second Isaiah, "in the wilderness prepare the way of Yahweh" (Is 40:3-5). He reveals that this text which became a focal point for the "Essene exodus to the wilderness at Qumran, as well as for the early Christian understanding of the role of John the Baptist" (Horsley, in Horsley & Hanson 1985:151).

In this period, covenantal traditions and Mosaic law was once again impressed upon the hearts and minds of the people in the "reforms" under Ezra and subsequent generations of official scribes. Furthermore, prophets were needed to interpret the altered circumstances of the people of God under foreign dominion from Yahweh's point of view for the people and the prophetic lore of the activity of prophets that stepped into these postexilic times up to late second temple times, offer much of importance in the way of prototypes for the two types of prophets functioning in the time of Jesus. Ancient rabbi's and scribes from at least the first century C.E. had professed that true prophecy had ceased with Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Josephus, Pharisee and historian had shared this view and so had the emerging "canonical" thinking regarding which prophetic books were to be included in the Hebrew Bible.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

This gave rise to speculation that the vacuum left by the absence of prophecy was filled by expectations of an eschatological prophet who would appear at the end of time and apocalyptic visions of judgment and salvation. Apocalyptic visions and visionary literature appear to have sprung out of traditional Israelite prophecy and to have been a development of the classical prophetic experience and had as common breeding ground extreme social-historical circumstances which were addressed by the prophets in announcing that Yahweh still cared for and acted on behalf of the just in these times, just as He had in the past. On the basis of this prophetic conviction arose the action prophets and the oracular prophets of the first century. These prophetic types seem to have been a new development in Jewish community life at the time of Jesus given the fact that hardly any prophetic activity, of this kind in any case, was to be found among the Pharisees or Essenes.

According to Horsley and Hanson, however, the line of oracular prophets had continued unbroken. In the post-exilic crisis the oracles of the classical prophets was collected and adapted by their loyal disciples or prophetic schools. But this was not the total extent of prophecy in this time. Some postexilic prophets continued to attach themselves to the restored temple while others were more popularly based and independent of, if not in direct opposition to, the newly established order. Of the latter we know little, records having been kept by respectable scribal circles which would blanch at reporting on these disreputable figures. They were branded as rustics, despised and refused recognition as prophets but ironically stood more directly in the line of prophets such as Elijah and Micah than their respectable contemporaries. The popular prophets in their turn ridiculed the other prophets as seen in Zechariah 13:2-6 where there is referred to spiritually inspired prophets in their hairy mantles in a derogatory fashion. Although oracles of judgment continued unabated, they did not form the majority, but took second place to oracles of liberation, comfort and new redemption called for by the situation. A messenger was needed to convey the will of God, perhaps re-establish God's rule in the community. It is therefore, as remarked earlier, not surprising that hope veered away from a

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

royal figure with the destruction of the monarchy while some hope settled on a prophetic messenger as harbinger of judgment and restoration on the grounds of Yahweh's promise to Moses in Deuteronomy 18:18: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him."

Despite this and a few other references, little evidence exists that expectations of an eschatological prophet featured very prominently in Jewish society prior to the time of Jesus.

There seems to have been considerable prophetic activity, mainly the interpretation of traditional biblical prophecies, in the late second temple period based on material from the literate groups but hardly any evidence exists of significant expectation of either a prophetic figure or deliverer that fits the mould of the oracular or action types of the prophets of biblical traditions.

Essene prophets mentioned by Josephus were seers who made predictions and neither led any movements nor delivered any oracles. This said, however, Horsley (in Horsley & Hanson 1985:157) indicates the importance for the current research of examining, at close quarters,

...the origin of the group itself – a type of exodus to the wilderness – may be significant for our survey of prophetic movements. It may be argued that Qumran provides the first instance of a prophetic movement since Elijah-Elisha and the "sons of the prophets". One might even claim that the Essenes constitute a prophetic movement among the literate strata nearly 200 years prior to the emergence of such movements among the Jewish peasantry....Qumran does show, however, that the typological pattern of interpretation and action – as was God's great act of deliverance in the past, so will be the great new act of deliverance – was very much alive in Jewish society at the time. It also indicates that the memory of the older tradition of liberating movements led by a Moses or a

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

Joshua was still vital among the people, even if there apparently had been no prophetic movements since Elijah-Elisha.

In Jesus' time, though few among the peasantry would have been able to read the Scripture, traditions and traditional forms were very much alive among them, and although they were far more spontaneous in their experience of the Spirit and far less restricted by scriptural tradition in their prophetic activities, this spontaneous popular prophecy was by no means formless. "Indeed, during the first century C.E. the memory of ancient prophetic movements of liberation informed new prophetic movements, and traditional oracular prophecy was revived among the people" (Horsley, in Horsley & Hanson 1985:160). Prophecy was more than just the fulfilment of an expectation – it was prophecy in the very essence of the word and in the time of Jesus continued and revived the two types of popular prophecy known from biblical history as the principal traditional prophetic forms.

From the time of Jesus "...there is plenty of evidence that a strong apocalyptic mood pervaded the society during this period of acute distress and tension" (Horsley, in Horsley & Hanson 1985:171). Josephus is hostile witness to the fact that action prophets of the time led movements of peasants in symbolic and active anticipation of God's acts of salvation, often into the wilderness where it was alleged that God would reveal to them signs of imminent liberation and where signs and wonders according to divine plan would be manifested. These actions had a distinct apocalyptic flavour; prophets and their followers believing that they "...were about to participate in the divine transformation of a world gone awry into a society of justice, willed and ruled by God" (Horsley & Hanson 1985:161). Large numbers of people abandoned their day-to-day lives to follow their charismatic leaders out into the desert, their minds filled with memories of God's salvific and redemptive acts of the past and with their own salvation and liberation which would surely unfold in analogy with God's liberating interventions in the history of Israel, to purify, prepare and renew themselves and their covenant with Yahweh who had not, after all,

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

abandoned his people. A mystery, his eschatological plan of redemption, was about to be made known through the popular prophets, to whom Yahweh had entrusted the knowledge of his plan.

Of course prophets proclaiming to the people liberation from oppression and a restoration of their freedom and attracting such numbers as followers, would have met with animosity from the oppressive regime and Horsley and Hanson report anxiety on the part of Felix, the Roman governor, to match that of Josephus, about the possible disruption of the Roman imperial order. Under the Samaritans a prophetic figure emerged although he had help from several ringleaders and led a movement intending to ascend the holy Mount Gerezim to retrieve the sacred vessels left there by Moses. This seems to indicate that he was considered to have been the eschatological counterpart of Moses.

Pontius Pilate aggressively quelled the movement with sizeable military force, not merely dispersing crowds, but attacking and killing them and executing ringleaders. Round about 45 CE, about a decade later than the previous incident, Theudas, claiming to be a prophet, led a movement of people with their possessions to the River Jordan where the river was to divide at his command in symbolic motion to let his followers through in a reverse conquest, retreat to cleanse and purify in the wilderness or new exodus. The events leading up to this were Caligula's resolution to erect a statue of himself in the temple, the exorbitant taxes levied by Agrippa I and his declaring himself to be divine later on. However, Fadus, the governor of Judea, sent a cavalry attack against them in a surprise attack which left many dead, others captured alive and Theudas himself beheaded and his head carried off to Jerusalem as stern warning to other aspiring prophetic movement-leaders. This latter incident is mentioned in Acts and remembered alongside that of Judas of Galilee as one of the two most significant analogies to the growing "Jesus movement". Suffice it to say that leaders took swift and brutal action to annihilate these movements and their leaders.

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

One may find the pattern of interpreting and anticipating history by means of symbolic action as early as Second Isaiah in Jewish tradition, where the liberation from Babylonian captivity was interpreted as the new exodus and journey through the wilderness (Is 40:1-11; 51:9-11). This historical-eschatological typology had now become a prominent feature in prophecy, the symbolic enactment of great historical acts of salvation and liberation in anticipation of new eschatological acts by action prophets as leaders of a movement and their followers and remained prominent in the early Christian movement and later apocalyptic literature.

