THE PROPHET AS MENTOR: A CRUCIAL FACET OF THE BIBLICAL PRESENTATIONS OF MOSES, ELIJAH, AND ISAIAH*

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to the common stereotype of the ancient Israelite prophet as a 'lone ranger', the Old Testament yields a significant amount of evidence that prophets nurtured and were nurtured by supportive social groups within which attention is given particularly to mentoring relationships. This is brought to special focus and emphasis in the Elijah-Elisha materials, but it can also be found in the biblical presentations of other leading prophetic figures, especially Moses and Isaiah. This paper examines these materials for the insights they yield on the matter of the role of the Hebrew prophet as mentor. Some concluding reflections are offered as to how these insights can inform prophetic ministry in the church today.

Keywords: Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, mentor, mentoring, Moses, Old Testament prophecy, prophet.

This paper forms a sequel to my earlier study on the Old Testament prophet that sketched a profile composed of the following facets: the prophet as (1) messenger, (2) minstrel (3) madman, and (4) martyr.1 Here I extend

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the profile, as projected in the concluding note of that study, to a fifth facet: the prophet as mentor.  

In highlighting the mentoring role in Old Testament prophecy, as I am proposing to do in this paper, I am coming against a long-standing stereotype of the Old Testament prophet as a ‘lone ranger’ figure, who stands completely outside of and over against the rest of society as an independent, starkly isolated individual. This stereotype was once an attractive, romanticized notion in modern Western biblical criticism, in a time, no doubt, when rugged individualism, the myth of the solitary hero, and, yes, even TV Westerns like the ‘Lone Ranger’ were more popular.  

Robert Wilson’s book, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, published in 1980, deserves no small part of the credit for uprooting this stereotype in the field of Old Testament studies, for he compiled abundant evidence from Hebrew Scripture for the pervasive and variegated relationships and interdependencies between Hebrew prophecy and the social structures of ancient Israel.  

of the study were presented at the European Pentecostal Theological Association conference in Kolding, Denmark in April 2003 and at the Society for Pentecostal Studies meeting at Marquette University in March 2004.  

2. I credit Janet Everts Powers for giving me the suggestion of extending my study to include an additional section on ‘the prophet as mentor’. My work was already moving in this direction when she proposed the term ‘mentor’ as an appropriately alliterative parallel to the other facets I had developed. The Greek roots of the term notwithstanding (cf. Mentor, the friend and advisor of Odysseus in Homer’s *Odyssey*), ‘mentor’ is an apt term in contemporary discourse for the role that I am addressing in this paper. I do not use the term here according to some precise definition but rather according to general popular usage as an umbrella term associated with person-to-person eldering, discipling, training, teaching, modeling and such.  

3. A helpful summary of modern biblical scholarship (up to the 1970’s) on the OT prophets that points to this romantic Western view of their stark individuality and originality can be found in Ronald E. Clements, *One Hundred Years of Old Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1976), ch. 4.  

4. Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980). Wilson’s introductory review of scholarship on OT prophecy’s relation to ancient Israelite society (pp. 1-19) notes the important antecedents for his own contribution in the form-criticism of H. Gunkel, S. Mowinckel, and others that first began to raise the issue of social context (*Sitz im Leben*) and in the tradition criticism that first began to appreciate the role of distinct social groups that transmitted the prophetic traditions. See also the more recent and concise summary of the matter by Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), pp. 622-25, who sees the tradition criticism of Gerhard von Rad as particularly influential in leading up to Wilson’s sociological work.
Yet the stereotype still persists in many quarters in the church today, especially in discussions where OT prophecy is contrasted to NT prophecy. Here one sees the dispensational contrast that is overdrawn between the solitary prophet of OT times and a much more corporately interrelated and communally integrated form of prophecy for the church of the NT and for today. This line of thinking is firmly positioned to miss all the ways, such as Wilson has shown, that OT prophecy supports and is supported by ancient Israel's community life and social relationships. The result of this line is a view of the OT prophet that is both misinformed and incapable of informing, as a more accurate picture could, the communal relationships and dimensions of prophecy that are relevant to Christian prophecy even for the church today.

Wilson presented a broad view of the social connectedness of the Hebrew prophets. I propose to add to the discussion by focusing more narrowly on the OT prophet's role in mentoring. And whereas Wilson undertook a sociological analysis of the OT data, I pursue a literary-canonical approach to the prophetic literature. The concern for mentoring is not only present in the literature but prominent to the point of making it arguably one of the constitutive facets of the OT prophetic vocation. Its prominence is manifest by its being featured in the canonical presentations of the three leading prophetic figures in the OT: (1) Moses, the foundational prophetic figure in the canon's foundational section—the Torah, (2) Elijah, the leading prophet of the Former Prophets, and (3) Isaiah, the preeminent prophet of the Latter Prophets. This study will now proceed to look at the mentoring theme as it appears in relation to each of these prophets in turn.

