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Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Alice R. Goldfinger

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

"The Psychology of Prophecy"

Ms. Alice Goldfinger has written an extremely interesting thesis on prophecy in ancient Israel. The work is entitled, "The Psychology of Prophecy."

"Psychology of Prophecy" contains four chapters. Chapter One, "The Social and Historical setting of Biblical Prophecy," is devoted to the search for the social location of the prophet in ancient Israel. Whereas, earlier scholarship was satisfied with examining the literary remnants of prophecy (the texts), current scholarship, employing comparative material drawn from models in the social sciences, has attempted to set the prophets within their won society. Such questions as the socio-economic class of the prophet, the public perception of the prophet, and most relevant to this thesis, the real or presumed mental state of the prophet are now regularly addressed. Mr. Goldfinger discusses these attempts, notably the work of Robert Wilson of Yale. Chapter two deals with the so-called "ecstatic" behavior of the prophets. Here, the author provides a critical survey of some of the scholarly literature on "ecstasy" against the background of contemporary medical discussions of mental disorder. In chapter three the author provides a carefully researched examination of the native biblical Hebrew terminology employed to describe prophetic behavior. Highly useful are the discussions of the stems  $\text{נָבֵא}$  and  $\text{נָחַם}$ . Comparative material on apparently related phenomena in extrabiblical sources is also discussed, notably the phenomena of the mahhû āpilu/āpiltu and rāgimu/rāimtu. These three prophetic functionaries, whose behavior is described in Akkadian sources as "frenzied" or "trance-like," are known from the second millennium B.C. city of Mari, whose Northwest-Semitic population seems in many ways to have shared in a culture that ultimately molded Israelite civilization. For the Mari material, Goldfinger relies primarily on the Israeli biblicist Abraham Malamat and the French Assyriologist, A. Finet. The fourth chapter consists of some nicely reasoned conclusions and a very good bibliography.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. S. David Sperling

April 6, 1992

The Psychology of Prophecy

Alice Rachel Goldfinger

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
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## The Social and Historical Settings of Biblical Prophecy

Literary prophecy began as a movement in ancient Israel during the eighth century. This movement grew out of the early "prophets" and "seers" of the premonarchic period. In 1 Sam 9:9 we are told that:

וְלִפְנֵים יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּהָאֵמֶר הָיָה  
נִלְכָּהוּ לְדָרוֹשׁ אֱלֹהִים לְכֹהֵן עַד הָיָה כִּי יִזְבֵּא  
וְהָיָה יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵים הָאֵמֶר:

"the one who used to be called a seer in Israel is now called a prophet instead of a seer ."

The seer was a phenomenon of early cultures of the ancient near east. For the earliest period we have no direct accounts of these seers. "But the persistency of nomadic institutions in the bedouin world makes it likely that men of God or inspired persons appeared as seers among the nomads, proclaiming divine instructions primarily on the basis of dreams and presentiments."<sup>1</sup>

The seer offered highly poetic oracles based on visions such as those of Balaam, son of Beor (Num 22-24). To deliver any kind of blessing or curse, Balaam needed to see the subject of his oracle, hence the title "seer". At first Balak took Balaam to a spot where he could see a portion of the people. This first attempted-cursing was unsuccessful. Balaam saw a manifestation of God before giving his next blessing. The final and climactic blessing is given later:

וַיֵּאָמֶר בָּלָאָם אֶת־עֲלֵי הָרָא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל שֹׁכֵן לִשְׁכָּנָיו וְהָיָה רֵיחַ אֱלֹהִים:

<sup>1</sup>Georg Fohrer History of Israelite Religion (London: Abingdon Press, 1973) Pp.224

"Balaam looked up and saw Israel encamped tribe by tribe and the spirit of God came upon him."

Balaam's blessing is rendered in the form of poetry; a characteristic mode of communication for prophets. Balaam insists again and again, in an almost didactic fashion, that he has no control over the oracle he delivers:

18 וַיֵּן בְּלִמָּה וַאֲמַר אֶל-עֲבָדֵי בָלָק אִמְ

יִשְׁדְּלִי בָלָק מֵלֹא בִימָה בְּסֶפֶר חֶמֶד לֹא אֵכֹל לְעֹבֵר אֲחֵרֵי יְהוָה

אֲלֹהֵי לְעֹשֶׂה סִפְּתָהּ אֶן וְחֹלָהּ

"Even if Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, big or little that crossed the word of the Lord my God."

Although Balaam is a prophet by profession and for hire, he can only utter the words that God puts into his mouth. As a Seer, Balaam has no control over the nature of the oracle.

In addition to the biblical material about Balaam the Seer, there is extra-biblical mention of Balaam at the archaeological site at Deir Alla. The Balaam text from Deir Alla dates from approximately 700 BCE and is written in a script related to that of later Ammonite inscriptions.<sup>2</sup> The first two verses introduce Balaam the Seer and he is the subject of the rest of the text:

(1) [VACAT] sipr /bil'am birbu'ur 'as haze(h) 'ilahin hu'

way-ya'tu ' ilawh 'ilahin ba-laylah way-yahz mahze(h)

(2) ka-massa' 'il way-ya' muru la- /bil'alm birbu'ur kah yip'al

! | ' ' ahar'ah 'as LR | | T

"The account of [Balaam, son of Beor], who was a seer of the gods. The gods

<sup>2</sup> Jo Ann Hekett The Balaam Text from Deir Alla (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980) Pp.125

came to him in the night, and he saw a vision like an oracle of El. Then they said to [Balaa]m, son of Beor: "Thus he will do/make [ ] hereafter (?) which [ ]."

The Deir Alla text "serves to authenticate the Balaam traditions in the Hebrew Bible to the extent that the bare facts of his existence are the same in each case."<sup>3</sup>

According to Fohrer, the seers of the ancient near east had long been a familiar phenomenon in 1100 BCE.<sup>4</sup> Around 1000 BCE, there began a long process of distinction between the "roeh" (such as Nathan) and the "nabi" (Saul as portrayed in 1 Sam 10:5). The early prophets such as Elijah and Elisha give oracles and show the influences of ancient near eastern divination practices and magic:

32 וַיָּבֹא אֵלִישָׁע הַנָּבִיא וְהָיָה הָעֶלֶר לֹחַ קִשְׁקִיב

עַל סֵפֶה: 33 וַיָּבֹא וַיִּסָּד וַיִּלָּח בְּעַד שְׁנֵיהֶם וַיַּחֲפֹל אֶל-יְהוָה:

34 וַעַל וַיִּשְׁכַּב עַל-הַלֵּד וַיִּשָּׂם לוֹ עַל-אָזְנוֹ וְעַל-אָזְנוֹ וְעַל-רַגְלָיו

עַל-רַגְלָיו וְעַל-רַגְלָיו וְעַל-רַגְלָיו וְעַל-רַגְלָיו וְעַל-רַגְלָיו:

"Elisha went into the house and behold, the boy was dead and laid out on his beir. He went in and closed the door behind the two of them and he prayed to Yahweh. He mounted the bed and laid on top of the boy and he put his mouth on his mouth and his eyes on his eyes and his hands on his hands and he bent over him and the flesh of the boy became warm."

Upon the boy's death the mother of the child goes to the "man of God" who had promised her this child in the first place. The fact that the

<sup>3</sup> Hackett Pp. 125

<sup>4</sup> Fohrer Pp. 225

Shunammite woman returns to Elisha upon her son's death attests to the fact that she saw Elisha as having been responsible (through Yahweh) for the miraculous conception and that she had some faith in his ability to revive her dead son. In this case, the "man of God" is a service profession. Likewise, the prophet can make twenty loaves of bread feed a hundred men (2 Kgs 4:42) and can turn one vessel of oil into many (2 Kgs 4:1-7).

Unlike the early prophets, the literary prophets were not prophets by profession or even by choice. Although Isaiah works miracles (Is 38:7, 21) and many of the prophets foretell the future (Is 7:11), these characteristics are secondary to the prophet's *raison d'être*. The prophet is called by Yahweh, often against his will. Although elected by God, the early seer or prophet serves the people who can seek him out in times of need. The literary prophet is solely an instrument of Yahweh and often comes into conflict with the people.

The books of the literary prophets underwent editing over the centuries. What is important to note is that "such adaptation can be found only in the work of the arranger of the book, but never in the text of the prophecies themselves.... When the historical purview of each of the prophets is examined, it proves to belong to a definite setting and to reflect the events of one period only."<sup>5</sup> Kaufmann notes that prophecies that turned out to be historically inaccurate were not harmonized with historical reality at a later date. He explains that this might indicate that these writings were already considered sacred during the time of the prophets themselves.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Yehezkel Kaufmann The Religion of Israel (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960) Pp. 351

<sup>6</sup> Kaufmann Pp. 354

The literary prophets are also distinguished from the early prophets in that they are not surrounded by a band of disciples.<sup>7</sup> They have individual supporters or companions but it is the literary prophet alone who is engaged in the act of prophecy. Jeremiah's companion Baruch and even Isaiah's "limmudim" (Is 8:16) do not take part in the prophetic process. They are simply observers and supporters.

Unlike Elisha or Elijah, the literary prophets seem to have written, or at least dictated their prophecies themselves as opposed to handing down an oral tradition. According to Kaufmann, the narrative portions of the books of the prophets may have had a significant amount of input from his admirers while the prophecies themselves were primarily from the hand of the prophet.<sup>8</sup>

Fohrer divides the prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries into three types. Two out of the three types were professional prophets. The first is the professional cult prophet, who participated along with the levites and priests in the sanctuaries. According to Fohrer, evidence for these cult prophets is found in Psalms 2; 21; 81; 110; 132 as well as in the books of Nahum and Habakkuk.<sup>9</sup> In Nahum 3:4-5 there is a reference to sorcery:

4 מִלִּבִּי וְתַעֲלֵי וְתַעֲלֵי מִלִּבִּי וְתַעֲלֵי מִלִּבִּי

הַמִּלִּבִּי וְתַעֲלֵי מִלִּבִּי וְתַעֲלֵי מִלִּבִּי

5 וְתַעֲלֵי מִלִּבִּי וְתַעֲלֵי מִלִּבִּי וְתַעֲלֵי מִלִּבִּי

וְתַעֲלֵי מִלִּבִּי וְתַעֲלֵי מִלִּבִּי וְתַעֲלֵי מִלִּבִּי

"Because of the countless harlotries of the harlot, The winsome mistress of sorcery, Who ensnared the nations with her harlotries And people with her

<sup>7</sup> Kaufmann Pp. 354

<sup>8</sup> Kaufmann Pp. 356

<sup>9</sup> Fohrer Pp. 236

sorcery, I am going to deal with you - says the Lord of Hosts...etc. (JPS translation).

Nahum paints a most unflattering picture of those who practice sorcery. Habakkuk is much more explicit about these professional prophets. He accuses them of being false prophets who deliver oracles through the use of idols. They have amassed great wealth but eventually they will be punished by Yahweh (Nahum 2).

