FROM EARLY TO CLASSICAL PROPHECY:
CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

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It is an indisputable truth that classical prophecy, which made its appearance in Israel in the second half of the 8th century B.C., was preceded by long preparatory stages of spiritual growth, formation of patterns of activity and refinement of means of expression. Classical prophecy is only the direct continuation of early prophecy, whose beginnings were rooted in much earlier times than the 8th century B.C., and which, for its part, was certainly related to some forms of mantic and ecstatic activity which were found in the ancient Near East and preceded the emergence of prophecy itself. A number of specific features serve to distinguish early from classical prophecy, and several of these will be discussed below.

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One such particular feature of early prophecy is its mode of activity in bands with collective ecstasy accompanied by rhythmic movements and disorientation of the senses—an ecstasy which is apt to infect even the uninvolved onlooker and to drag him into the group (1 Sam. x 5-6, 10-13, xix 20-24). The case of Eldad and Medad is said to have been somewhat unusual in that these two were far away from the company, but as “they were among those registered”, that is, were intended to be included among the elders who prophesied, the ecstatic frenzy infected them as well (Num. xi 24-30). Another feature of early prophecy is the use of musical instruments and the notion that music is a means of awakening ecstasy and attracting divine inspiration (2 Kgs. iii 15; cf. 1 Sam. x 5). Most probably, this use of musical instruments was also accompanied by rhythmic movements and tended to develop into dance (cf. Exod. xv 20).

1) A method of producing ecstasy mentioned as typical of the prophets of Baal was that of cutting themselves “with swords and lances until the blood gushed out upon them”. The text points out that this was done “after their custom”, implying that the prophets of Yahweh did not act in this way (1 Kgs. xviii 28).
Such features would certainly have been inconceivable within the domain of classical prophecy.

A further feature of early prophecy is its propensity to special places of oracular activity. Particularly conspicuous in this respect is its affinity to Mount Horeb (Sinai), which in the circles of early prophets was certainly conceived of as the place par excellence at which to attain divine revelation. Accordingly, Elijah goes all the way to that mountain, a distance of forty days and forty nights, and there he receives by divine command the main mission of his life: to lay upon Israel terrible sufferings until the people dwindle in number as a punishment for worshipping Baal in the days of Ahab's dynasty (1 Kgs. xix 8-18). It seems likely that the image of this mountain in the Exodus narratives, with the descriptions of theophanies taking place on it, is drawn mainly from the concepts of early prophecy, or at least is recast in its spirit, while the mountain itself, as a site of prophetic sacredness, was one of the central symbols of that early prophecy. Indeed, in this manner this mountain is depicted particularly by E, which in character is an evidently prophetic (that is, early prophetic) source.

An additional feature of early prophecy—which, in a way, is related to its proclivity to prophetic holy-places or is just another manifestation of that proclivity—is its peculiar attraction to permanent institutions of oracular activity. One such institution is, for example, the 'ābel mō'ēd, "tent of meeting", particularly as described in Exod. xxxiii 5-11; Num. xi 16-17, 24-30, xii 4-10; Deut. xxxi 14-15 (all of which are E, either directly or indirectly). The tent of mō'ēd is conceived of as an institution placed at a distance outside the settlement. It is a site of group ecstasy as well as of individual inspiration; Moses, together with his attendant, and also "everyone who seeks the Lord" go there to acquire a link with the divine. This tent, with the portrayals of theophanies occurring beside it, is only an "institutionalized" reflection of the revelation on Mount Horeb (or rather, to the contrary: the theophany on the mountain is patterned upon the particular features that were ascribed to this institution of oracular activity)². Such a connexion with special institutions, whose sole purpose was, as it were, to stir up the prophetic capacity itself, is totally unknown to classical prophecy (just

²) The character of this institution was the subject of my discussion in JSS 5 (1960), pp. 50-65; in a rewritten form it will constitute a chapter in my forthcoming book Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel.