

Ask Away – April 14

- 1) **What does it mean when it says of Saul: “And he too stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel and lay naked all that day and all that night”? (1 Sam 19:24).**

While the word translated “naked” (*ārōm*) can signify complete nudity (cf. Gen 2:25; Job 1:21; Hosea 2:3), it may also describe a person who has removed their outer garment and is wearing only the long linen tunic which was worn next to the skin (Isa 20:1–6; Micah 1:8; cf. John 21:7). I think the later usage makes the most sense, since it says that Saul “too stripped off his clothes,” implying that Saul’s messengers and perhaps the other prophets had also taken off their outer garments. It doesn’t seem likely that Samuel was presiding over a group of completely naked prophets.

So what exactly was Saul doing when he “prophesied” before Samuel? The basic meaning of “prophesied” (*yitnabbe*) is “to speak forth a message” (Exod 4:14–16; 7:1–2; Deut 18:15–22; Amos 7:12–16). Although the message was typically spoken, there is evidence that it could be sung or chanted (1 Sam 10:5–6; 1 Chr 25:1–7). In these cases, the message was usually one of praise and thanksgiving to God. In light of this, I understand the verse to be saying that Saul joined with the other prophets in speaking and/or singing the words and praise of God.

At least two passages in the OT assign a further meaning to *yitnabbe*: to “rave” or “act violently.” One of these is the instance in which Saul became angry at David and tried to kill him with a spear. The verse says that, in this display of anger, Saul “prophesied (*yitnabbe*) in the midst of the house” (1 Sam 18:10 KJV). The ESV, NLT and NASB all translate this as “raved.” The other instance is when the prophets of Baal “prophesied (*yitnabbe*) until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice” on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:29). Again, the ESV, NLT and NASB all translate the word as “raved.” In both cases, the word describes a frantic and passionate outburst.¹ Thus, when a person “prophesied,” they often did so with a passion and fervency that led to the word being used to indicate that same intensity of feeling. There is little doubt that Saul prophesied before Samuel with just such passionate intensity, for the verse says that he was so exhausted that he lay weakened and drained the rest of the day and night (1 Sam 19:24).

¹ For an excellent discussion, see Leon J. Wood, “Ecstasy and Israel’s Early Prophets,” *BETS* 9.3 (Summer 1966): 125–137. I agree with his dismissal of the variant meaning of “to be mad” as not relating to the word itself (p. 135).