

Harmonizing with the Spirit: Rethinking Prophetic Ecstasy in 1–2 Samuel

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Abstract

This article challenges the dominant scholarly interpretation of prophesying in 1–2 Samuel as ecstatic madness or uncontrolled raving. Since Hölscher (1914), commentators have characterized prophesying in the Saulide narratives as frenzied, orgiastic behavior. This study employs narrative-rhetorical analysis to demonstrate that prophesying in 1–2 Samuel should instead be understood as musically attuned activity empowered by the Spirit of Yahweh.

The consistent association of musical instruments with prophesying (1 Sam 10:5) distinguishes Israelite prophecy from ancient Near Eastern parallels and situates prophetic activity within structured cultic performance rather than chaotic trance. Close reading of Saul's disrobing at Naioth (19:24) reveals prophetic submission rather than madness, paralleling Isaiah 20:2–3. David's explicitly musical and Spirit-empowered "last words" (2 Sam 23:1–7) function as a hermeneutical key for interpreting earlier unlyricized prophesying, creating an *inclusio* with Hannah's prayer (1 Sam 2:1–10). This reading demonstrates that prophetic activity is validated by its origin in divine Spirit rather than the prophet's moral character. The music metaphor structuring these narratives invites readers to hear prophesying as attunement to divine harmony.

Introduction

This paper seeks to make no small claim. Put succinctly, "prophesying" in 1–2 Samuel should not be understood as ecstasy (interpreted as raving like madmen) but as musically attuned to the Spirit. In the history of interpretations of the prophetic in the Old Testament, in the books of the Former Prophets, and even more so with regard to prophesying in 1–2 Samuel, claims are made of "ecstasy" (defined

as madness and raving) for many of the characters described as “prophesying” with wide use of the Saulide tales as exemplar.¹

As a prime example, Joseph Blenkinsopp’s *A History of Prophecy in Israel* claims the *hithpa’el* form of נָבֵא is used in order to emphasize the “wild and uncontrolled behavior” of the prophetic band and Saul joining them (1 Sam 10:5–13; 19:20–24) and Saul’s prophesying as “deranged” (1 Sam 18:10–11).² He further claims the *niph’al* stem of נָבֵא “is also used of communal, orgiastic ecstasy” in 1 Samuel 10:11 and 19:20. He makes this claim in his argument that both stems *may* include “ecstatic behavior” that is out of control or orgiastic even as he has earlier left open that such stem usage does not of itself indicate (negatively) uncontrollable or orgiastic prophesying.³

This paper seeks to address such arguments (which are rather widely held) and notes the ways in which music seems intentionally rhetorically to inform the prophesying of Saul and David (rather than madness and ecstasy as focus or perhaps even present). It is the contention here that such intent is potentially central to understanding the prophetic within 1–2 Samuel overall. The Chronicler’s explicit identification of Levitical musicians as prophets who prophesy with instruments (1 Chr 25:1–3) might be regarded as a fortissimo theological affirmation of what the Samuel narratives present more subtly. However, this study argues that the Samuel narratives themselves already present this theology, providing the foundation for the Chronicler’s later development. It should be noted that the connection between music and prophetic activity appears to be distinctive to the biblical tradition. While prophecy is well-attested in the ancient Near East—notably in the Mari texts (18th century BCE) with the *muḫḫum* and *āpilum*, and in Neo-Assyrian prophecy (7th century BCE)—these prophetic figures are not described as using musical instruments in their prophetic performances.⁴ This makes the consistent association of music with prophesying in 1–2 Samuel all the more significant as

1 The foundational work of Gustav Hölscher seems to have set this trajectory, *Die Profeten: Untersuchungen zur Religionsgeschichte Israels* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1914). The origins and some earlier history up to about 1970 is found in James L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect Upon Israelite Religion* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1971), 7–8. Many others simply follow this even within their own nuanced perspectives: Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel: From the Settlement in the Land to the Hellenistic Period* (The Westminster Press, 1983); Bogdan Mărcășan, “Ecstatic Hypostases in 1 Sam. 10:10–12; 19:18–24,” *Astra Salvensis* 1 (2021): 49–62; Martti Nissinen, “Prophecy and Ecstasy,” pp. 171–200 in, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives*, ed. Martti Nissinen (Oxford Academic, 2017), online edition, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198808558.003.0005>, accessed 6 Nov. 2022.

2 Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, 37.

3 Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, 37.