The other type of professional prophet Fohrer describes was the court prophet. They functioned as advisors to the king and supported the king's policies. Hananiah and Shemiah in the book of Jeremiah are examples of court prophets. Both the court and cult prophets provided oracles, communicated the divine will while possessed by the "spirit of Yahweh" and acted as mediators between Yahweh and the people.<sup>10</sup>

The third category of prophets were the individual prophets who were called by Yahweh to deliver His message. They did not make their living from prophecy and often were called against their will. These individual prophets are, retrospectively, the great literary prophets of Israel and include Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and in part, Deutero-Isaiah.<sup>11</sup> For the Israelite, the professional prophet is the norm and constituted an important class within Israelite society, whereas the individual prophets were the exception in their time.<sup>12</sup>

Kaufmann would disagree that the Israelite made a distinction between

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<sup>10</sup> Fohrer Pp. 236

<sup>11</sup> Fohrer Pp. 236

<sup>12</sup> Fohrer Pp. 236

the individual prophet and the professional. To the Israelite, including the prophet's supporters, the prophet was primarily a wonder-worker and future-teller. The book of Kings makes no mention of the literary works of the prophets or the names of the prophets themselves (with the exception of Isaiah). Kaufmann's conclusion then is that literary prophecy was not a distinguishable movement in Israelite society.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Kaufmann Pp. 158



## The Ecstatic Behavior of the Prophets

The Bible is filled with prophets who, by contemporary Western standards, would be considered to have some kind of mental disorder. For example, in 1 Sam 19:24 King Saul and his messengers encounter a band of prophets "speaking in ecstasy." They too join the prophets in speaking in ecstasy. Saul (who frequently becomes possessed by the "spirit of Yahweh") strips off his clothes and "spoke in ecstasy before Samuel; and he lay naked all that day and night". The Anchor Bible 1 Samuel notes that the activity the company of Saul encounters,

"is prophecy, that is, group ecstasy which spreads contagiously to each newly arriving troop of Saul's emissaries in its turn... He (Saul) is now more a victim of prophetic inspiration than a beneficiary of it; he participates in the prophesying as a sufferer, an invalid and the ecstasy is for him a disease."<sup>14</sup>

Like Saul, Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Hosea and other prophets take Yahweh's prophecies of doom to extremes. They act out Israel's future suffering through the use of symbolic, self-destructive acts. Lang views these acts (such as Ezekiel's hunger strike) as street theater used knowingly by the prophets to provoke and challenge their public to respond.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, JR. The Anchor Bible: 1 Samuel (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1980) Pp. 329

<sup>15</sup> Bernhard Lang Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority (Sheffield: The



"The prophet of the 8th century is a journalist who works in the open air, who reads out his article in person and accompanies it with mime, indeed often converts it into a sign language. Above all, it is a question of impressing the people to attract a large crowd. In order to achieve this, the prophet spurns no tricks which modern journalism prides itself upon inventing. He stands at the place where many people are going by, especially at the town gate. In order to win listeners there he uses the most cunning advertising tricks: faked madness, new words and expressions, and carries written posters around him...The clownery linked to an uncouth appearance is put into the service of piety."<sup>16</sup>

Renan and Lang see the behaviors of the prophets as being simply a means to an end and not significant in and of itself. Yet it would seem that at some point the behavior of the prophet overpowers the prophet's message. With some prophets, going naked is a tool for communicating Israel's fate. Furthermore, ecstatic prophets "going about in bands, fired to dervishlike frenzy prophesying to the sound of music... represents a phenomenon well attested in the ancient world with parallels among the Canaanites and as far afield as Anatolia and Mesopotamia."<sup>17</sup>

The Darwish is a phenomenon in Islam that bears some resemblance to the ancient Israelite prophet. The Israelite prophet preceded the Darwish by centuries and the roles of the two function differently in the two societies. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning the behavioral characteristics of the Darwish so as to understand better the comparisons made between the two. The Darwish is a member of an Islamic religious fraternity or order which

Almond Press, 1983) Pp.81

<sup>16</sup>E. Renan Oeuvres Completes ed. by H. Psichari (Paris: vol. 6, 1953; vol. 8, 1958) translation in Lang, Pp. 82

<sup>17</sup>John Bright A History of Israel (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press) Pp. 182

forms organized expression of religious life in Islam. The ritual of these groups stresses the emotional religious life. Members are expected to take part in rituals which lead to ecstatic experience with the goal of impressing upon the worshipper the idea of the unseen world and his dependence upon it. These rituals include self-hypnosis through fasting, dancing and music. This results in barking, howling and extraordinary feats such as the eating of glowing embers, live serpents, glass and the like rendered possible in part by these hypnotic states. In addition to these behaviors, the Derwish is expected to have the powers of clairaudience and clairvoyance.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike the Israelite prophet it would seem that the religious goals of the Derwish are more personal and less aimed at reforming society or transmitting God's word to the people. That role seems to have been taken in the Islamic world by the kahin. Like the baru at Mari and in Akkad, the kahin transmitted oracles, offered sacrifices, interpreted signs by means of divination and was the sole repository of supernatural knowledge. Like the baru and nabi the kahin had a feminine counterpart in the kahina. The ecstatic behavior of the Kahina is more marked than that of the Kahin although present in both.<sup>19</sup>

The behavior exhibited by many of the Israelite prophets demonstrates a lack of awareness of the self. While in the throes of prophecy, the prophet is asocial and unaware of the body and its functions. He also hallucinates visions and voices. By our modern psychological standards the prophet would probably be diagnosed as having some form of schizophrenia.

Before establishing a psychotic personality for the prophet (specifically, Ezekiel) we should turn our attention to what is the crucial feature of his condition. Ordinarily the first

<sup>18</sup>Encyclopedia of Islam pp 164

<sup>19</sup>Encyclopedia of Islam pp 421

outward indications of a psychosis are more or less bizarre. The patient may complain that people are trying to "get" him; he may attempt to harm himself physically, or more likely to harm someone else. Ordinarily he has been having strange experiences before the actual outburst. In some types of psychosis, the patient may also develop what are known as catatonic symptoms. These are often spectacular, and in antiquity it is not surprising that they were looked upon as symptoms of divine favor."<sup>20</sup>

Ecstatic behavior has been integral to prophecy in many cultures and times. For the purpose of this study we will try to define ecstasy. Malamet understands ecstasy to be

"...anything from autosuggestion to divinely infused dream. Only in rare instances does this quality appear in the extreme embodiment of frenzy, and even then it is not clear whether it is accompanied with loss of senses, for the utterances of the prophets are always sober and purposeful and are far from being mere gibberish."<sup>21</sup>

Lindblom differs somewhat in his understanding of ecstasy:

"Ecstasy belongs to the psychical phenomena the definition of which has varied from time to time and from one author to another. Sometimes the etymology of the word has been followed. Then ecstasy has been defined as a mental state in which one has the feeling that the soul leaves the body and goes off to distant regions, and the bond with this world is temporarily cut off. However, this definition is too narrow... Modern psychologists use the term 'ecstasy' in a wider sense. Following scholars... who have thoroughly studied ecstatic experience, I

<sup>20</sup> Edwin Broome JR., "Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality," The Journal of Biblical Literature, vol. 65 (1946) Pp. 279

<sup>21</sup> Abraham Malamet, "A Forerunner of Biblical Prophecy: The Mari Documents," Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross, Edited by Patrick D. Miller JR., Paul D. Hanson, S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) Pp. 35

prefer to define ecstasy as an abnormal state of consciousness in which one is so intensely absorbed by one single idea or one single feeling, or by a group of ideas or feelings, that the normal stream of psychical life is more or less arrested. The bodily senses cease to function... consequently ecstasy can rightly be described as a kind of monoideism.<sup>22</sup>

According to the Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, ecstasy comes from the Greek meaning "to put out of place." It is a mental condition "in which consciousness is wholly or partly in suspension, thought and volition cease and the subject is directed and controlled by the Spirit of God." Ecstasy can be induced through music, dancing, or fixation on objects (1 Sam 9; 2 Kgs 3:15) or can be spontaneous. It is sometimes called "madness" because of the accompanying physical movements, incoherent speech and frenzied behavior (2 Kgs 9:11; Cor 14:23).<sup>23</sup>

Among sociologists and anthropologists the term "ecstasy" has been replaced by the more specific "possession trance." "Possession refers to states where the person is thought to be possessed by spirits and "trance" referring to altered states of consciousness often characterized by hallucinations or visions.<sup>24</sup> More specifically possession trance is

"... a condition in which a person is believed to be inhabited by the spirit of another person or a supernatural being. During this "possession" by a spirit other than his own, the person is in an altered state of consciousness, evidenced by one or more of the following: talking and acting like the inhabiting spirit, lapsing

<sup>22</sup> J. Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962) Pp. 4-5

<sup>23</sup> Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Pp 21-22

<sup>24</sup> Erika Bourguignon Religion, Altered States of Consciousness and Social Change (Columbus: Ohio State University 1973) Pp. 12

into a coma-like state, speaking unintelligibly, exhibiting physical symptoms such as twitching, wild dancing, frothing at the mouth and so on. Upon regaining his original identity the person generally retains no conscious memory of the activity of the spirit.

Possession trance may be an individual or group phenomenon. It may be induced by drugs, music or other methods external to the individual, or it may be a spontaneous manifestation by the person possessed... In all cases however, the phenomenon is accepted within the society as a trance induced by the spirit entering the person possessed and not as an individual psychological aberration."<sup>25</sup>

Apart from possession trance, visionary trance is another category which is characterized as a covert, passive experience. "It acquires social significance only when the visions are recorded or communicated, which is possible after such a trance, since the visions are generally remembered, especially when given religious significance in the society."<sup>26</sup>

Just as the modern definition of mental illness can vary, so does the definition of ecstatic experience. Malamet highlights the functional if somewhat bizarre behavior of ecstatic prophets whereas Lindblom sees ecstasy as abnormal. Wilson explains "Because in many societies the signs of genuine spirit possession and the symptoms of illness are virtually identical, a professional medium or diviner is frequently consulted for a diagnoses of the affected individual's condition."<sup>27</sup> Although the behaviors associated with

<sup>25</sup> L. Greenbaum in Erika Bourguignon Religion, Altered States of Consciousness and Social Change (Columbus: Ohio State University 1973) Pp.42-3

<sup>26</sup> Simon B. Parker "Possession Trance and Prophecy in Pre-Exilic Israel" *Vetus Testamentum* vol. 28 1978 Pp. 273

<sup>27</sup> Robert R. Wilson Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel (Philadelphia:



ecstatic prophecy are outside the norm of biblical society, one of the questions this paper will address is whether the prophets themselves were considered to be abnormal or if prophetic behavior (particularly when taken out of the context of prophecy) was abnormal.

It is important to mention that there are scholars such as Parker<sup>28</sup> and Petersen who assert that ecstatic prophecy or trance possession was not a part of Israelite prophecy. Petersen points in particular to 1 Kgs chapter 18 to illustrate his point that ecstasy was present in Phoenician culture but not Israelite culture.<sup>29</sup> In chapter 18 Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal and Asherah to prove the power of their gods. Each will prepare a sacrifice and then call on their respective gods to produce the fire for the altar. The prophets of Baal and Asherah danced, shouted, gashed themselves with knives and raved. Elijah then invoked the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel to produce the fire and Yahweh obliged. Although the ecstatic behavior of the prophets of Baal and Asherah seem expected and accepted by the Israelites, Elijah does not use ecstasy to invoke Yahweh. Furthermore, Parker and Petersen assert that "Yahwistic prophecy in Israel does not involve possession of any kind."<sup>30</sup> Petersen claims that the verb hitnabbe can either mean "to prophecy or "to fall into a possession trance" but that in each example of these verbal forms the context allows for only one of these meanings, not both.<sup>31</sup> As we shall, see visionary trance and in some cases

Fortress Press 1980) Pp. 177

28 Simon B. Parker "Possession Trance and Prophecy in Pre-Exilic Israel" *Vetus Testamentum* vol. 28 1978

29 David L. Petersen The Roles of Israel's Prophets (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 17 1981) Pp. 30

30 David L. Petersen The Roles of Israel's Prophets Pp. 29

31 Simon B. Parker "Possession Trance and Prophecy in Pre-Exilic Israel" Pp. 274

possession trance can be located within the context of Israelite prophecy. Although possession behavior or ecstasy is not prerequisite for Israelite prophecy it certainly does seem to have existed.

To diagnose Biblical ecstatic experience by our modern psychological standards is of little use in understanding the role of the prophet in Biblical society or in understanding Biblical society in general. It is much more significant to find out how this ecstatic behavior was viewed in the context of its own time and place. Was Saul for example, considered to be sick as the Anchor Bible intimates? If so, was Saul's "illness" contagious?

This thesis will attempt to find out if there was a Biblical concept akin to our modern concept of mental illness. If such a concept did exist, how did it relate to the ecstatic experiences of the Biblical prophets? If there was no concept of mental illness in the Bible, then we must try to determine how ecstatic behavior was viewed by Biblical society.

Before we can speak of mental illness in the Bible we must define our terms for the purpose of comparison. There are many understandings of the terms "mental illness" and "mental disorder." For that reason I have taken the definition of "mental disorder" from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Third Edition, Revised (DSM -III-R). The DSM-III-R is the diagnostic manual accepted by the American Medical Association for the purpose of diagnosis and for insurance purposes.

<sup>32</sup>Although this manual provides a classification of mental disorders, no definition adequately specifies precise boundaries for the concept "mental disorder" (this is also true for such concepts as physical disorder and mental and physical health)".

Mental disorder is a matter of illness akin to physical disorders.

<sup>32</sup> The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Third Edition- Revised ( Washington D.C.: 1987) Pp.xcii.

The DSM-III-R does set boundaries in its description of mental illness so as to make clear what classifies a condition as a mental illness:

"In DSM-III-R each of the mental disorders is conceptualized as a clinically significant behavioral or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in a person and that is associated with present distress (a painful symptom) or disability (impairment in one or more important areas of functioning) or with a significantly increased risk of suffering death, pain, disability or an important loss of freedom. In addition, this syndrome or pattern must not be merely an expectable response to a particular event, e.g. the death of a loved one. Whatever its original cause, it must currently be considered a manifestation of a behavioral, psychological or biological dysfunction in the person. Neither deviant behavior, e.g., political, religious, or sexual, nor conflicts that are primarily between the individual and society are mental disorders unless the deviance or conflict is a symptom of a dysfunction in the person as described above."<sup>33</sup>

What is clear from the DSM-III-R is that a mental disorder is an illness. Furthermore, simply behaving in a deviant fashion does not make one mentally ill. The deviant behavior must be coupled with some kind of dysfunction that leads to symptoms which cause (or are) the deviant behavior. Of particular importance to this study of a Biblical concept of mental illness, is a cautionary statement in the DSM-III-R regarding the its use in relation to cultures other than our modern, Western culture. "When an experience or behavior is entirely normative for a particular culture - e.g., the experience of hallucinating the voice of the deceased in the first few weeks of bereavement in various North American Indian groups, or trance and possession states occurring in culturally approved ritual contexts of the non-Western world - it should not be regarded as pathological." If behavioral norms are culture-bound

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<sup>33</sup>The American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Third Edition - Revised ( Washington D.C.: 1987) Pp.xxii.



then we must try to gain an understanding of what those Biblical norms were and how non-normative behavior was viewed by ancient Israelite society.

## A Philological Study of the root **שׁוּן** and Related Terminology

**שׁוּן** is a word which connotes insanity in both a literal and figurative sense in modern Hebrew. The term **שׁוּן**, is defined in The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary by Reuven Alcalay, as : "mad", "crazy", "insane", "lunatic." Each of these English adjectives connotes mental illness. For example, according to The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary the adjective "insane" comes from the Latin "insanus" which means "unhealthy in body or mind", "not of sound mind." The modern Hebrew term **שׁוּן** contains that same sense of an unhealthy mental state. It is used in compound form to describe mental hospitals as well as technical terms for particular mental disorders.

The word **שׁוּן** derives from the root **שׁוּן**. According to A New Concordance to the Old Testament by Abraham Even-Shoshan, there are ten instances where the root **שׁוּן** appears in the Bible. We will examine these ten uses of **שׁוּן** to see if it connotes a similar sense of mental illness as its modern Hebrew counterpart, or if the word has some other meaning. In each case we will examine the root in its usage in the passages as well as the larger context in which the passage is found. Let us begin with Deut 28:28.

To understand the usage of **שׁוּן** in Deuteronomy 28:28 we must first look at the context of the verse. The word occurs in the midst of a curse that

is fifty-three verses long. It is the curse that Yahweh will deliver upon the Israelites if they do not follow His laws and commandments. More specifically, נִסְגָּע is included in a list of physical ailments with which the Israelites will be afflicted: וְכָל יָמֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע וְכָל יָמֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע וְכָל יָמֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע 27

וְכָל יָמֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע 28 יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע וְכָל יָמֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע וְכָל יָמֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע

וְכָל יָמֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע 29 וְכָל יָמֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע וְכָל יָמֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע וְכָל יָמֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע

Like Egyptian inflammation, hemorrhoids, boil scars, itch and blindness, נִסְגָּע is a painful physical ailment and a disability. Within this same list of calamities that will befall the Israelites God uses the root נִסְגָּע again:

וְכָל יָמֶיךָ יִהְיֶה נִסְגָּע 34

In the sight of the destruction and misery that will be inflicted upon the Israelites they will become נִסְגָּע. Within the context of the verse alone the meaning of נִסְגָּע is not immediately apparent. Again, directly after its use is a list of (other) physical ailments. Like the list in verse 27 these are diseases "from which, you cannot be healed."

Driver explains this instance of נִסְגָּע as "mental infatuation, resulting in ill-considered and disastrous public policy, blind incapacity to perceive what the times require and paralysis of reason in the presence of unexpected disaster."<sup>34</sup> The JPS translation renders verse 34 as "...until you are driven mad by what your eyes behold." Although the verse itself does not contain information that would clearly define the symptoms of נִסְגָּע it is clear that נִסְגָּע is a physical malady that can be chronic. Furthermore, it is brought on in both Deut 28:28 and Deut 28:24 by circumstances that make life intolerable. When existence becomes inescapably painful, one becomes נִסְגָּע.

<sup>34</sup>Samuel Rolles Driver The International Critical Commentary: Deuteronomy (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1895) Pp. 310

The use of נָסָה in Jer 29:26 also conveys a sense of the physical. What it does not convey is the sense of an illness. Instead, נָסָה seems to be a behavior; a symptom. Jer 29 is written in the form of a letter, although, because of the letter of Shemaiah within Jeremiah's letter, chapter 29 is probably a composite of two or more letters written at different times. The Anchor Bible Commentary explains that Shemaiah's letter was probably read aloud to Jeremiah. Jeremiah then responded with his own letter which included excerpts from Shemaiah's original letter.<sup>35</sup>

The letter is from Jeremiah (who is in Jerusalem) to the "priests, prophets and the rest of the elders of the exile community and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon." In this letter Jeremiah urges the community in exile to put down roots in Babylon, promising that eventually Yahweh will restore them to their own land. Jeremiah also warns the Israelites not to follow the prophets among them in Babylon and not to heed King Zedekiah. Both Zedekiah and the false prophets will be punished by Yahweh and they will be "a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth."

The letter within this letter is from a competing prophet, Shemaiah the Nehelamite, to the priest Zephaniah regarding Jeremiah's letter to the exile community. Shemaiah accuses Zephaniah of not fulfilling his role as the head of the priesthood, which is to purge Jerusalem of:

לְכָל אִישׁ שֹׁטֵט וְסוֹחֵב וְחַמְסָה אֹתוֹ אֶל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְאֶל הַדֶּקֶק  
27 וְעָלָה לְפָנָיו לֹא וְאֶת בְּרִיתוֹ הַעֲוִתִי הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְכָבֵד

<sup>35</sup> John Bright The Anchor Bible: Jeremiah (New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc. 1965) Pp.212

In this case, *gdan* is the behavior of one who "acts the prophet." The phrase "חֲזוֹן נָבִי" is a hendiadys where the separate words "חֲזוֹן" and "נָבִי" are joined to form a single expression meaning something to the effect of "a person who acts crazy like a prophet." According to John Gray, "the denominative verb *hitnabbe* is used of madness, in support of the theory that ecstasy was an essential feature of Hebrew prophecy."<sup>36</sup> Wilson disagrees with this theory

".. the hithpael of \*nb> sometimes appears in passages where there is no clear indication of ecstatic behavior, so the occurrences of this form cannot be used to support the notion that ecstasy was the chief characteristic of the early *nabi*s. Rather, the hithpael of \*nb> should probably be given a more general meaning. On the analogy of forms such as *hithal* ("pretend to be sick," "act as if you were sick" [2 Sam 13:5]) *hit>abbeli* ("pretend to mourn," "act like a mourner" [2 Sam 14:2]) and *lehistagga* ("to act like a madman" [1 Sam 21:16]), it is probable that *hitnabbe* originally meant "to act like a prophet," "to exhibit behavior characteristic of a *nabi*." In contrast, the niphal forms of \*nb> were probably originally denominatives meaning simply "to prophesy," "to deliver a prophetic oracle." If this was in fact the case, then the verbal forms of \*nb> do not specify the behavioral characteristics of the *nabi*. These characteristics can only be determined on the basis of an examination of the behavior of each prophet."<sup>37</sup>

In 1 Kgs 18:29 Elisha challenges the prophets of Beal to a contest to prove Yahweh's omnipotence. The prophets of Beal *wayitnabbe>u*, which means behaviorally, they slash themselves with knives, dance and "exhibit their stereotypical possession behavior."<sup>38</sup> In other words, the behavior of those who *wayitnabbe>u* includes ecstatic behavior and possession is associated

<sup>36</sup> John Gray *1 and 2 Kings* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963) Pp. 488

<sup>37</sup> Robert R. Wilson *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* Pp. 138

<sup>38</sup> Robert R. Wilson *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* Pp. 196

with prophecy but it is not necessarily a required aspect of all prophecy.

In Jer. 29:26 the *na'um* is someone who manifests prophetic behavior without being a true prophet. When a prophet is recognized as such his or her behavior is considered normal by Israelite society. When that prophet no longer is recognized as such, or when one behaves like a prophet without actually being one, then one is considered to be *na'um*. Furthermore, Shemaiah wants this *na'um* to be put in jail. In this case, the *na'um* is not treated as one who is ill, but rather, as a subversive element within the society. Chapter 29 is a power struggle between Shemaiah and Jeremiah. Each of them claims to be in possession of God's word.

Possessing the true word of the god was of great significance in Israelite society. Before attacking Ramoth-Gilead, King Ahab asks the prophets (approximately four hundred) whether or not he should attack. Only after receiving the advice of the prophets does he go ahead. He listens to the advice of the four hundred prophets who always tell him what he wants to hear. The king of Aram who asked for the prophecy in the first place before agreeing to go into battle with Ahab, asks if there are any other prophets to be consulted. Ahab replies that there is a certain Micaiah son of Imlah who always give unfavorable prophecies. Micaiah is warned that the other prophets gave the king favorable prophecy and at first Micaiah tries to do the same. Ahab knows Micaiah is lying and convinces him to tell the truth. Micaiah accuses the other prophets of lying, tells the king he will die in battle and is thrown in jail.

Likewise, Nehemiah "was accused of monarchic, and hence anti-Persian activities, in particular of bribing the prophets to proclaim him king of Judah (Neh 6:7)."<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, with the exception of the Elijah-Elisha stories,



in the time before Amos, no prophecy is directed to anyone outside the royal court and the prophets themselves all belong to the landowning elite from which state officials are recruited<sup>40</sup> Therefore, according to Lang, during periods when the landowning aristocracy wields authority, the prophet has a great deal of authority. When the aristocracy has less political influence prophecy too loses its influence.<sup>41</sup>

In Jeremiah's time his struggle with Shemiah was a significant one since, according to Lang, the recognized prophet held a position of great authority and influence among the Israelite nobility. How then is one to know who is the true prophet and who the *na'um*? All would-be prophets exhibit some stereotypical behavior which is recognizable to those around as prophetic and share a common stereotypical vocabulary. In some cases true and false prophets are distinguished by whether or not they receive their prophecies directly from Yahweh, whereas false prophets do not (Jer 23:16-40; 1 Kgs 22:13-23).<sup>42</sup> From the perspective of the Canon, the true prophet is the one whose prophecies come true (2 Kgs 2:23f) although as we have already noted earlier the editors of the Canon made no attempt to harmonize the prophecies of the literary prophets which turned out to be historically inaccurate.

In our passage Zephaniah does not carry out Shemiah's orders to stop Jeremiah, rather he shows the letter to Jeremiah who then accuses Shemiah of false prophecy. This, coupled with Jeremiah's relationship with the

<sup>39</sup> Bernhard Lang Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983) Pp.63

<sup>40</sup> Lang, Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority Pp.63

<sup>41</sup> Lang, Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority Pp.70

<sup>42</sup> Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel Pp. 158

powerful Shaphan family (Jer 26:29-32, 1-24; 29:23) and the account of the reading of Jeremiah's scroll (Jer 26) indicate Jeremiah's close connection with the royal establishment. This connection will not remain close and as the Babylonian conquest approaches Jeremiah's position becomes treasonous.<sup>43</sup>

The problem of two contradicting prophecies is addressed in 1 Kgs chapter 13. In this case the "man of God" who is the true prophet mistakenly follows the false prophecy of another prophet. The man of God is killed by Yahweh for not following to the letter the prophecy he had been given. The text implies that the prophet must follow Yahweh's instructions and may only take a different course if instructed to do so by Yahweh alone.

Both Jeremiah and Shemaiah behave like prophets and call themselves "prophets", but only one can be the true possessor of God's wishes. The other one can only play the prophet. He is *unreliable*. The threat of a prophet being false is inherent in the nature of prophecy. Since the true prophet is the sole possessor of the divine message, his or her society has no means by which to corroborate the prophet's story. In Deut 18:18-22 God tells Moses that a false prophet is one whose prophecies do not come true. This of course requires hindsight to verify the veracity of any prophecy.<sup>44</sup> Jeremiah suggests that prophets delivering oracles of disasters are more likely to be true than those of peace (Jer 28:8-9) but Jeremiah himself delivers oracles of peace in chapters 30-32.<sup>45</sup> Both the false prophet and the true prophet use the same stereotypical speech formulae and behavior. It is left then to society to judge the veracity of each prophet.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel Pp. 247

<sup>44</sup> Robert R. Wilson Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1983) Pp. 68

<sup>45</sup> Wilson, Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament Pp. 69



From the perspective of the Canon Jeremiah was the true prophet. But from the perspective of Jeremiah's own society Jeremiah was supported by his own group but the Jerusalemite establishment saw him as a madman rather than a true prophet (Jer 20:1-6; 29:24-28; 36:1-32).<sup>46</sup> Wilson notes that Jeremiah's false prophecy charges carry more weight than simply accusing the other prophets of not possessing God's word. In Jeremiah's tradition false prophesying was a capital offense:

18 וְלֹא אֶקִים לָהֶם מִסֵּרֶב אַחֲרָם

כִּי־יִהְיֶה דְבַר־יְהוָה בְּפִי דָבָר אֱלֹהִים אֲנִי קֹלֵאֲשֶׁר אֶמְצֵא:

19 וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־שָׁמַע אֶל־דְּבַר־יְהוָה בְּשֵׁמִי אֲנִי

אֲדַרְשׁ סִפּוֹ: 20 אֶךְ תִּבְלֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵיךְ לְדָבָר דְּבַר בְּשֵׁמִי אֲנִי אֲשֶׁר

לֹא־צִוִּיתִי לְדָבָר וְאֲשֶׁר דָּבָר בְּשֵׁם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְהִנֵּה תִבְלֵא

הָרָע: 21 וְכִי תֹאמַר בְּלִבְךָ אֵיכָה יָדַע אֲחֵרֵךְ דְּבַר־יְהוָה לֹא

דָּבָר יָדָע: 22 אֲשֶׁר דָּבָר תִּבְלֵא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה וְלֹא יִהְיֶה דְבַר־יְהוָה

וְלֹא יִבָּא הָאִישׁ דְּבַר־יְהוָה לְאֲדָבָר יָדָע פִּחֻן דְּבַר־יְהוָה תִּבְלֵא

לֹא תִמָּוֶה: 23

"I will establish a prophet like you from among your brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth and he will tell them all that I command him. And if any person does not listen to the words he speaks in My name I personally will call him to account. But, a prophet who claims to speak in my name, that which I have not commanded to speak or who speaks in the name of other gods this prophet will die. And if you say to yourselves 'How do we know that the thing was not spoken by Adonai?' When the prophet speaks in the name of Adonai but the thing does not come to pass that thing was not spoken by Adonai, the prophet has spoken falsely. Do not fear him."

Jeremiah was an adherent of the Deuteronomistic school. "Modern

<sup>46</sup> Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament* Pp. 79

scholars have followed their predecessors in seeing Deuteronomistic language and theology throughout Jeremiah...<sup>47</sup> Well aware of the laws of Deuteronomy, Jeremiah tries to undermine his opponents by accusing them of a crime punishable by death (Deut 18:20).<sup>48</sup>

What is crucial for our study is the connection between *נבו* and prophecy. Jeremiah himself gives a glimpse of some of the typical (*נבו*) prophetic behaviors: 1.dreams (29:8) 2.divination (29:8) 3.making promises (29:31). In Jer 29 *נבו* is partially a mental state but more importantly a deviant behavior which can cause disequilibrium within the society. The *נבו* is a political non-conformist. According to Radak *נבו* is a pejorative synonym for *נביא*.

The usage of *נבו* in Hosea 9:7 contains the linkage with prophecy and the sense of some kind of mental affliction brought on by what we would call "anxiety." As in Deut 28:28,34 the prophet will become *נבו* by witnessing the punishment that Yahweh has in store for the unfaithful Israelites:

אֵל תָּבִיא סָוֵל אִישׁ רָחוֹק  
עַל לֵב עוֹלָם וְרָחַק מִשְׁמֵרָה

JPS translates this verse as "The prophet was distraught, The inspired man driven mad by constant harassment." Literally the verse reads "The prophet became an (evil) fool, The inspired man (or "possessed man", in either case, this is a synonym for "prophet") became *נבו* on account of suffering and hatred." The Anchor Bible Commentary translates the verse "The prophet is a fool, the man of the Spirit is insane because your iniquity is great and your hostility is great."<sup>49</sup> The Interpreter's Bible translates the verse "The

<sup>47</sup> Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* Pp. 231

<sup>48</sup> Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament* Pp. 79-80

<sup>49</sup> Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman *The Anchor Bible:Hosea* (New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1980) Pp.515

prophet is a fool, the man of spirit is mad."<sup>50</sup> The different translations of the verse have a great impact on our understanding of נָאִיִּם. If we follow the JPS translation, suffering causes the prophet to act in a manner that is considered evil and foolish. The נָאִיִּם and the נָאִיִּם שָׂרָא, who are usually considered to be normal, will become deviant when they reach their threshold for mental pain. Like Deut 28, Hosea presents נָאִיִּם as a state into which one enters when one finds life too painful to bear.

The Anchor Bible and Interpreter's Bible translations are more in line with Rashi's understanding of the text. Rashi explains that even the true prophet will become a fool. Rashi cites the case of Hananiah ben Azzur in Jeremiah 28 who initially seems to be regarded by Jeremiah as a true prophet but who dies as a result of giving false prophecy. The Anchor Bible Commentary explains that the Israelites call Yahweh's true prophets fools because the people are corrupt.<sup>51</sup> This interpretation is consonant with that of Ibn Ezra. Ibn Ezra asserts that the actual sin of the Israelites was that they called God's true prophets crazy and for this they would be punished. Likewise the Interpreter's Bible explains that it is the public opinion that the prophets are mad. "if belief can be encouraged that they are suffering from illusions and hallucinations, they will be disregarded."<sup>52</sup> Radak reads this verse in an entirely different manner. When retribution comes the false prophet (Navi) will be unmasked as an נָאִיִּם שָׂרָא i.e., full of wind.

According to Wolff, the נָאִיִּם is a madman who is no longer accountable for his actions.

"Hosea sees himself condemned with other prophets of the Northern Kingdom such as Elisha and Amos. Hosea's opponents,

<sup>50</sup> The Interpreter's Bible Pp.659

<sup>51</sup> The Anchor Bible:Hosea Pp.515

<sup>52</sup> The Interpreter's Bible Pp.659

those professional optimists, encircle him, noisily shouting him down with insults born of their hatred...The reason for their abusive language probably lies in Hosea's persistent threats and in his unusual conduct despite the apparent normalcy of life in Israel.<sup>53</sup>

The Anchor Bible comments: "the token of rejection of Yahweh is contempt for His prophet. Although the latter is the guardian of the country (v8), he is opposed and dismissed as a madman."<sup>54</sup> Both the Anchor Bible and Wolff highlight the destructive and paranoid nature of the prophet under fire. Hosea is a hated man and it is in this very hatred that he finds satisfaction.

Like Wolff, Wilson understands the passage as though Hosea were talking about himself. Hosea is quoting the people when he says "the prophet is foolish the man possessed by the spirit is insane." "Hosea 9:7 thus suggests that at least some of the society did not recognize Hosea as a genuine prophet but considered his possession behavior, whatever it included, to be an indication of illness. The identity of Hosea's opponents is implied in the next two verses, where the prophet continues by complaining that although the prophet is the watchman of Ephraim, he is now ineffective."<sup>55</sup> Wilson suggests that Hosea's opposition came from priests and prophets associated with the central cult who kept him on the periphery.

The fine line between deviant political behavior and mental illness is seen in II Kings 9:11. The stories of Elijah and Elisha are filled with ecstatic experiences such as music induced trance and miraculous events which we will discuss at length later on. Elijah and Elisha are constantly surrounded by

<sup>53</sup>The Interpreter's Bible Pp.659

<sup>54</sup>The Anchor Bible: Hosea Pp. 522

<sup>55</sup>Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel Pp. 230

their: מִיִּנְיָאִים

" Sons of the Prophets."

In II Kings we are given a portrait of the prophets as a well organized, political group within the authority structure of ancient Israel. The means by which they operate within the structure (i.e. miracles) are not within the grasp of the average person, but their power is considered normative for the society despite the fact that it is out of the ordinary. Mircea Eliade explains that miracles are "events, actions and states taken to be so unusual, extraordinary and supernatural that the normal level of human consciousness finds them hard to accept rationally."<sup>56</sup> Eliade points out that although no miracles exist without miracle workers, no miracle workers exist without an audience to affirm the performance of the miracle worker to be worthy of admiration.<sup>57</sup> Therefore the miracles of Elisha, Elijah and the מִיִּנְיָאִים required an audience. This explains why Jehu and his officers knew exactly who Elisha's emissary was. Despite their sometimes bizarre behavior (or perhaps because of it) Elisha and his circle must have been highly regarded by at least the element of society which preserved the miracle stories about them.