During the first century and just before and during the great revolt in particular, a number of oracular prophets appeared who shared a number of distinctive characteristics with the biblical prophets and may therefore be considered as continuing along the line of “the long-standing Israelite-Jewish tradition of oracular prophets” (Horsley & Hanson 1985:172). These oracular prophets, in the manner of their predecessors, delivered messages from God to his people, preaching repentance and pronouncing judgment especially during times of crisis. The only two examples of this type of prophet recorded for posterity are John the Baptist and Jesus ben Hananiah. Of the latter, Josephus provides a fairly lengthy description. Striking similarities between his situation and modus operandi and that of the biblical prophets are:

- The socio-political situation was deceptively favourable and peace and prosperity seemed to reign, just as when Amos had pronounced judgment in the northern kingdom of Israel in ancient times.
- Like both Amos and Jeremiah the prophet knew better.
- Again like Amos and Jeremiah he takes his message of doom straight to the temple precincts.
- “His subsequent behaviour, as he continues his dirge on the doomed city, recalls that of Jeremiah uttering his warnings or that

University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H (2006)

of Jeremiah with the yoke around his neck before the impending Babylonian siege of the holy city” (Horsley & Hanson 1985:174).

- Like Jeremiah he was thrown into prison and abused.
- His message of judgment and lament is reminiscent of that of the classical prophets on the city.

Jesus ben Hananiah baffled the Roman governor but the Jewish ruling group were well aware of the threat to the established order posed by this prophet and his message. Josephus mentions attempts to silence him only by Jerusalem’s aristocratic ruling group and not by Judean peasant groups and their leaders who took control of the city and led the resistance to the Roman siege.

John the Baptist is attested to in Q, the Gospel of Mark and Lukan *Sondergut*, and as lengthily in Josephus. His similarities with biblical oracular prophets are his stationing in the wilderness as symbolic place of purification and renewal, his hairy garment and girdle like those of Elijah and biblical prophets in general and his message of imminent and inevitable eschatological judgment like the prophetic messages at least since the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. He exhorted his followers to bear fruits befitting their conversion and baptism and, just like Amos and Jeremiah, the fruits he called for were not in any sense of a vague spiritual nature, but had to do with very concrete economic and social justice. Because of his passion for a just society, for simple justice for the common people, his message by its very nature targeted the aristocracy of his time. Furthermore, when he called for repentance, what he had in mind was a complete rededication to covenantal social practices, symbolised by the rite of baptism which became so typical of him, and being in essence the means “...by which persons passed into the eschatologically reconstituted community of Israel which would survive God’s judgment” (Horsley & Hanson 1985:178). Therefore it is obvious that his message sits anything but loose to the politics of his day and is addressed to the whole nation while the “vipers” he refers to may be the priestly aristocracy and gentry who rely for their

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

salvation on their sacred lineage and sacral position as they did in Jeremiah.

It is important to realise that his actions weren't interpreted to have been that of an Elijah-*redivivus* or a forerunner of the Messiah; these perceptions may be ascribed to much later traditions found in the gospels. Nor do we have any indication that he saw himself as such.

As with Jesus ben Hananiah he was rightly perceived as a challenge to the authority and power of the priestly aristocracy which was considered by the people to be both oppressive and illegitimate. His prophecy impacted in such a direct fashion on the politics of his day that he was perceived as a threat to the regime whose message may lead to a revolutionary uprising by the people. As such Herod Antipas had him arrested and executed much as ruling groups of bygone days had been killed or efforts been made to silence Uriah, Amos or Jeremiah. The conflict between John the Baptist and Herod Antipas is also mentioned in the conversation of Jesus with the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the elders in Mark 11:27-33. John's condemnation of the marriage of Herod Antipas to Herodias is of course directly related to the stipulations of the Mosaic law. But what actually sealed John's fate was, as pointed out by Josephus, the fact that John's condemnation of this marriage had the potential to incite the inhabitants of Petrea to avenge the fate of Arestas (Herod's first wife). It was essential for John to be silenced. Horsley (in Horsley & Hanson 1985:181) writes:

Not surprisingly, the popular prophets who announced imminent divine deliverance were concentrated just before and during the great revolt. Josephus claims that there were many prophets at this time bidding the people to "await help from God." Originating in apocalyptic visions, the messages delivered by these prophets held out hope for the people suffering under increasing oppression prior to the rebellion, or

[University of Pretoria etd – Dannhauser, E H \(2006\)](#)

for those struggling against overwhelming odds once the Romans brought their massive forces to suppress the revolt.

Interestingly most of these prophetic movements occurred just before or during the Jewish revolt and coincided with the escalation in apocalyptic expectation among the people. Many a prophetic vision was accepted without question by the people, and even during the siege of Jerusalem many prophets came to the fore.