4 For a monograph that precisely argues against the musicality of ANE literature in prophesying that is proposed to have been read into such via hearing the OT texts and then reading music into the ANE texts, see Jonathan Stökl, *Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: A Philological and Sociological Comparison*, Ancient Near East Monographs 56 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

a characteristic feature of Israelite prophetic tradition that warrants careful interpretation rather than dismissal as mere “ecstasy.”

Methodological Consideration

This study employs a narrative-rhetorical approach to the prophesying texts in 1–2 Samuel, attending carefully to the literary contexts and rhetorical framing of each prophetic episode. Rather than imposing predetermined definitions of prophetic behavior derived from comparative anthropological or ancient Near Eastern studies, this analysis allows the narrative contexts themselves—particularly the consistent association of musical instrumentation with prophesying in 1–2 Samuel—to guide interpretation. The method involves three key moves: first, close attention to the Hebrew lexical range and stem usage without presupposing negative connotations; second, intertextual analysis examining how later explicit prophetic songs (Hannah’s prayer, David’s psalm and postlude) might inform our reading of earlier unlyricized prophesying; and third, narrative-theological reading that traces the development of Saul’s character in relation to the Spirit (רוח) across multiple prophetic episodes. This approach prioritizes the final form of the Masoretic Text while noting significant textual variants that may affect interpretation.

One immediate objection made is that the problem is not so much with the terminology of “ecstasy” that itself is widely used in the literature to describe the prophetic within 1–2 Samuel. The functional definition of “ecstasy” or “ecstatic” is often used to speak of alterations of one’s normal state of mind. So far, so good. This would be acceptable if the definition did not slip into discordant uses almost immediately in a way that denigrates such experiences as contrasted with “acting rationally and delivering coherent messages.”⁵ The alteration of one’s normal state of mind need not mean “mad” or “orgiastic.” It can actually speak of heightened knowing of the divine mind and viewing life as meant by the Spirit of Yahweh. In this sense, it means to harmonize with the divine rationality. The sense of which way to interpret statements of prophesying would then not be predetermined but would allow contexts to offer their own sense.

The basic tendency in the literature has been to claim that the *hithpa’el* (and sometimes *niphal*) stem of נבא points toward raving or madness in prophesying as a negative reading. However, this seems to miss the rhetorical cases of such usage and, after misreading such applies the madness carte blanche to a wide range of texts across the OT as if the finale has begun and we have only to hear the reprise of earlier madness. The discussion of the function of the *hithpa’el* to bear the prophetic without recourse to madness in the texts examined within 1–2 Samuel is meant as a prelude to the discussion of other texts to be examined in future projects.

5 This contrast is stated clearly in Robert R. Wilson, “Prophecy and Ecstasy: A Reexamination,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98.3 (1979): 322.

In this way, Robert Wilson, following anthropological leads, contends that the *hithpa'el* form may more basically indicate “characteristic prophetic behavior” that identifies the person as doing *whatever it is prophets do* rather than specifically *ecstatic experiences* as one of the two functions of the stem.⁶ If only he had heeded his own advice when he goes on to call for a rejection of “generalizations” to be avoided “in future research” with care taken to address “each description of prophetic activity ... individually.”⁷ Instead, he predetermines the negative reading of Saul’s prophesying. The only other explicit connection between music and prophetic reception in the Former Prophets appears in 2 Kings 3:15, where Elisha requests a musician: “But now bring me a musician. And when the musician played, the hand of Yahweh came upon him” (ועתה קח-לִי מנגן והיה כנגן המנגן ותהי עליו יד-יהוה). This scene demonstrates music’s role in prophetic reception, but notably, it results in a clear, rational, strategic oracle about military victory—nothing about raving or loss of control. The music facilitates prophetic receptivity, creating space for the “hand of Yahweh” to come upon the prophet, but the result is coherent speech. This single other explicit music-prophecy connection in the Former Prophets suggests that music serves as an aid to prophetic attunement rather than an inducer of irrational ecstasy, supporting the interpretation of the musical prophets in 1 Samuel as engaged in structured, Spirit-led activity. With this in mind, let us turn the page to hear Saul’s overture to the prophetic in 1 Samuel 10:5–6, and 10.