Alexander Rofe in his The Prophetic Stories disagrees with the idea that the מִיִּנְיָאִים share the prophetic power of Elisha. According to Rofe the מִיִּנְיָאִים were not an organized communal sect since they did not share communal property. Rofe does concede that in 2 Kgs 2:1-15 and in our passage (2 Kgs 9:1) the מִיִּנְיָאִים "are described as knowing part of the future and inheriting Elijah's spirit." Rofe asserts that these two passages which

<sup>56</sup> Mircea Eliade The Encyclopedia of Religion Vol 9 (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1987) Pp. 542

<sup>57</sup> Eliade, The Encyclopedia of Religion Vol 9 Pp. 542



attribute to the **נִיְנְיָאִים** prophetic powers are later documents and therefore do not reflect the original meaning of the term **נִיְנְיָאִים**.<sup>58</sup>

According to Wilson the "Sons of the Prophets" were a highly structured group with some members living and eating together communally (2 Kgs 6:1, 4:38-41). Wilson also asserts that the **נִיְנְיָאִים** shared power in that they were able to prophesy individually.<sup>59</sup> The authority of the prophetic circle is particularly evident in our example from II Kings 9:11. Elisha sends one of the Disciples of the Circle of Prophets to anoint Jehu as king and to deliver the prophecy that the line of Ahab will be destroyed (i.e. to give Jehu license to kill King Joram and Jezebel). The "servant of the prophet" followed Elisha's instructions and anointed Jehu and delivered the prophecy. After the servant of the prophet leaves Jehu's fellow officers ask him:

מַה בָּרַחְתָּ לָנוּ הִנֵּה אִישׁ אֶלֶף וְאֶחָד

אֵלֵינוּ אָמַר דְּבָרִים אֲדֻרָּאִים וְאֵדֻרָּאִים:

"Why did this **נִיְנְיָאִים** come to you? He said to them 'you know this man and his talk!'"

The servant of the prophet is associated by the officers as one from the Circle of Prophets. They laugh at his crazy "talk" (JPS translates it as "ranting"). Gray notes that the term "**נִיְנְיָאִים**" "is used to describe a prophet with regard to his ecstatic propensities."<sup>60</sup> He connects the term "**נִיְנְיָאִים**" with the Akkadian *ṣagu* (to howl or "rage"), "referring to the more extreme abandon of the prophet or 'howling dervish'."<sup>61</sup> According to the Anchor Bible "**נִיְנְיָאִים** is

<sup>58</sup> Alexander Rofe, The Prophetic Stories (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1988) Pp.22

<sup>59</sup> Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel Pp. 202

<sup>60</sup> John Gray 1 and 2 Kings (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963) Pp. 488

<sup>61</sup> Gray, 1 and 2 Kings Pp. 488

used disparagingly to refer to the ecstatic dervishlike behavior in some prophetic circles."<sup>62</sup>

The tone of the exchange between Jehu and the other officers is disdainful and sarcastic. Yet, despite his "ranting", they take the prophet quite seriously. This, of course may be due to the fact that the prophecy was to their benefit. Had they servant come with a prophecy less to their liking we do not know how they would have reacted.

Jehu and his officers see the prophets as נביא. That is to say, the prophet is considered to be deviant in regard to social customs and behavior, but a part of the political process and society in general. As it is used in II Kings 9:11, נביא is a pejorative term used to describe (in this case) the behavior of a prophet. The prophets were not considered to have been ill or dysfunctional. To the contrary, in II Kings 9, the prophets were powerful enough to orchestrate a coup d'etat.

The classical rabbinic commentators have much to say about the use of the term נביא in this passage. According to Rashi it was well known that נביאים were נביא. Radak explains that the prophets were referred to as ohgdan because occasionally, when they received prophecy they would lose their sensory apprehension and their conscious capacities. Radak gives the example of the prophet who removes his clothes in the throes of prophecy. Radak adds that the appellation "נביא" was pejorative. Ralbag explains that the term "נביא" was used in reference to prophets because the prophet spent so much time in isolation from society, lost in contemplation of God, and therefore they would act abnormally in society.

<sup>62</sup> Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor The Anchor Bible: 2 Kings (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1988) Pp. 108

By contrast, the story of David feigning *חשוג* in 1 Samuel 21:15-16 presents the *חשוג* as thoroughly ineffectual and sick. David is running from King Saul who wants to kill him. In his flight he runs into the camp of King Achish of Gath. The servants of Achish notice David and say "Why that's David, King of the land! That's the one of whom they sing and dance: Saul has slain thousands; David his tens of thousands."

Considering Saul's response to David's success in battle, David attempts to mask any threat he might pose to Achish. David is not trying to appear weak, rather, he is trying to present himself as being of no consequence whatsoever. David pretends to be *חשוג*. Behaviorally speaking that means:

14 וַיִּסְתֵּר אֶת־חָכְמוֹתָיו בְּעֵינֵיהֶם וַיִּחַלֵּל בָּדָם וַיִּזַּק נִימְקֵיהֶם עַל

וַיִּלְחֹחַ הָאֵזֶר וַיִּזְרֹק אֶל־יָסְדוֹ:

"He concealed his good sense from them; וַיִּחַלֵּל for their benefit. He scratched marks on the doors of the gate and let saliva rundown his beard." The Anchor Bible translates the passage "so he disguised his judgement while in the sight of them and feigned madness while in their custody." Here, the hitpa'el form of the root *חלל* does not mean "to be mad" but rather "to pretend to be mad".<sup>63</sup>

David behaved like an animal with no sense of control or social convention. He pretended not to be in control of his thought processes or his body. In this case the behavior of the *חשוג* serves no purpose (such as to induce prophecy) and is completely anti-social. David is considered to be sick and perhaps even contagious:

וַיֹּאמֶר הָאִישׁ אֵשֶׁת כִּשְׁמוֹ לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו: 16 וְהָיָה כְּאִשְׁתִּי:

"You see this man is raving (acting like a *חשוג*) why do you bring him to me?"

<sup>63</sup> The Anchor Bible; 1 Samuel pp 355





סוס העמים אלה בעורן:

"Behold I will make Jerusalem a bowl of reeling for the peoples all around. Judah shall be caught up in the seige upon Jerusalem, when all the nations of the earth gather against her. In that day - declares the Lord - I will strike every horse with panic and its rider with madness. But I will watch over the House of Judah while I strike every horse of the peoples with blindness" (JPS translation).

סוס, עורן and סוס appear together in many passages. As we shall see later on, each of these belongs to a group of disability-related words which have parallels in other ancient near-eastern languages. סוס is like throwing out one's back or blindness: it is completely debilitating. סוס is also paralleled with סוס which means "bewilderment, stupefaction" (Deuteronomy 28:28). In this case, just as in the story of David, סוס includes a loss of mental capacities. The סוס is unable to think and is sick.

In the ten instances of סוס we have seen several layers of meaning which parallel the meanings of סוס in modern Hebrew as well as the meanings of "insane" or "crazy" in English. סוס in the case of David, it is a technical term for someone who is sick and dangerous. The סוס is uncontrollable and completely outside the pale of normative behavior. The prophets manifest some of the symptoms of a סוס but from the examples that actually include this term, it would seem that the prophets are not considered to be sick, out of control or asocial. The word is also used in a figurative sense, much as it is today, to describe someone who drives or behaves in a manner that shows little regard for danger or the value of his life.

סוס also has two synonyms סוס and סוס which also have literal and

figurative meanings that connote the loss of the ability to think. הָלַל in the hitpoel form occurs eleven times in the Bible. It also occurs many times in the noun form הַלְלוּת. Within the context of the usage of הָלַל we gain some insight into the symptoms of הָלַל and will raise some important questions about the ecstatic behavior of the prophets.

Job 12:17-20 defines הָלַל as "mad" and yields information about the symptoms of madness.

17 מוֹלִיד יֹעֲצִים שׁוֹלֵל וְשֹׁפֵעִים יִהְיֶה:

18 מוֹכֵר מַלְכִּים פֶּתַח וְאַסֵּר אֲחֹר בִּמְחִירָהֶם:

19 מוֹלִיד בָּרִים שׁוֹלֵל הַחֲמִים יִסְרֶף:

20 סָקִיר שֹׁפֵה לְאֻסָּמִים וְאֵינָם וְקָנִים יִסֵּף:

"He makes counselors (I am unsure of the meaning of this word. It is some kind of official. "Counselors" is how JPS translates the word. According to De Vaux יֹעֲצִים means those "who saw the king's face" i.e., the king's closest advisors.) go naked ( "to be bereft of sense" according to Ibn Ezra) and causes the judges to הָלַל. He loosens the belts of kings and girds them with loin-clothes. He makes the priests go naked and leads the levitical singers astray. He deprives faithful men of speech and takes away the reason of elders."

The Anchor Bible translates verses 18-20 "Earth's counselors he makes foolish; Judges he makes mad. He loosens the belt of kings, And binds a rag on their loins. He makes priests go bare, Overturns the well established. The confident he deprives of speech, Takes away the reason of the elders."<sup>64</sup> The Anchor Bible notes that verse 17 in the Masoretic Text reads "He makes counselors go stripped". They amend the translation because the Masoretic reading "disturbs the parallelism with the following line and is also repeated in 19a."<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Marvin H. Pope The Anchor Bible: Job (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1965) Pp. 89

If going naked is a common symptom of madness in the biblical world then the Masoretic Text would reinforce the parallel. According to Robert Gordis לל means "stripped of clothes, naked" and the derived meaning "stripped of sense, mad." Either meaning is appropriate here as a parallel to לל<sup>66</sup>

In this passage, Job is expressing his anguish to Zophar, one of his friends who comes to console (torment) him. In the sight of his unmerited suffering Job comes to the conclusion that he is blameless. It is God who has turned the world upside down so that the good suffer and the evil are rewarded.

Job describes a world gone mad where everything is the opposite of how it should be. Those, who are usually looked to as wise leaders and authority figures, become insane. The counselors and priests go about naked. Leaders of the community lose their ability to think or speak.

We have seen the symptoms of loss of ability to discern or the ability to communicate in relation to לל. It is clear from the instances of לל (i.e. I Sam. 21:15-16) that one who suffers from such a loss of rational capacities is considered sick and dangerous. It is the symptom of going naked that is crucial to our understanding of a Biblical concept of mental illness and its relation to the prophets. In this example of לל, going about naked is one of the symptoms of a person who has lost his rational faculties. Yet we see Isaiah, Saul and Micah exhibiting just such behavior. It would seem that the

<sup>65</sup> Pope, The Anchor Bible: Job Pp. 90

<sup>66</sup> Robert Gordis The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation and Special Studies (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1978)

prophets and their sometimes bizarre behavior was viewed by the society as an authentic means of communicating Yahweh's words.

"All these prophets- understood as exceptional spiritguided people not dismissed by their society as mad- possess clear social meanings and values in their own context... It remains likely that in some way the prophetic movement took its rise from within cultic institutions (with their asserted monopoly over the voice of Yahweh), but soon achieved enough institutional and ideological independence to stand on its own- both in communication and at odds with the older established sectors of society."<sup>67</sup>

Very often, in the midst of their ecstatic prophetic experience, the prophets manifest the same behaviors as one, who in other circumstances, is considered to be mentally ill by Biblical standards. The question remains, at what point does the behavior of going naked cross the line from normative, prophetic behavior to טמא?