We begin, as the Hebrew canon would naturally prompt us, with the Torah's presentation of Moses. While Moses fills a broad spectrum of leadership roles in Israel's formational phase, the Torah's most explicit projection of his identity is as the prophet par excellence—the exemplar for all Hebrew prophets to come. "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your midst" (Deut. 18.15), says Moses to Israel as he recalls what God had said to him on Horeb: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kindred, and will put my words in his mouth."
mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him’ (Deut. 18.18). While this programmatic text registers respect for the notion that the source of the OT prophet’s vocation rests ultimately and singularly in divine choice and initiative, beyond the jurisdiction of family inheritance, human appointment, or social instigation, it also at the same time shows respect for the idea of Moses’ function as human model, even if this does not yet involve a direct mentoring role.

Something a step closer to the latter can be seen in the other classic Torah text on the succession of prophets after Moses, found in Numbers 11. Here we have Moses’ famous wish that takes on the force of solemn prophetic prediction, ‘Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit upon them!’ (Num. 11.29). Again we can note the emphasis on divine agency; it is the LORD who would put his Spirit upon them. Yet the narrative leading up to this pronouncement begins with God initiating this line of action in a way that brings his involvement into close association with that of Moses. He tells Moses,

Gather seventy elders...and bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, so that they may stand there with you. Then I will come down and talk with you there, and I will take of the spirit that is upon you and will put it upon them. Then they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you might not bear it yourself alone (Num. 11.16-17).

This statement seems to go out of its way to emphasize to Moses that these elders would experience this call to prophetic activity ‘with you’, repeating this otherwise superfluous phrase two times. It is not only that their prophesying would originate with the spirit that is taken from that which is upon Moses, but also that their prophesying would continue in close proximity and connection to the attending presence of Moses. On the other hand, one might see this latter emphasis offset by the subsequent turn in the story when two of the seventy elders are exonerated by Moses after they continue prophesying in the camp outside the presence of Moses (Num. 11.25-29). Yet this only serves to set up the story’s culminating and forward-looking declaration by Moses that acknowledges that the prophetic vocation is something that is not always to be tied immediately to Moses’ physical presence and historical time.

The element in this story in Numbers 11 that is most pertinent to the proposal at hand is that the prophetic role is here presented in direct association with eldering. The prophetic call is directed specifically to a group

8. Translations from Hebrew Scripture in this paper are my own, unless otherwise noted.
of ‘elders’, who in exercising this call will be assisting Moses explicitly in the task of ‘bear(ing) the burden of the people’—an expression that, in light of Torah usage elsewhere, quintessentially represents the parental, eldering role. Thus we see elders being raised up to prophesy as a means of extending their function as elders.

Thus this passage weighs significantly for my thesis in the way it presents (1) a clear OT precedent for prophetic community in terms of a corporate experiencing of the prophetic vocation, (2) the first indications of prophetic mentoring, (3) and a culminating declaration that has the effect of projecting the expectation of such phenomena into the future of God’s people.

The implicit connections between the prophetic vocation and mentoring that appear in Numbers 11 are greatly enhanced in the light of the explicit concern, which runs through the entire Moses macro-narrative, for the teaching and raising up of the next generation. This can be seen in a passage no less pivotal than the Passover story, recorded in Exodus 12. This crucial event turns on the institution of a solemn observance that is framed as an exercise in parental instruction to the children.

And you shall observe this word as an ordinance for you and your children forever... And when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’, you shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the Passover of the LORD, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when he struck the Egyptians and delivered our households’. So the people bowed the head and worshipped. Then the children of Israel went away and did as the LORD commanded Moses and Aaron’ (Exod. 12.24, 26-28).

Yet an even more significant display of this theme of parental faith instruction of the children comes in the last book of Moses, Deuteronomy, where it is the dominant concern from start to finish. Following the book of Numbers, which is itself structured to highlight the shift of focus from the old generation that perished in the wilderness to the new generation that would enter the promised land, Deuteronomy is presented as a grand,

9. Note how the same verb, ‘bear’ (nasa), is used earlier in the same passage (Num. 11.12—Moses says, ‘Did I conceive this whole people? Did I birth them that you should say to me, ‘Bear [nasa] them in your bosom, as a nursing parent carries the suckling child?’) as definitional for the parental responsibility that is taken to characterize the eldering role. See such a usage also in Deut. 1.31.


11. On this and its implications for the entire Pentateuch, see the authoritative work
culminating, divinely inspired effort by Moses to disciple the new generation toward the promised future of God's covenant (1.5; 5.31; 31.19). Moses is an elder who, in the end (as I like to tell my students), becomes a youth minister. He is a father who functions as mentor to the children of Israel. And he does so in a paradigmatic way, for in exercising the mentoring role he also models it and mandates it, explicitly and repeatedly, as the future responsibility and expectation of both this new generation and all subsequent generations of the children of Israel (Deut. 6.7-9; 20-25; 11.19-21; 29.9-15).

