

# THE PROPHET AS WATCHER

DAVID GREENSPOON

## INTRODUCTION

How did a prophet come to be called a "watcher" in the Bible? This brief survey will examine the prophetic use of "watcher" and will offer an explanation of the role this term plays in prophetic usages. We will trace the term "watcher" as applied to the prophets from its earliest appearances. We will see that the role undergoes considerable development; it evolves from a literal, historical term to become a metaphor for the prophet's spiritual duty and obligation on behalf of the Israelite community.

The role of the watcher in ancient Israel is attested to in numerous places throughout the Bible. Various prophets employ the term, as do the historical books of II Samuel and II Kings. There is even an appearance of the "watchman" in the Book of Psalms. Despite the widespread use of the general image, there is no single word which is used to define the watcher (or for that matter the watchtower). *Hatzopheh* [הצפה] certainly predominates, but there is the alternate form of *hashomer* [השומר]. Indeed, one could even imply the position without the use of a particular noun, as evidenced by the phrase *I will stand on my watch* [על משמרתִי אעמדה -- *al mishmarti emodah*] (Hab. 2:1) The multiple terms quite possibly reflect the multiple meanings that the image held for ancient Israel.

## THE HISTORICAL AND LITERAL WATCHER

In the realia of ancient Israel, watchers truly patrolled on the rooftops of city gates (see Joshua 2:15 on the width of city walls; in Jericho the walls were big enough to support entire houses). They scanned the horizon for messengers or signs of advancing military forces. The watcher was responsible for passing on the information gleaned while on his post that was vital to the city's security. This is an essential function of the watcher that will be called upon in later usage by different prophets.

*David Greenspoon graduated from The Jewish Theological Seminary. In addition to his ordination, he has a concentration in Hebrew Bible. He is the rabbi of Adat Shalom in Pitsburgh, P.A.*

The earliest specific reference to a *tzopheh* is in II Samuel 18:24-27, where he informs King David of approaching messengers. A second historical reference is in II Kings 9:18, in an event that took place in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. These examples suggest with a fair amount of confidence that the nature of the watcher's role and duty was universally understood in ancient Israel. The limits of the watcher's abilities are made explicit, however, in a great theological statement in Psalm 127:1: . . . *unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman keeps vigil in vain.*<sup>1</sup> This ties together the historical and allegorical roles of the watcher quite neatly. We turn now to more fully examine the allegorical role of the watcher.

#### THE PROPHET AS WATCHER: A METAPHOR IS BORN

##### Hosea 9:8

This section of the Book of Hosea is the middle of the long prophecy comprised of Chapters 4-14. Coming in the second division of this section, it "rehearses the spiritual history of Israel."<sup>2</sup> Chapter 9 in particular condemns Israel to exile (9:3; 6-7). Verse 7 makes it abundantly clear that this is punishment for sins committed in the past. The nature of those sins is made clear in the verse: *The prophet was distraught, the inspired man driven mad by constant harassment.* Verse 8, the focus of our investigation, presents an abrupt shift into the present:

*Ephraim watches for my God.  
As for the prophet,  
Fowlers' snares are on all his paths,  
Harassment in the House of his God.*

Commentaries by W.M. Harper and by F.I. Anderson and D.N. Freedman<sup>3</sup> note that the text here is exceptionally difficult, but Harper offers an interpretation from W. Nowack which is useful: *tzopheh Ephraim* is understood as "Ephraim's watchman."<sup>4</sup> Given the state of confusion on the meaning of this verse, it could barely be muddled by the addition of one more translation:

*Ephraim's watcher is with my God,  
A prophet;*

*A fowler's snares [are] on all his paths,  
Enmity [is] in the House of his God.*

Here it is clear that the watcher is none other than the prophet who is bemoaning the adversarial attitude of the people to whom he preaches. This is supported by the next verse (cf. Hos. 10:9; Jud. 19:22-30, 20:46-48) in which the people are proclaimed to be corrupt. The corruption mentioned in verse 9 will result in Divine punishment. While no clear role is delineated for the watcher/prophet, this text indicates that early in Israelite history some correlation existed between the prophet and the watcher. It must be assumed that this correlation would be readily recognized by Hosea's audience in eighth-century Israel.