In 1 Sam 19:24 Saul seems to have crossed that line:

19 וַיֵּךְ

לְשָׂאֵל לְאַמֵּר הֵן יוֹד עֲנִיחַ וּמִצִּיחַ עָרָה: 20 וַיִּשְׁלַח שְׂאֵל טַלְאִים

לְסַחַח אֶחָדָם וַיֵּרָא אֵת לְהַסָּח הַגִּבִּימִים וּבָאִים וְשֹׂמְרֵי עֵד

נֶכֶד עֲלֵיהֶם וַיֵּהָיֶה עַל-טַלְאֵי שְׂאֵל רֹחַ אֱלֹהִים וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם

הַפֶּה: 21 וַיֵּדוּ לְשָׂאֵל וַיִּשְׁלַח טַלְאִים אֲחֵרִים וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה

וְסָפֵי שְׂאֵל וַיִּשְׁלַח טַלְאִים שְׁלִשִׁים וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה: 22 וַיֵּלֶךְ

אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה

אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה

וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה

וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה

וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה וַיִּתְּבֹא אֵם הַפֶּה

<sup>67</sup>Norman K. Gottwald The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) Pp. 306,307

John Bright writes of Saul "Always of a volatile temperament capable of frenzies of excitement (10:9-13; 11:6f), it appears that as pressure was put on him he became increasingly disturbed in mind, swinging like a pendulum between moments of lucidity and black moods in which, incapable of intelligent action, he indulged in behavior calculated to alienate even those closest to him. Before the end Saul was probably no longer quite sane."<sup>68</sup> Lindblom asserts that this ecstasy "was collective and contagious. How effective the ancient narrator imagined the contagious power of the ecstasy to be, we can see from what he tells us about the messengers whom Saul sent to David. Three times the messengers were sent; but all three groups fell into ecstasy at the mere sight of a company of ecstatic prophets."<sup>69</sup> In this instance,

"prophetic behavior is seen as uncontrolled and incapacitating. Furthermore, in the overall context of these narratives, the traditional question "Is Saul too among the prophets?" has a new answer. The reader already knows why Saul exhibits stereotypically uncontrolled, violent prophetic behavior. He is possessed by an evil spirit which is driving him mad (1 Sam 18:10-11). The answer to the question is therefore, "No, Saul is no prophet; he is insane."<sup>70</sup>

In Jer. 25:16 the hitpoel form of the verb הָלַל is paralleled with the hitpoel form of the verb הָלַל; "to reel to and fro (like a drunkard)" (BDB pp 172) or "To retch" (JPS). The one who is הָלַל is likened to one who is drunk to the point of vomiting. This implies a loss of physical and mental control.

Likewise, in Jer. 51:7:

<sup>68</sup> Bright A History of Israel Pp. 186-187

<sup>69</sup> J. Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel Pp. 48

<sup>70</sup> Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel Pp. 183



7 כוס יין ביד ידו יצא ששברה כל הארץ

כינה שמה נשים על בן יתחללו נשים

8 פתאום נפלה בבבל וישבר היכלו עליה

קח צרי לסכאונה אולי תרפא

9 רפאנו ורפנו אתה בבבל ולא תרפא

"Babylon is a gold cup in the hand of Yahweh. The whole earth was drunk of her wine, the nations drank and because of this the nations יתחללו. Suddenly, Babylon has fallen and is shattered. Shout (?) over her. Get balm for her wounds, perhaps she can be healed. We tried to heal Babylon but she was incurable." Again, the nations become יתחללו from drinking too much wine. In this example, those who are יתחללו behave as though drunk and are considered to be ill. Babylon, who was the first to be infected with the disease transmitted it to the other nations through physical contact (sharing the wine glass). Both Babylon and the other nations are now incurably ill from this contagious disease.

Although Jer. 51:7-8 was clearly intended as metaphor and not intended to be taken literally, the verse still lends insight into how mental illness was viewed. Frequently, used in conjunction with drunkenness, madness seems to have been defined here as a loss of control over the body and mind. The distinction between being drunk and being mad is cloudy and perhaps drunkenness was even viewed as temporary insanity. As for the metaphoric sense of the verse, the metaphor of a country being mentally ill, contagious and incurable only works if there exists, in the society, just such a concept of mental illness.

It is interesting to note that in the Mari letters Queen Shibtu writes to her husband about a man and a woman whom she asked to tell her the future

regarding her husband's upcoming military campaign. To expedite the future-telling process Queen Shibtu writes "I plied (them with drink)." Here, the connotation of drunkenness is reversed. Queen Shibtu harnesses the power of alcohol to bring about the shared symptomology of drunkenness, madness and prophecy with the positive outcome of accepted prophecy instead of illness which was viewed negatively. Likewise Jeremiah describes his reaction to receiving prophecy from Yahweh:

וְלִבִּי כְּסֵדֶי רַחֲמֵי יְהוָה לֹא יִצְמָחוּ

הֵיחֵי כְּאִישׁ שָׁמֹר וְכַגֵּבֶר צָבָרָן נָם

סַפְּנִי יִזְחַל וּסְפָנִי דִבְרֵי קִדְשֶׁךָ

"Regarding the prophets: My heart is crushed within me, All my bones are trembling; I have become like a drunken man, like a man overcome with wine Because of Adonai and His holy words."

Like intoxicants, music was also used as a stimulus for inducing prophetic trance. In 1 Sam 5-6 Saul is told he will encounter a band of prophets:

5 אַחֲרַי בְּנֵי חִבְלֵי הַמָּוֶל יִהְיוּ

אִישׁ־שֵׁם וְגִבּוֹר פִּלְשֹׁתִים וְיֵהִי לְבָנָם שֵׁם הָאֵלֶּיךָ וְיִשְׁמְעוּךָ חֶבֶל וְגִבּוֹרִים

יָרִידִים מִתְּהַבֵּה וְלִפְנֵיהֶם נֶגֶל וְזָף וְחֹלֶלֶל וְכֹזֵר וְהָפֵה סַחֲבָאִים:

6 וְעִלְתָּה עֲלֵיהֶם רֹחַ יְהוָה וְהִצְטִיק עִמָּם וְהִפְכֵתָם לְאִישׁ אֲחֵר:

"After that go to Gibeah of God where the Philistine deputy is, there as you enter the city you will meet a band of prophets coming down from the high place preceded by lyres, timbrels, flutes and harps and they will סַחֲבָאִים. The spirit of Yahweh will grip you and you will הִצְטִיק with them and you will become another person."

Here, the the hitpeel form of *חָבַה* results in the one who "acts like a prophet" "becoming another person" through the use of music. Likewise, in 2 Kgs 3:15 Elisha was asked to help end a drought. He ordered a musician to be

brought, Yahweh's "hand came upon him" and he found water.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, in 1 Sam 19:9 the ruach ra'ah overcame Saul as he was sitting and listening to David play the lyre.

Likewise, in 2 Kgs 3:15 Elisha uses music to bring about a trance state in which he is able to find water for the kings of Moab, Judah and Israel

15 וַעֲזָה קַח־לִי טַבָּחַ וְהָיָה כִּנּוּן וְהָיָה נֶחֱלֹם וְהָיָה עָלַי יָד.  
יִרְמֵה 16 וְאָמַר כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה הַחֹל הַזֶּה וְכִים וְכִים 17 כִּי  
כֹה אָמַר יְהוָה לֹא תִרְאֶה רֶחַק וְלֹא תִרְאֶה אִשָּׁם וְהַחֹל הַזֶּה אֶפְלֹא  
מִים וְשִׁחִיתִם אֹתָם וְכִסְיֵיכֶם וְכִרְתִּיכֶם:

"..Now then, bring me a musician. And while he played the hand of Yahweh came upon him (Elisha). And he said "thus said Yahweh: this wadi shall be full of pools. For thus said Yahweh: you will not see wind and you will not see rain but this wadi will be full of water and you and your cattle and your pack animals will drink."

Elisha expressly call for music to induce communication with Yahweh. During his conversation with Jehosaphat Elisha acts the part of the primadonna telling Jehosaphat to use his own prophets to find water, finally acquiescing to help because "were it not that I respect king Jehosaphat of Judah I wouldn't look at you or notice you." It would seem that Elisha is looking for recognition that he is Yahweh's true prophet who alone is able to invoke Yahweh and bring about miracles.

Music and intoxicants can produce the behaviors associated with prophecy. This behaviors are neither positive or negative in and of themselves. Their

<sup>71</sup> J. Lindblom, Prophecy in Ancient Israel Pp. 58

context is the deciding factor in whether drunkenness or self-induced ecstasy is an illness or a normative means for receiving divine communication.

In Jer. 46:9 and Nahum 2:5 חלל is used in the same way as חסוע is used in II Kings 9:20; "to drive like a madman". Jeremiah's prophecy describes the battle between The armies of Egypt under pharaoh Neco and Babylon under king Nebuchaddnezzar. At the scene of the battle the Egyptian army is retreating and both sides are entangled in the mayhem of war. Yahweh exclaims through Jeremiah:

עלו החסועים ויהללו חרכב וצא המבורים

"Advance (get up) horses! ויהללו chariots! Let the warriors go forth!"

In this case, ויהללו means for the chariot to advance as one does in a war (i.e. charge!). One would assume this means to drive recklessly. The connection between this figurative use of ויהללו and the figurative use of חסוע is seen in II Kings 20:9 and in Nahum 2:5. In Nahum the chariots ויהללו in the heat of battle amidst flaming torches and an army advancing "like a flood." Like חסוע, חלל connotes driving with no regard for danger. The fact that both hebrew words share figurative meanings as well as literal points to them being two words which mean essentially the same thing. The Israelites had more than one way of saying that someone was crazy (literally or figuratively) which points to it not being foreign or unusual as a concept.

The prophecy of Isaiah 44 speaks of Yahweh as supreme and omnipotent. Idols have no power; it is Yahweh alone who created and controls the universe. To make clear how powerful Yahweh is Isaiah says in verses 24-25:

24 בְּאֵזֶר יָדָיו יִצְרֵם וְיִצְרֵם

אֵלֶּם יִצְרֵם לֵאלֹהֵי

לֵאלֹהֵי יִצְרֵם לֵאלֹהֵי יִצְרֵם

25 פֶּסֶק אֵלֶּה הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּל

הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּל הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּל:

"Thus said Yahweh your redeemer, who formed you in the womb: It is I Yahweh who made everything, who stretched out the heavens and, alone, spread out the earth. Who annuls the omens of diviners and הָאֵלֶּל diviners (JPS, "augurs") who turns the wise back and makes their knowledge foolish." According to Anchor Bible "He frustrates the signs of soothsayers, and makes fools of diviners. He upsets sages and makes nonsense of their wisdom."

Although the Hebrew of this passage is difficult to understand, it does contain some information regarding הָאֵלֶּל as a synonym for שֹׁמֵעַ. The שֹׁמֵעַ (translated as "diviners" by JPS, the Hebrew "boasts" according to Anchor Bible) is a corruption from שֹׁמֵעַ from the Akkadian "baru" or "prophet".<sup>72</sup> "The *baru* priest is known from Akkadian literature, and the text is restored from this word. The sage was the professional wise man, a counselor and spokesman of traditional wisdom."<sup>73</sup>

In each phrase the diviner or sage is one who normally has above average insight or intellectual capacities within the Israelite society. These are the people to whom the average Israelite looks for advice. Like the wisdom of the sages, which is turned to nonsense, the diviner הָאֵלֶּל. In presumably both cases the diviner and the sage lose their ability to think. Anchor Bible reads their passage differently. Second Isaiah is refuting the art of divination, popular in Mesopotamia and contrary to the idea that the course of history is governed by and Yahweh and made known only to His true prophets.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>72</sup> A.L. Oppenheim The Assyrian Dictionary vol 2, (Chicago 1965) Pp. 121-125

<sup>73</sup> John L. McKenzie S.J. The Anchor Bible: Second Isaiah (New York: Doubleday, 1968) Pp. 73

Jer. 50:38 seems to use חָלַל in a similar fashion as Is. 44:25, but by itself the verse yields little information as to the meaning of the word. Likewise, the three other examples of חָלַל (Ecc 2:2, 7:7, Ps. 109:9) do not add to our understanding of the verb. חָלַל is used frequently in Ecclesiastes as an antonym for wisdom (Ecc 1:7, 2:12, 7:25, 9:3, 10:13). Like עָוֵן, חָלַל is paralleled with blindness (Ecc 2:12). In this passage Ibn Ezra explains that חָלַל is akin to drunkenness, madness and greed; all behaviors which imply a loss of control. As for חָלַל as a synonym for עָוֵן, there are no other examples of its use in the Bible besides the two which we have already noted as parallels with עָוֵן.

As we have seen, the word עָוֵן, as well as its two synonyms, can connote mental illness both literally and figuratively. It can be a physical ailment which can be chronic and/or incurable. עָוֵן can set in as a result of intolerable mental or physical pain. It is, and is accompanied by such symptoms as loss of control over body and/or mind, ranting, dreaming and anti-social behavior. On a figurative level, a עָוֵן is someone who acts like a prophet, follows deviant social practices or acts like a drunk. In both the former and the latter usage, עָוֵן is a pejorative term. In its most figurative sense, עָוֵן means someone who behaves (or more specifically, drives) recklessly. As for the two synonyms of עָוֵן, they seem to be extremely close in meaning, so much so, that it would seem that the term was common enough in Biblical Hebrew to have three synonymous expressions.

Now that we have explored the levels of meaning of the root עָוֵן and the behaviors associated with it let us examine prophetic behavior in ancient Israel as well as comparative material from the ancient near east. It is

<sup>74</sup> John L. McKenzie S.J. The Anchor Bible: Second Isaiah Pp. 73



interesting to note that the category of **שׂוטה** in rabbinic literature bears a striking resemblance to **שׂוטה** behavior. The **שׂוטה** is one who is disqualified from being a legal principal or agent on the grounds that he is mentally incapacitated (Shulchan Aruch H.M. 188b). Hagigah 4a asks "Who is the **שׂוטה** ? One who goes out at night alone, spends the night in the cemetery, tears off his clothes or destroys what is given to him." The **שׂוטה** is unaware of his dysfunction (Shabbat 13b) and is compared to a blind person (Gittin 23a). According to Ketubot 48a the **שׂוטה** is "one who departs without knowing it."

Perhaps the **שׂוטה** was a prototype for the later **שׂוטה**? Like the **שׂוטה** the **שׂוטה** is compared to someone who is blind and both the **שׂוטה** and the **שׂוטה** tear off their clothes (1 Sam 19:24, Job 12:17-20, Radak on 2 Kgs 9:11). In addition, Yahweh instructs Isaiah to take off his clothes in imitation of the Assyrian victory over Egypt and Cush (20:1-6). Otto Kaiser notes that nakedness was "...the mark of prisoners and fugitives."<sup>75</sup> In Micah 1:8 the prophet exclaims:

8 עלֹאֵל אֶפְסֹדָה וְהִלֵּילָה אֵלַיָּה שִׁילָל [שִׁלָּל] וְעָרֹם

אֶעֱרֶה כַּסְפִּי כְּחֵלֶם וְהָבֵל כְּחֹמֶת עֵרָה

9 כִּי אֵשׁהּ סִבּוּחָהּ כִּי בָאָה עַד־יְהוּדָה

וַעַד עַד־שָׁעַר עָמִי עַד־יְרוּשָׁלַם׃

"Because of this I will lament and wail; I will go stripped and naked. I will lament as sadly as the jackals, as mournfully as the ostriches. For her wound is incurable, it has reached Judah, it has spread to the gate of my people in Jerusalem."

Like the examples of **שׂוטה** we saw in Deut 28:28, Hos 9:7, Zach 12:4, the "anxiety" brought on by the sin of the people is likened to an illness. One of

<sup>75</sup> Otto Kaiser *Isaiah 13-39: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1974) Pp. 114

the many symptoms of this illness is going naked as in the case of Micah.

As for the other symptoms of *חוסר*, they all connote a loss of self-awareness, seizures, catatonia and a general disregard for one's physical well-being. Like the *נביא* of the Bible and the *חנניה* of the Talmud, other ancient near eastern cultures had ecstatic prophets who exhibited the equivalent of *נביא* behavior. According to Malamat the diviner-prophets of Mari are most akin to the Israelite prophets although he also identifies the *ragimu* (fem. *ragintu*), "the pronouncer," "speaker" as being a prophetic equivalent from the Neo-Assyrian period.<sup>76</sup>

Although Malamat identifies striking similarities between the ecstatic prophets of the Mari letters and those of ancient Israel, he cautions

"..it is difficult to determine the nature of the analogy between the prophecy at Mari and that in Israel, the two being set apart by a gap of more than six centuries. Furthermore, there are no intermediary links whatsoever. It would be therefore premature to adopt the view that Mari presents the prototype of prophecy in Israel. But one cannot belittle this earliest manifestation of intuitive prophecy among West Semitic tribes at Mari, which is still an enigma."<sup>77</sup>

The twenty-eight Mari Letters contain approximately thirty-five prophecies. The *Muhhum* (fem. *Muhhutum*) and the *Apilum* (fem. *apiltum*) are the best known professional prophets at Mari.<sup>78</sup>

"The *Muhhum* as the etymology indicates was some sort of

<sup>76</sup> Abraham Malamat, "A Forerunner of Biblical Prophecy: The Mari Documents," *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, Edited by Patrick D. Miller JR., Paul D. Hanson, S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) Pp. 35

<sup>77</sup> Malamat, Pp.37

<sup>78</sup> Malamat, Pp.38

ecstatic or frenetic... The nominal form designates bodily defects and is functionally like the Hebrew gittel form used in such words as iwwer ("blind"), pisseah ("lame") and gibben ("hunchback"). Thus this type of prophet, because of his peculiar behavior was perceived of as a madman, similar to the biblical mesugga, a term used occasionally as a synonym of nabi... we should add now the instances of the verb immahu derived from the same root as muhhum. The verb is used in the N stem resembling nibba (see also hitnabbe) in the Bible and has the ingressive meaning "become insane," "went into a trance."<sup>79</sup>

Like the Israelite prophets, the Mari prophets were known to the royal establishment and were paid some heed. Finet makes a distinction between the mahhum/muhhum, who was who was an enlightened and ecstatic prophet, and the lumahhum who was a highly placed priest.<sup>80</sup> Finet also notes that in a Mari letter we have mentioned previously, Sibtu firsts asks the man and the woman for an oracle regarding her husband and then asks for an oracle regarding her husband's opponent. The opponent serves as the "control group" in this rigorous and scientific method of predicting the future.

At Mari, despite the prophet's seemingly low place on the social scale, the prophet was sought out by the royal family for advice in matters of state:

<sup>1</sup>/a-na be-ti-ia <sup>2</sup>/q-ib-bi-ma mi d IM-du-ri-ma <sup>4</sup>[GEM] E-ka-a-ma <sup>5</sup>/a-

<sup>79</sup> Malamet, Pp.39

<sup>80</sup>A. Finet "Un Cas de Cleidonomancie a Mari" From G. van Driel et al (eds) Zikir Sumim: Assyriological Studies Presented to F.R. Kraus on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday (Leiden: Brill, 1982) Pp. 52

*pī-lum i-na E a [H]i-sa-me-tim<sup>6</sup> I-si-a-hu su-um-su<sup>7</sup> [it-be ma um-ma-  
 mi<sup>8</sup> [s]a wa-ar-ki-ka-ma<sup>9</sup> / kar-ka i-ka-lu<sup>10</sup> / u ki a-as-ka<sup>11</sup> / i-sa-elt-  
 tu-u (1)<sup>12</sup> [it-ti-ka la x a y a im<sup>13</sup> [(x)]\_ne-e-tim<sup>14</sup> / b[e-el a-wa-ti-ka  
 15 / in-ŋe-su-u (2)<sup>16</sup> / a-ŋa-ku-ma ka-ab-sa-ak-su-nu-ti (break)*

"[S]peak [to] my lord: [Th]us Addu-duri your [maid]-servant. [A  
 prophet. Isi-ahu by name. [a]rose in the temple of [H]isametum and  
 (spoke) thus: "only your [f]ollowers will eat your [ram] [and dri]nk  
 your [cup] ...your [ad]versaries will be [sl]it open. I alone have  
 trampled them down."

The author of the letter, Addu-duri, wrote and received other  
 letters found at Mari and was a woman of some importance at  
 Mari.<sup>81</sup> Although Addu-duri considers the prophecy of Isiahu  
 important enough to the future of the nation to relate it to the king,  
 Zimri-lim, the title given Isiahu is used at Mari of slaves.<sup>82</sup> It would  
 seem that the social status of the Mari prophet can be fluid, much  
 like the Israelite prophet. At times Jeremiah is a key player in the  
 royal court. At other times he is a fugitive. The anointing of Jehu  
 by one of the "sons of the prophets" could not be more serious  
 despite the fact that he is dismissed as *ṣṣṣ*.

The *ṣṣṣ* (particularly as characterized in Deut 28) the *Muhhum*  
 and the *ṣṣṣ* function in a strikingly similar fashion. Each has the  
 connotation of a disability. The *ṣṣṣ* and the *Muhhum* also seem to  
 be synonymous for "prophet." The prophet then could be viewed as  
 being both a highly functional who at times wielded some degree of

<sup>81</sup> W.L. Moran "New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy" in  
Biblica (Rome: Biblical Pontifical Institute, 1969) Pp. 34

<sup>82</sup> W.L. Moran Pp. 35

authority and yet could also be viewed as sick and ineffectual depending on the circumstance.

## Conclusions

Our examination of the root  $\text{מח}$  and its synonyms has demonstrated that ancient Israelite society did have a concept similar to our modern notion of mental illness, although it differed from our concept in many respects.  $\text{מח}$  is a disease or disability that does impair functioning. Unlike our modern notion of mental illness  $\text{מח}$  is contagious. Furthermore, deviant behavior as a response to stressful events would not be diagnosed as mental illness, but would be seen as  $\text{מח}$  as in the case of Hosea 9:7. The symptoms of  $\text{מח}$  are characterized by asocial behavior and general disregard for safety. It can be accompanied by seizures, paranoia, exhibitionism and loss of motor control. This person who has contracted  $\text{מח}$  shares the same behavioral characteristics as the ecstatic prophet.

The concept of a disease or disability which shares parallel behavior with prophecy is well attested in comparative ancient near eastern material. Although functional and sometimes powerful members of society, the ecstatic prophets of Mari were considered to be mentally ill themselves.<sup>88</sup> The terms  $\text{מח}$ , Muhhum and  $\text{מח}$  all derive from grammatical forms related to categories of illness and disability.

The data indicate that the extent to which a true prophet exhibits ecstatic behavior can vary. All true prophets do experience a "call" from

<sup>88</sup> Malamat Pp. 39



Yahweh and receive the basic auditions or visions from Yahweh to be communicated to the people. As we have noted earlier, Lindblom understands visions and auditions to mean "visual and auditory perceptions received in trance or ecstasy or a mental state approximating thereto. These perceptions are not caused by any object in the external world, but arise within the soul."<sup>84</sup> Therefore, there is a minimal ecstatic component to all "true" prophets.

The degree to which a prophet exhibits ecstatic behavior can vary greatly. As we have shown, Ezekiel's behavior might lead the modern psychologist to diagnose him as schizophrenic. Lindblom makes a distinction between ecstatic visions and hallucinations. "A hallucination is a visual, auditory, or other sensory perception which does not correspond to any objective reality in the external world but (and here it differs from vision and audition) is thought to be apprehended by the bodily senses and has all the characteristic features of real perception, although it does not correspond to any external reality."<sup>85</sup>

During Ezekiel's initial call and throughout his ministry he experiences hallucinations. In chapter 3:1-3 it would appear that Ezekiel actually eats the scroll he is given by Yahweh and physically experiences the "taste as sweet as honey." In 3:14 Ezekiel feels himself transported by the hand of God. Similarly, Ezekiel feels God carry him by the hair from his home to Jerusalem.

By contrast, other prophets such as Obadiah experience only the basic auditions necessary to receive prophecy. Certainly a minimal amount of ecstatic behavior was requisite for the prophet. The evidence from Ezekiel's

<sup>84</sup> Lindblom Pp. 122

<sup>85</sup> Lindblom Pp. 123

reported experiences seem to show that there was no limit to the amount or intensity of ecstatic experience a prophet could undergo. I would add that although ecstasy was an expected stereotypical behavior for a prophet it was not necessarily viewed positively. That negative reaction to ecstatic behavior did not matter to the prophet or his audience.

Since the mentally ill and the ecstatic prophet exhibit the same stereotypical behaviors it is crucial to understand the criteria by which the ancient Israelites deemed one person a prophet and the other a lunatic. We have already established that the nature and intensity of the prophet's ecstatic experience does not seem to be a criterion to distinguish between the prophet and the mentally ill. In some cases it is clear that the *na'um* has no connection to prophecy whatsoever, for example, in the case of David feigning madness. As we have noted earlier, in the case of Jeremiah, *na'um* takes on the meaning of "false prophet" that is to say, "someone who behaves like a prophet." Therefore we must distinguish between two kinds of *na'um*: 1. A carrier of a contagious and disabling disease 2. A person who calls himself a prophet, exhibits the behaviors associated with prophecy and *na'um*, but who is neither ill nor recognized as a true prophet.

In cases such as this, where the prophet is *na'um*, he is even more dangerous than a carrier of the disease of the same name. If a prophet is *na'um* it means that he claims to speak in the name of Yahweh, but is not Yahweh's true prophet. From the ancient perspective, it was considered dangerous to take actions that were not acceptable to the deity. Knowing the will of the deity through his mediator, the prophet, was crucial in all matters of state policy. As we have seen in the story of Balaam, the Mari letters to Zimri-lim and in the anointing of Jehu by one of Elisha's disciples, governments often looked to prophets and diviners in important matters of

state. So, for example, a leader who follows the advice of the wrong prophet before going into battle would be committing suicide as in the case of Ahab at Ramoth-Gilead ( 1 Kgs 22). Furthermore, as we have mentioned before, with the exception of the Elijah-Elisha stories, in the time before Amos, no prophecy is directed to anyone outside the royal court. In addition, for the Israelite, false prophesying is associated with idolatry and is a capital offense (Deut 13).

In Deut 18:9-22 Yahweh explains that He will continually raise up prophets like Moses to serve as intermediaries between the people and Yahweh. From the deuteronomist's perspective, there could only be one true prophet in any generation and that prophet would be on the model of Moses. The mosaic prophet is not a prophet by trade rather, he is called by Yahweh to deliver His message to the Israelites. The mosaic prophet is in the service of Yahweh, not in the service of the Israelites, and as a result often communicates messages contrary to their wishes.<sup>86</sup>

According to Kaufmann, the Israelites believed in the system by which Yahweh would send prophets like Moses. Therefore, the prophet's power was not individual but was derived from being part of the system of mosaic prophecy.<sup>87</sup> It was the Israelites themselves who invested the system of mosaic prophecy with authority. Deut 18:16-19 describes the tradition that this system was instituted at the request of the people. It was the Israelites who asked Yahweh for an intermediary during the theophany at Horeb. As a result, Yahweh agrees to appoint prophets like Moses:

וְלֹא יִהְיֶה אִתְּכֶם כֹּהֵן וְנָבִיא  
לְכָל עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל וְיִהְיֶה  
אִתְּכֶם כֹּהֵן וְנָבִיא לְכָל עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל

<sup>86</sup> Kaufmann Pp. 214

<sup>87</sup> Kaufmann Pp. 214

בְּמִוֶּךְ וְחֶסֶד דְּבַר יְהוָה וְדָבַר אֱלֹהִים אֵלָּה כֹּל אֲשֶׁר אָמַרְתִּי  
 19 וְהָיָה רִאשִׁית אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשְׁמָע אֶל דְּבַר יְהוָה בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה  
 אֲדַרֵּשׁ מֵעַתָּה:

"And I will put My words in his mouth and he will speak to them all that I command him. And if anyone fails to heed the words he speaks in my name, I Myself will call him to account."

The question remains, how did the Israelites distinguish between the one, true mosaic prophet of their generation and the *מְשֻׁגָּעִים*? This question was relevant to the ancient Israelite as to the modern student of Bible. The ancient Israelite faced a dilemma. How was he or she to know whether a prophet who claimed to speak in Yahweh's name really received a message from the deity? Jer 28 reports that in the fifth month of that year a prophet named Hananiah and Jeremiah give conflicting prophecies. Jeremiah accuses Hananiah of false prophecy and predicts that Hananiah will die that year as a punishment for lying to the people and urging disloyalty to God. Hananiah dies in the seventh month of that year. We have no data concerning the two months between the time of Jeremiah's prediction and Hananiah's death. During those two months how were the people to know whether to follow Hananiah's oracle of peace or Jeremiah's oracle of doom? How would the Israelite know which prophet was the one, true mosaic prophet of their generation and by extension, can we discern whether a canonical prophet was viewed as a true prophet by his contemporaries?

First, to even be considered a mosaic prophet the candidate had to exhibit stereotypical characteristics (i.e. the call; not a prophet by trade; at the command of Yahweh, not the people.) Deut 18:21-22 gets more specific:

"And should you ask yourselves, "How can we know that the oracle was not spoken by the Lord?" If the prophet speaks in the name of the Lord and the oracle does not come true, that oracle was not spoken by the Lord."

As we have already seen, there are cases where canonical prophets make predictions that do not come true. Daniel attempts to harmonize such a case in chapter nine. From Daniel's perspective, Jeremiah is a true, mosaic prophet, yet Jeremiah predicted the exile would last seventy years. Daniel then has a vision and an angel reinterprets Jeremiah's words to mean seventy weeks, not seventy years. Although the problem of Jeremiah's prediction is important to Daniel (who has the benefit of hindsight) it is of little importance to Jeremiah's contemporaries. However long Jeremiah predicts the exile to be, it is still far off enough in the future to have little bearing on whether or not he is accepted as a true prophet by his contemporaries. I would conclude, that whether or not a prophet's oracles are in harmony with historical reality has less to do with the acceptance of those oracles by the Israelites than Deut 18 would have us believe. For Daniel, Jeremiah has already been authenticated as the mosaic prophet of his generation. The question remains, is there any data that would point to Jeremiah's having been authenticated as such for his contemporaries?

Deuteronomy 13:2-4 points to what seems to be the most convincing, and potentially misleading evidence for true prophecy:

2 כִּי יִסֹּם בְּקִרְבְּךָ וְנִיחָא אֶל חֵלֶם חֲלֹם וְנִחָא אֵלֶיךָ אוֹחַ אֶל  
מִוֶּפֶת 3 וְנִחָא הָאוֹחַ וְהַמִּוֶּפֶת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֵלֶיךָ לֵאמֹר וְלָקַח אֲחֵרִי  
אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִדְעַתֶּם וְעִבְדֶּם: 4 לֹא תִשְׁמַע אֶל  
דִּבְרֵי תַנְבִּיאָה הַזֶּה אֶל חֵלֶם חֲלֹם הַזֶּה הֵוא כִּי מִוֶּפֶת יִרְוֶה  
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲחֵרִים לְדִעַת הַשִּׁמְעָם אֲבָנִים אֲדָמָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּכָל  
לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל וְנִשְׁמָע:



" If there arises among you a prophet or a dream diviner who gives you a sign or portent and the sign and portent come true. And he says to you "come let us worship other gods" whom you have not experienced, Do not listen to the words of this prophet or dream diviner. For YHWH is testing you to see whether you really love love YHWH with all your heart and soul."

The *nāia* and the *ḥik* seem to be the most convincing and tangible evidence of true prophecy. Wonder working is more prevalent among earlier prophets such as Elijah and Elisha than among literary prophets and is traceable directly back to Moses. Like ecstasy, wonder-working is a stereotypical prophetic behavior. In Ex 7 Moses and Pharaoh's magicians compete at producing marvels (*nāia*). Eventually, as the competition progresses, Moses produces marvels that Pharaoh's magicians can not replicate or prevent. Moses prevails as the true prophet. Because the *nāia* and the *ḥik* are so powerfully convincing Yahweh instructs the Israelites to listen carefully to the prophet's message. Any prophet who advances the cause of idolatry is patently false no matter how convincing his stereotypical prophetic behavior.

Thus far we have seen several methods to detect a false prophet. What remains is the problem of how to distinguish a false prophet: 1.who's message is not idolatrous 2. Who's prophecies are reasonably believable at the time they are pronounced and 3. who exhibits convincing stereotypical prophetic behavior.

I would conclude that there is not enough evidence about the criteria the Israelites would have used to distinguish a false prophet from a true prophet under the circumstances outlined above. As we noted earlier, Jeremiah suggests that prophets proclaiming messages of peace are less likely to be true



but Jeremiah himself delivers such a message. Furthermore, we only know that Jeremiah was viewed as a true prophet in retrospect. Certainly, he had a strong support group and at times was close to the government. The data are inconclusive as to whether Jeremiah was viewed as a true prophet by the majority of his contemporaries once he fell out of favor with the government.

Both King Ahab and Queen Shibtu in the Mari letters, try to gather as much prophetic data as possible before making important security decisions. In Queen Shibtu's case she does not accept an oracle as favorable until it is corroborated by that of another prophet(s). Sometimes it is the nature of the *nabi* and *nabim* that is particularly compelling to a king. In 2 Kgs 20, Hezekiah initially receives a prophecy from Isaiah that he will die. Hezekiah prays to Yahweh and Yahweh decides to let Hezekiah live another fifteen years. Hezekiah asks for an sign:

8 וְאִמָּר חֲזִיקָה אֶל־שִׁמְרָה  
 כִּי אִם אֵלֶּיךָ יִרְדָּא יְהוָה לִי וְעָלִיתִי בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בַּיּוֹם  
 9 וְאִמָּר שִׁמְרָה וְהָיָה לְךָ הָאֵלֹהִים מָחָר יְהוָה בִּי יִצְחָק יְהוָה אֱחָדְכֶם  
 אֲשֶׁר דָּפַר הָרֹדֶף הָאֵל עָשָׂה מַעֲלֹת אִם יִשָּׁב עֲשֶׂה מַעֲלֹת:  
 10 וְאִמָּר יְחִיעֶלָה וְכָל לֵצֶל לְנֹשֶׁט עָשָׂה מַעֲלֹת לֹא לִי יִשָּׁב הָאֵל  
 אֲחֵרִים עָשָׂה מַעֲלֹת: 11 וְיִסְרָא שִׁמְרָה הִבָּא אֶל־יְהוָה וַיִּשָּׁב אֵחָד  
 הָאֵל בְּמַעֲלֹת אֲשֶׁר יָדָה בְּמַעֲלֹת אֲחֵרִים עָשָׂה מַעֲלֹת:

Hezekiah asked Isaiah "What is the sign (*nish*) that YHWH will cure me and I shall go up to the house of YHWH on the third day?" Isaiah replied "This is the sign for you from YHWH that YHWH will do the thing that He has promised. Shall a shadow advance ten steps or recede ten steps?" Hezekiah replied "It is easy for the shadow to lengthen ten steps, but not for the shadow to recede ten steps.." So the prophet Isaiah called to YHWH and He made the shadow which had descended on the dail of Ahaz recede ten steps."

In some cases the *mir* and *neia* are impressive enough to convince a king, but as is particularly evident in the case of Pharaoh and the ten plagues, even the most spectacular signs are only effective on a ruler who is willing to hear an unfavorable message. Therefore, I would conclude that there was no completely reliable test for whether or not a prophet was a true prophet or *naia*. The prophet's contemporaries had only the scant data that we have today upon which to base their analysis of the veracity of a particular prophet's words.

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