While the instructional character of Moses' activity in Deuteronomy is not contested, there would be those who would not see this as especially linked to his prophetic vocation but rather see Moses in Deuteronomy more in the role of teacher or priestly figure responsible for Torah instruction (cf. Deut. 31.9-13). Yet, even though Moses is featured throughout Deuteronomy as the subject of many verbs having to do with teaching, when it comes to the specific nouns used to identify him in the book, it is his role as prophet that is expressly highlighted (Deut. 18.15-18; 34.10). And this goes right to the point: Moses' crowning role in Torah is presented precisely and paradigmatically as that of the prophet as mentor.

This is not to say that mentoring in Deuteronomy is restricted to the prophetic vocation, for Moses clearly expects the priests, elders, and parents of Israel to be actively engaged in this crucial effort. Yet Moses here takes up this task in special relationship to his prophetic call and commission, for the whole message of Moses in Deuteronomy is introduced as something both pedagogical ('Moses began to explain this Torah', so 1.5) and prophetic ('Moses spoke...according to all the LORD commanded of Dennis T. Olson, The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

12. It is not my purpose here to establish this point, seeing it is already a well-established consensus of Deuteronomy scholarship (see, e.g., Dennis T. Olson, Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: A Theological Reading [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994]), who can even insist on seeing the genre of the book as 'catechesis'). My only purpose here is to relate this consensus to the thesis at hand.


14. See Olson, Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses, p. 11 and esp. fn. 10.

15. Cf. also Deut. 33.1, where Moses is called, 'man of God', a term that substitutes for 'prophet' elsewhere in the OT (e.g. 1 Kings 13), and Deut. 34.5, where Moses is called 'servant of the LORD', but in a text that explicitly highlights his status as a prophet.
him', so 1.3). We can see prophecy here in the service of pedagogy, just as we could see prophecy in Numbers 11 in the service of eldering.

Perhaps one last connection between Moses and mentoring should be noted. In Deuteronomy 31 Moses presents Joshua as his successor (vv. 1-3), exhorting Joshua before the people (vv. 7-8), and summoning him, at God's command, to go with him to the 'tent of meeting' where the transaction is completed and sanctioned through an encounter with the presence of God (vv. 14-23). This passage by itself may yield no more than a slight indication of a mentoring relationship. Yet it gains more weight by the way it arcs back to Moses' summoning of the elders in Numbers 11 to the same 'tent of meeting', while also pointing forward to the only other comparable story of leadership succession in Hebrew Scriptures, that of Elijah and Elisha, with its long-noted Moses-Joshua parallels16 that can be found alongside numerous indications of the mentoring relationship. And to this we now turn.

Elijah's presentation in Scripture may yield the strongest example in the OT of the prophet as mentor. In addition to his relationship with Elisha, the protégé with whom Elijah's ministry is inseparably linked in Israel's memory, there is the culminating canonical reference that associates Elijah for all time with the divine aim 'to turn the hearts of the elders to their children and the hearts of the children to their elders' (Mal. 4.6; cf. Lk. 1.17).

It is somewhat ironic that Elijah's legacy would arrive at this end in view of how his story begins. He bursts on the scene of Israel's history in 1 Kings 17 without antecedent or genealogical introduction. We simply and abruptly hear, 'Now Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, spoke to Ahab' (17.1). It appears to me to be without precedent in the OT for a character of such magnitude to be introduced without reference to his father.17 Could it be that Elijah had no father worth referencing? Such

16. See R.P. Carroll, 'The Elijah-Elisha Sagas: Some Remarks on Prophetic Succession', *Vetus Testamentum* 19 (1969), pp. 400-15, and A.W. Jenks, *The Elohist and North Israelite Traditions* (SBLMS, 22; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), p. 95. Among a number of parallel motifs noted is the particularly striking one that presents the successor miraculously crossing the Jordan and then journeying to Jericho. Reinforcing these parallels would be that the successor's name in each case is formed by a divine appellation joined to the root yasha, 'to save' (Joshua—'Yahweh saves' and Elisha—'God saves'); see my *God Saves: Lessons from the Elisha Stories* (JSOTSup, 95; Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1990).

17. One could perhaps find a later example of this magnitude in Daniel. His lack of genealogical identification in the book of Daniel might serve to register the force of the break in familial connection and native identity that the Babylonian captivity was deliberately aiming to carry out, as the story of Daniel 1 seems intent to show.
a thought is reinforced when we hear Elijah saying to God in his moment of despair, ‘Take now my life, O LORD, for I am no better than my fathers’ (1 Kgs 19.4). This at least points to a fathering deficit in Israel—one that Elijah is at once divinely called out of his despair to address in the form of anointing leaders for the next generation, including ‘Elisha, son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah, to be prophet in your place’ (1 Kgs 19.16). So whether the fathering problem in Israel extended to the personal level for Elijah or not, this canonically ‘fatherless’ one proceeds to become Scripture’s primary paragon for restoring fatherhood among God’s people.

Elisha calls Elijah ‘my father, my father’ at their final parting (2 Kgs 2.12), a title that obviously corresponds to ‘the sons of the prophets’ who appear in the background of this event and in the subsequent ministry of Elisha, clearly pointing to the relationship of a prophetic leader among a small group of disciples (2 Kgs 2.3, 5, 7 and 15; 4.1, 38; 5.22; 6.1; 9.1; and cf. 13.14). Identified elsewhere as the one ‘who poured water on Elijah’s hands’ (2 Kgs 3.11—a metaphorical expression that obviously connotes in this context an apprentice relationship), Elisha inherits from Elijah the role of ‘father’ to the ‘sons of the prophets’, and the entire narrative of 2 Kings 2 is plainly designed to highlight this.

What makes 2 Kings 2 even more significant in its bearing on my thesis is the central placement this story of prophetic succession is given in the literary structure of 1 and 2 Kings. It forms the midpoint of not only the Elijah and Elisha materials (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 13) but also the entire Kings corpus, as the literary analysis of George Savran has convincingly shown.18 Prophetic mentoring is thus not merely a peripheral motif but a central concern of the books of Kings and the Elijah-Elisha materials in particular. Centered in a long and largely sad saga of royal succession that finally ends in failure, 2 Kings 2 presents a divinely graced instance of prophetic succession that offers the best model and hope for all Israel finally to succeed—indeed, to experience the ultimate success of succession, which is all about transmitting the sacred inheritance to the next generation.

18. George Savran, ‘1 and 2 Kings’, in R. Alter and F. Kermode (eds.), The Literary Guide to the Bible (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 148-49. Savran sees 2 Kings 2 standing at the midpoint of the Elijah and Elisha stories, which form the Kings corpus’ middle section (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 12), which is itself flanked by an inner frame featuring alternating coverage of the Northern and Southern kingdoms (1 Kings 12–16 and 2 Kings 13–17) and then the outer frame covering the unified kingdom of Solomon on one side (1 Kings 1–11) and the single remaining kingdom of Judah on the other (2 Kings 18–25).
Elisha poses the very issue of the transference of the covenant inheritance in 2 Kings 2 when he asks Elijah, ‘Please let a double portion of your spirit be upon me’ (v. 9). The ‘double portion’, of course, refers to the eldest son’s share of the patriarchal inheritance, according to the standards of patrimonial lineage as represented in Israel’s covenant law (Deut. 21.17). Granted, ‘spirit’ is not the normal ‘stuff’ of the patrimonial inheritance. ‘Spirit’ obviously does not lend itself to being measured and apportioned like property and land. So we have here a figurative application of the ‘double portion’ that specifically pertains to the endowment of the prophetic vocation—a point that could be reinforced by the Numbers 11 passage, viewed earlier, where God took of ‘the spirit that was upon [Moses] and placed it on [the seventy elders]’ (v. 17), whereupon they were empowered to prophesy (v. 25).

On the other hand, we should perhaps not be so quick to restrict the idea of the transference of ‘spirit’ exclusively to the prophetic role. In Israel’s covenant, a father’s bestowal of inheritance upon his son was never simply reduced to what was material. There was an obvious element of spiritual transfer involved in the transaction, where the father laid hands upon the son and uttered solemn, prophetic pronouncements of favor and blessing over the son’s future and destiny (Gen. 48.8-22). That these words were seen to bestow a spiritual force that would effect their fulfillment was not doubted (Gen. 27.18-40). So if Elisha in 2 Kings 2 is speaking of the ‘double portion’ in a fresh figurative way in reference to a bestowal of spiritual power, it is not entirely beyond the bounds of what had always been expected to be passed on from Israel’s elders to those being raised up after them. And here again, the prophet Elijah, like the prophet Moses before him, is modeling a role of spiritual eldering that is not the exclusive domain of the prophet but belongs finally to all the people of God (again, cf. Mal. 4.5-6).

Beyond 2 Kings 2 uplifting the crucial fact of mentoring, this chapter also highlights, I would suggest, some key clues to its characterizing features. I detect one of these in Elijah’s initial reply to Elisha’s request for ‘a double portion of your spirit’ (v. 9). Elijah says, ‘you have asked a difficult thing’ (v. 10). One finds in this response a forthright recognition that the completion of the nexus between mentor and mentoree is something that moves a bit beyond one’s capacity to master. It takes us into

19. One might have already gotten the impression that Elijah had thoughts along this line from the beginning when he first throws his mantle upon Elisha in 1 Kgs 19.19-21. When Elisha follows after Elijah on this occasion, the older prophet seems awkward and at a loss as to what to do, saying to Elisha, ‘Go back again; for what
untamed territory beyond our ken and control—territory that is effectively symbolized in this very story by the region beyond the Jordan, which Elijah’s miracle of parting the water has just allowed the two prophets to enter before they have this exchange.20

The goal of mentoring, then, is ‘a difficult thing’, not reducible to a formula, program or technique. Indeed, it involves an element of the spirit that cannot be packaged, manipulated or controlled, for, as the LORD knows, ‘the wind blows where it wills’ (Jn 3.8)—a notion clearly signified in the story’s moment of truth when a divinely sent ‘whirlwind’ at once both separates Elijah and Elisha and binds them together for good, as the mantle of the elder falls down to the successor (vv. 11-13).

This succession is predicated upon only one condition that must be fulfilled—one that, in the light of this story’s paradigmatic centrality, may point to the most defining characteristic of the mentoring relationship. After telling Elisha that he has ‘asked a difficult thing’, Elijah continues, ‘nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it will occur for you, but if not, it will not occur’ (2 Kgs 2.10). Thus, the one thing necessary is that Elisha be tenacious in staying with Elijah to the end. This could seem rather random if not for the fact that the first half of the story features a repetitive series of instances where Elijah urges Elisha to stay behind while he keeps proceeding to the next phase of his final journey, whereupon Elisha repeatedly vows, ‘As the LORD lives and you yourself live, I will not leave you’ (vv. 2, 4 and 6). Thus, Elisha has already proven his determination to be tenacious in sticking with Elijah to the end, even before it explicitly becomes his mentor’s final pre-condition for succession. It is as if Elisha has all along been passing the test that qualifies him to receive Elijah’s mantle. The success, indeed, the succession of this mentoring relationship is shown to turn not so much on the doing of mentoring21 but rather on simply being a mentor and being with a mentor.

have I done to you?’ (v. 20). Elijah here seems anything but a ‘master’, the preferred title, apparently, that the ‘sons of the prophets’ come to ascribe to him (2 Kgs 2.3, 5).

20. See the incisive comment of W. Brueggemann, 1 & 2 Kings (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), pp. 294-95: ‘The two of them now cross the Jordan, departing the settled land governed by the king into the wilderness, the inscrutable land of mystery. In this territory Elijah began his own dangerous ministry that refused any royal authority (1 Kgs 17:1-6). That the two of them go into the untamed land parallels the entry of Moses into the wilderness where reliance upon the raw power of Yahweh is a necessity’ (Exod. 15.22). One thinks here also of John the Baptist and Jesus.

21. One can recall here when Elijah first puts his mantle upon Elisha and then says, ‘Go back again; what have I done to you?’ (1 Kgs 19.19-21). From beginning to end, it would seem, being a mentor does not depend upon knowing how it is done.
My final OT case for the prophet as mentor is Isaiah. Raising up the next generation is one of the most crucial and comprehensive themes in the book of Isaiah, but this has not been recognized in previous Isaiah scholarship. In this brief paper I attempt only to sketch the evidence, which merits a fuller exposition in the future.

In the first chapter of Isaiah the first issue raised comes in God’s words, ‘I have reared and raised up children, but they have rebelled against me’ (1:2). The thrust of chapters 1–5 is to elaborate this point. Chapter 6 presents Isaiah’s dramatic call from God to address the point by delineating the entire course of his subsequent ministry—(1) delivering a message that will be disregarded and refused by those of his own generation, bringing about their devastation down to (2) a remnant, which will then itself be destroyed until only a stump remains, whereupon (3) a ‘holy seed (zara)’ at last will appear (6:8-13). At the beginning of the book we see God’s desire for holy offspring (1:2) and its fulfillment is now foreseen in the end. Indeed, the last word of the book features a reverse match of the first word of the book:

Hear, O heavens,  
And give ear, O earth,  
For the LORD has spoken.  
I have reared and raised up children,  
But they have rebelled against me (1.2)  
Your seed (zera) and your name  
shall so remain (66.22)

Within this frame, after elaborating the problem (chs. 1–5) and previewing both the consequences and the course toward the solution (ch. 6), the rest of the book of Isaiah (chs. 7–66) elaborates the course of Isaiah’s commission in terms of his prophetic ministry to each of three successive generations (linked to the three parts in 6.8-13 noted above), whereby his

22. The scope of this paper limits me to this one final example. By no means do I regard this as the only remaining place in the OT to find evidence for the prophet as mentor. For example, evidence can be gleaned from the Samuel narratives, specifically where Samuel is raised up from childhood as a prophet (1 Samuel 3) at a time when righteous fathering had fallen down (1 Sam. 2.22-36). Supplementing this, we also find in the Samuel narratives further appearances of the communal bands of prophets (1 Sam. 10.5-6; 19.20). Then there is the prophecy of Joel that begins with a prophecy to elders about how nothing remains for them to leave to their children (1.2-4) but afterward opens up to a word that reverses this curse with a promise for an outpouring of Spirit with prophetic manifestations upon both elders and their children (2.28-29) and culminates finally in a promise of covenant blessing that will continue ‘from generation to generation’ (3.20).
ministry successively moves toward the end goal of raising up ‘holy seed’. The shifts in Isaiah’s ministry from the first generation to the second and then from the second to the third, turn respectively on the two historical narratives that distinguish and dominate the internal structure of the book. The first narrative recounts a national crisis under King Ahaz in chapter 7; the second recounts a manifold national crisis under his son, King Hezekiah, in chapters 36–39. In both cases Isaiah plays a pivotal role that culminates in a judgment on these kings and the generations they represent for their failure to attend to God’s will, with particular respect to their children—a failure that sets up a call for Isaiah to turn his attention, in each case, to these very children who constitute the generation that will follow. Laying out the parallels between these two historical narratives will begin to clarify this structural and thematic matrix for the book.