#### EXTENDING THE METAPHOR: THE PROPHET AS INTERCESSOR

##### Isaiah 21

Isaiah 21 consists of three oracles. Only in verse 10 does it become clear that the prophet is addressing Israel, where *my threshing, the product of my threshing-floor* [ מַדְשׁוֹתַי וּבֶן-גְּרוֹנַי -- *medushati u-ben gronai*] can only refer to Israel. Indeed, the latter appellation *ben gronai* recalls Hosea 9:1! With this loose intertextual connection with Hosea established, the function of the watchman metaphor in this context can be better explored. It is clear that use of the metaphor is allegorical; it is employed in the course of a prophecy (against Israel?). Yet the function of the watcher closely approximates the role of the watcher in the historical books. He is charged to announce what he sees. Yet despite the military nature of the watch, it is still an element of prophecy and not an actual military maneuver. In context, we must understand that Isaiah here purposefully blurs the role of the watcher; he employs the actual watcher of walls, yet in a prophetic oracle. One can employ mundane events in the course of a prophecy the better to drive home the prophetic message. The connection with Hosea suggests that Isaiah built this prophecy employing an earlier model "the watcher" and "the watchtower" that was commonly known and accepted.

### Jeremiah 6:17

It is only in Jeremiah that we begin to find unanimity among later commentators concerning the nature of the watcher. Those who said *listen to the sound of the shofar* were the watchers appointed by God. It takes no great leap to determine that it was the prophets who so abjured Israel (cf. Hos. 5:8, 8:1; Jer. 6:17). The New Jewish Publication Society translation even identifies the watchmen as the prophets in a note.<sup>5</sup> Here we get our first solid hint of the prophetic role as a "watcher." It was clearly demonstrated that in general the prophet served as the people's intercessor with God.<sup>6</sup>

But this can only be half the equation. If the prophet served such a role on behalf of the people to God, what role did he serve on behalf of God to the people? Of course, he was the vessel which contained Divine messages. But such a role could even be filled by an ass! After all, the prophet had no choice but to deliver the prophecy with which he had been charged.<sup>7</sup> What called upon his zeal? What drew on his love for Israel? What special role did the prophet serve which is reciprocal to the people's intercessor? Perhaps it is Watcher of Israel, in which the prophet's responsibility was to warn Israel of impending disaster. Certainly the image of the *shofar*-blowing in this verse brings to mind a warning of imminent national emergency. We should recall the military role of the watcher from the historical books: to insure the security of the community. It takes no great stretch of imagination to suggest now that one role of the prophet was to warn the community of impending danger from God's anger.

#### THE METAPHOR MATURES: THE PROPHET AS INTERCESSOR-INTERCEPTOR

### Habakkuk 2:1

It is precisely this role which might motivate Habakkuk in 2:1. Following an impassioned cry against God in which he deplors the way God is running the world (Ch. 1), Habakkuk prepares for his answer by taking up his post as a watcher, waiting for God's reply.<sup>8</sup> Here the image is graphic and explicit: the prophet is an intercessor for the people on messages going to God, and the watcher who intercepts messages going to earth from God. Indeed, God responds by telling Habakkuk to write down the message that will follow. It is

nearly certain here that the *matzor* [post, tower] is not physical; it is metaphorical. The prophet was on post, doing what was expected of him. It is unlikely that a prophet would need a real tower that was designated as the official communication center for Divine broadcasts. Indeed, the metaphor is somewhat dense without understanding the prophetic role to include that of interceptor as well as intercessor. Thus the prophet on post serves as interceptor as well as intercessor.

### Ezekiel 3:17; 33:2-7

So far there has been a steady progression in the use of the watcher metaphor. It began with a vague sense of connection in Hosea that was refined through time to become explicitly identified with the role of the prophet. How then does a chronologically later prophet use the term? It should not be a surprise that the metaphor finds its most complex expressions in Ezekiel, since Ezekiel is the last source in which the metaphor is found. The depiction of his role as a watchman stands very close to the accounts of his call to be a prophet.<sup>9</sup>

Ezekiel's first use of the metaphor is in Chapter 3. It must be noted at the outset that the scholarly debate surrounding the use of this metaphor in Ezekiel cannot even begin to be discussed in the context of this brief treatment. The arguments that try to claim the later usage as "original" and the earlier usage as "artificially abstracted . . . and inserted here" are insightfully refuted by Greenberg.<sup>10</sup> He cogently argues for two parallel charges to the prophet; one an individual message in Chapter 3 and the other a public discourse designed with the appropriate rhetorical elements in mind. Greenberg also makes the point that the theme of these two pieces are in fact common to both contexts, and "not mechanically copied from one to the other." Both stories are part of a whole. Greenberg is favoring a synchronic reading for these parallel texts; it is hard to disagree with him.

This private/public dual charge reflects the dual nature of the prophet/watcher as an intercessor/interceptor. The first charge (Ch. 3) makes Ezekiel the watcher responsible for the individual. Ezekiel's own blood is on the line if he fails to announce his watcher's warning. The function of the metaphor in Ezekiel 33 differs greatly. In that context, the metaphor serves "to persuade

the despairing exiles of God's concern for their survival."<sup>11</sup> It is a precursor for the message that God desires people to leave off from their sinful ways so that they will not need to be punished (33:11). Nevertheless, in both cases a *tzopheh* is responsible for warning the people of imminent Divine punishment. All that can be said definitively about the charges is that they are parallel. That they are otherwise ambiguous or vague is possibly a message in itself that we need to consider.

What is absolutely certain, though, is that Ezekiel has fully drawn the metaphor to its conclusion: here the watcher protects Israel against Divine attack.<sup>12</sup> This is in absolute contrast to the role of the watcher in the historical books, who guards against mortal enemies. It also reflects a fully developed tension in the role of the prophet/watcher who intercedes/intercepts on behalf of the people/God in the course of his service. Ultimately his oracular messages are warnings passed to the collective; each individual is responsible for heeding them.

#### CONCLUSION

The historical books present "the watcher" in his original context: the guard on post, ready to warn his city against calamity. This image is made into a metaphor that undergoes transformation throughout the prophetic era. Hosea first tentatively equates Ephraim's watcher with a prophet. Isaiah then blurs the role of the watcher, by drawing upon it as a familiar object in the course of one of his prophecies. Jeremiah explicitly equates those who blow the *shofar* (the prophet) with the watcher. Habakkuk marks the emergence of the watcher/interceptor as the natural counterpart to the prophet/intercessor. Ezekiel draws the metaphor to a logical terminus. The result is that throughout the prophetic books (as well as mentions in the Book of Psalms) the watcher metaphor has become equally identified with matters spiritual as well as military. The military metaphor was drawn from the realia of the day, reinterpreted to a spiritual role and applied to prophets. It is ultimately returned to its realia of military origin as the prophet guards Israel from Divine attack

## NOTES

1. A similar statement is made in Psalm 121:4: See, *the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps* [הנה לא-יננום ולא יישן שמר ישראל]. -- *hineh lo yanum v-lo yishan shomer Yisrael*].
2. Francis I. Anderson and David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible: Hosea* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) p. 314.
3. William Rainey Harper, *The International Critical Commentary: Amos and Hosea* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905) p. 332; Anderson and Freedman, p. 533.
4. Harper, p. 333.
5. Harper, p. 781.
6. Yochanan Muffs, "His Majesty's Loyal Opposition: A Study in Prophetic Intercession," *Conservative Judaism XXXIII:3* (Spring 1980) p. 27.
7. Muffs, p. 25.
8. What makes this passage all the more striking is the absence of the word *tzopheh*. The image of standing on the *matzor* [מצוד -- tower, post] speaks for itself; the text does not need explicitly to identify the prophet as watcher.
9. William H. Brownlee, "Ezekiel's Parable of The Watchman and The Editing of Ezekiel," *Vetus Testamentum XXVIII* (1978) pp. 393-408.
10. Moshe Greenberg, *The Anchor Bible: Ezekiel 1-20* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983) pp. 90-93.
11. Greenberg, p. 93
12. Brownlee, p. 399.

*Contributions of \$25.00 and over are U.S. tax deductible when paid to P.E.F. Israel Endowment Fund, Inc., 317 Madison Ave., Suite 607, New York, N.Y. 10017*

**IMPORTANT**

*Please stipulate that the recipient of your contribution is the Jewish Bible Quarterly, P.O.B. 29002, Jerusalem*



Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.