

Israel's cultural context concerning prophets shed light on Biblical texts.

Abstract

Nathan, Prophet to King David and King Samuel, played a significant role in Israel.

Introduction

“Prophets played a significant role in the ancient courts. Prophets are referred to in various sorts of literature, ...still, there are no collections of prophets’ oracles such as those found in the Old Testament” (Walton 43). “The bible labels a variety of officials as prophets, each played a distinct role” (Matthews and Benjamin 211-212). The Hebrew word for prophet is “Nabi,” and prophets were respected unless one did not like their message, which often resulted in the prophet being killed. “Most Prophets were associated with particular deities and identified themselves as servants of that deity” (Walton 215). Court prophets were in service of the ruler and consulted about important decisions. One such court prophet is Nathan, who served the Hebrew deity I Am. This essay will use Chapter 16, “The Prophet,” from Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin’s book *Social World of Ancient Israel*, and other resources to shed light on Biblical texts mentioning the interactions of Prophet Nathan with King David and Solomon.

Protocol for Prophets

The prophet:

- Analyzes the short-term consequences for the state of the decisions of its monarch to impose taxes, negotiate covenants, and wage war
- Represents the state before the divine assembly at its annual meetings to evaluate the fulfillment of Israel and Judah’s covenants with Yahweh
- Promulgates the decisions of the divine assembly regarding the state with words and pantomimes while in ecstasy

(Matthews and Benjamin 211)

The Hebrew Prophet Nathan found in Scripture

“The craft of the prophet was learned from a teacher or father in a school or guild” (Matthews and Benjamin 211). Old Testament passages like 2 Kings 2:1-18 and 4:1-7 reinforce the concept of the prophet guilds. According to Rabbi Avrohom Bergstein, “Nathan studied in an elite academy of mystics under the tutelage of the prophet Samuel. Although no book in the Biblical Canon is associated with his name, the Talmud tells us that Nathan concluded the writing of the book of Samuel” (Bergstein). The Book of Nathan is mentioned in both the 1st and

2nd Chronicles (1Chronicals 29:29, 2 Chronicles 9:29) and there are speculations that passages from the book are integrated into the books of Samuel and Kings. Prophet Nathan was significant in the lives of King David, King Solomon, and Israel as he had a significant role in building the temple and delivering the messianic promise.

Nathan's recorded interactions are found in four passages of the Bible, three in 2 Samuel and one in Kings. The first mention of Nathan is in 2 Samuel 7:1-17 (the same story is also found in 1 Chronicles 17:1). David, living in a cedar palace, expresses his desire to build a house for the ark of God, which remains in a tent, to the Prophet Nathan (vs. 2). At first, Nathan consents. However, that night the Lord reveals a different plan (vs. 5-16). God will build David's house, and David's offspring (Solomon) will build a temple for the Lord. 1 Chronicles 22:8 informs the reader that David was not chosen to construct the temple because he was a man of war and had shed much blood, whereas God wanted the Temple to be established by his son Solomon, a man of peace and rest.

Old Testament kings were subject to legal restrictions; thus, prophets often emphasized with "repeated reminders by the prophet of royal breach of legal expectations, fulfilling one of their roles" (Greer, Hilber and Walton 496). Prophets had the "ability to see the significance of a present crisis for the near future" by analyzing the situation and formulating solutions (Matthews and Benjamin 216). These aspects of a prophet are observed in Nathan when he skillfully uses allegory to rebuke David of his relationship with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:1-14), stating that his sin is not hidden from God. Nathan delivered the legal verdict that the consequences of that sin would include the sword will never depart from David's house (vs. 10), calamity will be brought upon David (vs. 11), his wives will be taken and given to those close (vs. 12), and David's infant son will die (vs. 14). David confessed (vs. 13a) (David's response is recorded in Psalm 51);

therefore, Nathan assured David of God’s forgiveness (vs. 13b). Oracles of Judgment are verdicts which impose a sentence; oracles of salvation are verdicts which extend a reprieve or pardon” (Matthews and Benjamin 218). In 2 Samuel 12:24-25 the David and Bathsheba story continues with them conceiving a second son whom they named Solomon. The Lord “sent word through Nathan the prophet to name the baby Jedidiah” which means ‘beloved of the Lord,’ because “the Lord loved him (v 25).

1 Kings Chapter 1 informs the reader that David’s son Adonijah self-declares himself as the king without his father’s knowledge or consent. Nathan advises Bathsheba to go to King David, and he will join her later. Wise Nathan approaches David with questions like “Have you, my lord the king, declared that Adonijah shall be king after you?” (vs. 24) and “Is this something my lord the king has done without letting his servants know who should sit on the throne...” (vs. 27). The chapter ends with David making Solomon king.

Other Aspects of Prophet Nathan Worth Mentioning.

Prophet Nathan and King David had a positive, respectful, and perhaps even endearing relationship, reflected in their shared history. David’s 4th son with Bathsheba was named Nathan, and “it can only be imagined that this son was named after the faithful court prophet” (biblestudytools.com). Nathan was closely aligned with David (Matthews and Benjamin 214). However, confrontations between monarchs and prophets did occur, be it personality conflicts, unavoidable political intentions, or the result of the exercise of appropriate institutional authority differently (Matthews and Benjamin 212). King David and Gad had such a conflict as in 2 Sam 24:1-25. “Some Prophets simply had a different understanding of the obligations Israel’s covenant with Yahweh imposed upon the state and its monarchs” (Matthews and Benjamin 214).

“Monarchs and prophets are both committed to fulfilling Yahweh’s covenant with Israel. They shared the traditions which stressed that ultimately only Yahweh fed and protected Israel” (Matthews and Benjamin 112). David and Nathan had a mutual understanding of their obligations and were both committed to Yahweh.

Did Nathan use Ecstasy, possession, and inspiration which were commonly used by prophets in the world of the Bible (Matthews and Benjamin 213)? Some prophets induced ecstasy with meditation, fasting, and music, including dancing, to stimulate the senses (Matthews and Benjamin 213). The Bible indicates that Samuel might have used such means (1 Sam 19:19-24), and if so, then under Samuel’s tutelage, Nathan may have too. However, within the four passages in which Nathan is mentioned, there is no evidence that he used ecstasy or possession, just inspiration from God. Likewise, though, there is no mention of Nathan using pantomime in the Scriptures, but that does not indicate he did not use such means of communication, seeing “prophets were masters of both the silent and the sounded arts” including “three kinds of pantomimes: single dramatic gesture, austere practices, and identification of the silent action or craft or another” (Matthews and Benjamin 215). Although pantomime is theater without a script (Matthews and Benjamin 216), Nathan’s parable of the two men and one little ewe (Samuel 12) could be seen as pantomiming.

Apocryphal sources claim that Nathan lived to an old age and was buried in his own land. The Midrash teaches that two honorary seats flanked the throne of King Solomon, one for Gad the Seer and the other for Nathan the Prophet” (Bergstein).

Conclusion.

Nathan was known to be a forthright, caring, godly, and reliable prophet, committed to the Hebrew deity and the monarchs he served. He bestowed excellent divine guidance to King David and King Solomon, and the Israel Nation gained a magnificent temple because of the planning and influence in building the temple. With such few mentions of Nathan in the scriptures, a reader can only grasp the complete role of Nathan if Biblical texts are paired with cultural understanding. Thankfully Matthews and Benjamin's "The Prophet" sheds light on Biblical texts mentioning the Prophet Nathan. Understanding Israel's cultural context of prophets and applying such knowledge to the Biblical texts gives new light and a deeper comprehension of Nathan's role and influence on the nation Israel.

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