The Ahaz narrative and the Hezekiah narrative are both initially set in the same geographical spot: ‘at the end of the conduit of the upper pool in the highway of the fuller’s field’ (7.3 and 36.2). In both cases this clearly represents a trusted resource at a time of military threat (Ahaz, from an Aramean-Israelite coalition, 7.1; and Hezekiah, from the empire of Assyria, 36.1-4). Both kings are confronted by a messenger (Ahaz, by Isaiah saying, ‘Thus says the LORD’, 7.7; and Hezekiah, by an Assyrian officer saying, ‘Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria’, 36.4) bearing a message in each case about the focus of their belief or trust (7.9 and 36.5-7). Alongside both messages stands a reference to children who represent ‘a remnant’ that signifies the gravity of the crisis (for Ahaz, the presence of Isaiah’s child, named ‘Remant-shall-return’, 7.3; and for Hezekiah, his own word to Isaiah, ‘This is a day of distress, rebuke, and scorn; for children have come to the point of birth and there is no strength to deliver... so lift up a prayer for the remnant that is left’, 37.3).

Amid these many parallels there is one stark contrast: Ahaz immediately turns away from the word of the LORD (7.10-13), whereas Hezekiah promptly turns toward the word of the LORD (37.1-2). Significantly, both kings, after being given divine words, are then given prophetic signs with pregnant references about children, but whereas Ahaz’s sign (one featuring

an expected child to be named ‘Immanuel’) is unclear, confusing and disquieting (7.14-25). Hezekiah’s sign (one featuring a ‘remnant who...will again take root downward and bear fruit upward’) is clear, concise and reassuring (37.30-32).

Yet Hezekiah’s crisis does not end here or even with the complete withdrawal of the Assyrian army the next day (37.36-38), for chapter 38 promptly begins,

In those days Hezekiah was sick unto death...and Isaiah the prophet...said to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Set your house in order, for you shall die”’ (38.1).

Again Hezekiah responds by turning to the word of the LORD, which again brings a reprieve—this time a divine promise of fifteen years added ‘to your days’ (38.2-5). This prompts Hezekiah to write a psalm of praise for God’s granting him health (shalom, 38.17) that significantly culminates in a vow concerning his children:

The living, the living one shall praise you,
As I do this day.
The father shall make known your trustworthiness (emeth) to the children (38.19).

Yet what happens next brings Hezekiah to the breakpoint of his crisis, which has everything to do with failing his children, about whom he has just made a vow. After Babylonian officials pay a state visit to toast his recovery and he shows to them all the treasures ‘in his house and in all his kingdom’ (39.1-2), Isaiah confronts him with a word from the LORD that indicts him for showing off the covenant inheritance that ‘your fathers have preserved until this day’ (39.5-6). This evokes the announcement of divine judgment:

Behold, the days are coming when everything in your house and what your fathers have preserved until this day shall be carried to Babylon, nothing shall remain, says the LORD. Furthermore, they shall carry away some of

24. For example, the ‘curds and honey’ that the child will eat in 7.15 seem to constitute the delicacies of prosperity, but in 7.22 ‘curds and honey’ seem to be all that is left in a land where cultivation has been destroyed. Clarity as to the sign’s sense of weal or woe is thoroughly lacking, especially since the child and land are not plainly identified, as the enormous diversity of scholarly opinion on the passage can stand as proof. But the confusion of the sign, I believe, is precisely the point, so that ‘hearing they do not hear and seeing they do not see’, as Isaiah had already been told would be the case in the previous chapter (6.9). The ambiguous form the word takes is the judgment for refusing it in the first place.
your sons who come forth from you and whom you bear—they shall become eunuchs in the house of the king of Babylon (39.6-7).

Hezekiah’s response, which comes in the following and final verse of the entire Hezekiah narrative, is stunning and absolutely pivotal in its relation to the governing theme of raising up children, as we have traced it through the hinge points of the book:

Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, ‘The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good’. For he said, ‘There will be health (shalom) and trustworthiness (emeth) in my days’ (39.8).

Whereas he had sought God to change the decree of death upon his own days, there is a telling absence here of any intercession for the sake of welfare and trustworthiness in the days of his children, countering the thrust of his own earlier vow (38.19). In the end Hezekiah, no less than his father Ahaz, abandons the children of the next generation to a rather dim prospect. Yet Isaiah had been told from the beginning that hope did lie in the remnant itself but in something deeper—deep in the stump after the cutting off of the remnant (6.13).

Having traced out the parallel’s between the Ahaz and Hezekiah narratives, we can now proceed to see the subsequent shifts that take place in the prophetic vocation of Isaiah, particularly with respect to the children who are left in the lurch by these two kings and the generations they represented.

Directly after the Ahaz episode that ends with God giving the king a sign, God speaks a word to Isaiah that begins with a sign (8.1-4). While both signs have to do with a child to be born, Ahaz’s Immanuel sign was confusing whereas Isaiah’s sign is clear. He is to notarize a name, ‘Spoil-speeds-plunder-hastens’, then give it to the child that his wife soon bears, and then know that before the child is able to say ‘Mommy’ or ‘Daddy’ Assyria will spoil and plunder the Aramean-Israelite coalition, thus eliminating the immediate national threat. However, the sign is then further extended to clarify as well what had remained obscure in Ahaz’s sign: Assyria will continue its sweep like a flood ‘through Judah’ and ‘rise up to the neck…and fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel’ (8.5-8). God here makes privy to Isaiah what Ahaz and his generation could not see in

25. In addition to the clear identity of the mother, the child’s first utterance of ‘Mommy’ and ‘Daddy’ provides a clear time marker that contrasts with the more vague time marker in Ahaz’s sign: ‘before the child shall know to refuse evil and choose good’ (7.16). Indeed most parents can mark the very moment that the former occurs, but the time of a child’s coming to know right from wrong is ever hard to pin down.
the Immanuel sign, namely, that ‘God with us’ means threat. Indeed ‘see-
ing, they do not see’ (6.9). The pivotal issue here comes down to seeing
or not seeing the sign, the signification, indeed the significance in the
identity of one’s children.

Isaiah is given eyes to see, and so now he is ready to receive a further
divine directive about his own calling:

‘Bind up the testimony,
seal the teaching (torah) among my disciples’

I will wait on the LORD,
Who hides his face from the house of Jacob,
And I will hope in him.
Here am I and the children,
whom the LORD has given me—
signs and wonders in Israel
from the LORD of hosts (8.16-18).

The ‘Here am I’ of chapter 6 is now sharpened to a focus on the new
generation: ‘Here am I and the children, whom the LORD has given me’. 
Isaiah, like Moses after the failure of the older generation in the wilderness, is called to be a minister to the youth. Isaiah knows the children are signs, he knows they are significant, and he knows his prophetic call is to be their mentor in the light of this revelation.

Thus, chapters 8–35, I would suggest, unfold as the torah of Isaiah
(8.16), which, like the torah of Moses in Deuteronomy, is given to the new
generation in the shadow of the failure of the older generation to prepare them for the threatened future that lies ahead. This future comes to meet them, we have seen, in the crisis of Hezekiah, who is raised up to represent the remnant that this new generation constitutes (Isaiah 36–39, see esp. 37.4). We have noted how that, at first, Hezekiah represents them well by turning toward the word of the LORD, but in the end he fails by turning away from his own children, resigning them to the dim fate of Babylonian exile that he and his generation had bequeathed them (39.5-8).

However, right after we see Hezekiah writing off the generation of his children (39.8), we turn to the next page and chapter and see Isaiah writing to them (chs. 40-66).26

This lengthy section of the book of Isaiah has long been recognized as being addressed to the future generation of the Babylonian captivity and has for this reason been thought to have come from hands much later than

26. For helping me to arrive at this way of putting it, I credit a conversation with one of my former students, Jonathan Morris Stone.
Isaiah’s. Yet this widely followed conclusion has failed to recognize the parallel between (1) Isaiah’s call in chapter 8 to the new generation left in the lurch by the Ahaz crisis and (2) the prophet’s call in chapter 40 to the new generation left in the lurch by the Hezekiah crisis. The historical-critical focus on how chapter 40’s sudden shift ahead to another generation does not conform to Isaiah’s time has completely missed how thoroughly this shift conforms to Isaiah’s call and the theme on which the structure of the book has been shown to turn. It is the call to mentor the children of the next generation to the end of raising up holy seed.

Significantly, the prophetic call of chapter 40 is first issued (‘Speak comfort’, v. 1), then taken up (‘a voice of one calls out’, v. 3), and then transferred to another (‘a voice says, ‘Call out’, v. 6). Like with Moses in Deuteronomy passing on the mentoring call, Isaiah’s call to the children of this future generation is urgently commended to being taken up by them—a most appropriate urging in view of the time gap beyond Isaiah’s days, which now must be bridged. So throughout this part of the book, Isaiah’s call to this future generation points beyond itself to the raising up of others to take up the call. Many points could be noted here, but most crucial to Isaiah’s purpose, as well as ours, is what can be found in the call of the servant of Yahweh, presented throughout the so-called ‘servant songs’ of Isaiah 42–53, but particularly in the climax of Isaiah 53. I note the following points.

1. For Isaiah, the call of the servant in chapter 53 points to the depths from which the holy seed springs forth. Accordingly the servant is identified in 53.2 as a ‘root out of dry ground’—one who, like the stump of 6.13, is ‘cut off from the land of the living’ (53.8).

2. Accepting the servant’s call requires faith—‘Who will believe our report?’ (53.1). This is the same issue (and Hebrew term) of belief posed to Ahaz (7.9), whose own response to the call failed here.


28. Scholars estimate the end of Isaiah’s ministry to be some time soon after 700 BCE and mark 586 BCE as the beginning of the Babylonian exile.

29. These ‘servant songs’ (42.1-4; 49.1-6; 50.4-9; and 52.13–53.12) were first demarcated and designated as a discrete grouping by B. Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja* (HKAT III, 1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 4th edn, 1922 [first published in 1892]).
3. Fulfilling the servant’s call entails enduring affliction from the LORD for the sake of the promise of one’s offspring and finding fulfillment therein for one’s own life—‘it pleased the LORD...to afflict him (or ‘make him sick’ [khalah], the same term used of Hezekiah’s sickness in 38.1)...for he shall see his seed [zera]; he shall prolong his days’ (53.10). Hezekiah’s response to the call failed here, for after prevailing upon God to take away his sickness and to prolong his days (ch. 38) Hezekiah was content in the gain of his own added days to accept, without objection, the loss of his children’s (ch. 39).

4. The servant’s call entails sacrificing one’s life for the life of one’s children—‘He shall see the travail of his soul and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant shall make many righteous...for he poured out his soul unto death’ (53.11-12). The travail of Isaiah 53 opens up to the birth announcement of Isaiah 54—the promise of many children (54.1), ‘your seed [zera]’ (54.3), ‘taught of Yahweh’ (54.13), ‘established in righteousness’ (54.14), and surely representing the ‘holy seed’ envisioned in Isaiah’s call in 6.13. The final verse of Isaiah 54 declares, significantly, that ‘this is the heritage of the servants [plural!] of Yahweh’ (54.17).

5. Thus, the call of the servant in Isaiah 53 is commended to all who would be servants of Yahweh. While this call points us ahead as Christians to Jesus, the ultimate example of the prophet as mentor, it also points us back to the prophet Isaiah, whose faithfulness as a servant of Yahweh, according to the call of Isaiah 53, 30. Thus, the call of the prophet as mentor and as martyr converge in the end (cf. my discussion of the prophet as martyr in my earlier paper, ‘The Prophetic Calling’).

31. For a study that points up the prominence of the theme of the ‘servants of Yahweh’ in the latter part of Isaiah, albeit in a way that is somewhat different than what I am suggesting here, see W.A.M. Beuken, ‘The Main Theme of Trito-Isaiah, “The Servants of YHWH”’, JSOT 47 (June 1990), pp. 67-87. For an example of how Christians in the New Testament understood themselves to be recipients of the call of the ‘servant of Yahweh’ in Isaiah, see Acts 13.46-49.

32. The call of the servant of Yahweh could also point back to Moses, as well, for he is called ‘servant of Yahweh’ (Deut. 34.5) in the very passage that reviews his legacy as a prophet (Deut. 34.5-12). See G. von Rad, Old Testament Theology. II. The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions (trans. D.M.G. Stalker; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 250-62, esp. 261-62, for the view that the figure of Moses as suffering prophetic intercessor is the prime biblical tradition behind the ‘servant of Yahweh’ in Isaiah 53. See also D. Olson, Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses, pp. 35-39, 45-48,
can be traced in clearly drawn contrast to Ahaz and Hezekiah, as we have seen, through the course of the entire book. And so we are led by the prophetic example of Isaiah to respond as servants of Yahweh, ‘Here am I’ (6.8), indeed, ‘Here am I and the children the LORD has given me’ (8.18).

In conclusion, I offer a few brief reflections on how the foregoing evidence for the OT prophet as mentor could be relevant for the church today. I merely mention a few leads that might be further pursued.

First, this study of the three leading prophets of the OT shows the extensive biblical grounding for the role of the prophetic vocation in addressing and calling all of God’s people to the responsibility of mentoring the next generation, ‘turning the hearts of the elders to their children and the hearts of the children to their elders’. It is a role that becomes especially critical, as we saw, in contexts of blatant dereliction of the eldering generation, such as can be seen today in almost any direction one looks.

Secondly, this study points up the importance of prophetic insight in recovering and reclaiming a divine revelation of the intrinsic significance of children. There is a profound spiritual dimension to raising up and blessing a new generation that includes but goes beyond a systematized catechism or curricular program of discipleship. It is more about being and being with someone than knowing what to do.

Consequently and thirdly, spiritual succession, as the prophet Elijah recognized and can still help us to see, is ‘a difficult thing’ that in the end will call elders to go to places beyond themselves where only a vision of God can overcome the division between generations.

Finally, this study shows that the call of the prophet as mentor is ultimately the call addressing us all to follow, even to be, the suffering servant of the LORD, giving up our lives for our children, indeed seeing the holy seed from the travail of our souls and being satisfied.

57-58, and 150, for a sustained argument on the presentation of Moses in Deuteronomy as one who suffered vicariously for God’s people.