Saul’s Overture (1 Sam 10:5–6, 10)

“After this you will come to Gibeah of God that is near a garrison of the Philistines and when you enter that town you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place. They will have harps, tambourines, flutes, and lyres, and they will be prophesying. And the Spirit of Yahweh will come rushing upon you and you will prophesy with them and you will be changed into another man.... And when he arrived there, at Gibeah, there was a band of prophets to greet him and the Spirit of God came rushing on him and he prophesied among them.” (1 Sam 10:5–6, 10)⁸

6 Wilson, “Prophecy and Ecstasy,” 330–37.

7 Wilson, “Prophecy and Ecstasy,” 337.

8 All translations are the author’s own unless otherwise indicated. It will be left aside that the fulfillment has “God” for the prediction of “Yahweh” concerning the changing and the Spirit in relation to Saul as well as the shift from “another man” to “another heart.” For an attempt at accounting for the distinctions in relation to the S/spirit and Saul, see John M. Ragsdale, “Rûah Yhwh Rûah ’ēlōhîm: A Case for Literary and Theological Distinction in the Deuteronomistic History,” Dissertation (Marquette University, 2007).

The text shifts from predicting “the Spirit of Yahweh” (רוח יהוה) will rush upon Saul (10:6) to describing “the Spirit of God” (רוח אלהים) actually rushing upon him (10:10). While this distinction may reflect different textual sources, for the purposes of the final form it suffices to note that both phrases indicate divine Spirit agency rather than human-induced trance states. The variation in divine names does not alter the fundamental claim that Saul’s prophesying is Spirit-initiated rather than self-generated ecstasy.

The specific enumeration of four musical instruments—harps (נבל), tambourines (תר), flutes (חליל), and lyres (כנור)—seems rhetorically significant. This is not a generic reference to “music” but a carefully detailed inventory that emphasizes the material, embodied nature of the prophetic activity. These are not instruments associated with inducing trance or frenzy in biblical literature (which would require the circularity of reasoning that this exact usage is the example); rather, they are the instruments of worship, celebration, and royal court performance (cf. 2 Sam 6:5; 1 Kgs 10:12; Ps 150:3-4). The נבל and כנור appear together frequently in contexts of praise and Spirit-inspired song (1 Chr 15:16, 28; 25:1, 6; Ps 33:2; 57:8; 108:2). If the narrator intended to depict wild, uncontrolled ecstasy, the choice to specify these particular instruments of ordered musical performance seems counterproductive. The detail suggests intentional portrayal of structured, musical prophetic activity rather than chaotic raving.

The prophets are “coming down from the high place” (מִן־הַבְּמָה), indicating they have been engaged in cultic activity at a sacred site. The בְּמָה serves throughout Samuel–Kings as a legitimate (if sometimes contested) site of worship and sacrifice to Yahweh prior to the Temple’s construction (cf. 1 Sam 9:12–14 where Samuel himself sacrifices at a בְּמָה). This cultic-liturgical context further distances the prophetic activity from chaotic ecstasy and situates it within structured religious performance. The prophets appear to be processing from worship, perhaps carrying instruments used in liturgical service, making their prophesying part of an ordered cultic event rather than spontaneous madness.

Saul encounters minstreling prophets on their way to a sacred meal. His encounter alters his identity with a “new heart” where he becomes a “new man” and joins the prophetic band. The language of transformation is crucial: Saul receives “another heart” (לֵב אַחֵר, 10:9) and becomes “another man” (אִישׁ אַחֵר, 10:6). This is the vocabulary of fundamental identity change, not temporary insanity. The “heart” (לֵב) in Hebrew anthropology is the center of intellect, will, and moral reasoning—the very faculties that would be lost in madness. To receive a “new heart” suggests enhanced capacity for understanding and alignment with divine purposes, not diminished rationality. This transformation language finds its echo in the prophetic promise of a “new heart” in Ezekiel 36:26, where it explicitly means moral-spiritual renewal, not ecstatic frenzy. The Spirit’s work

here is constructive and formative, preparing Saul for kingship by aligning him with prophetic wisdom, not deconstructing his sanity. This serves as a rhetorical element key to the questioned identity of Saul as “also among the prophets” (1 Sam 10:11; and also 19:24). Some commentators understand the rhetorical question as necessitating a negative response. Others simply leave the question open.

The rhetorical question of 10:12 and 19:24, “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (הגם־שׂאול בנביאים), admits of multiple interpretations, but the narrative context favors a positive reading. The question arises from witnesses who are surprised, not horrified. The surprise stems from Saul’s social status and background—he is the son of Kish, from Benjamin, not from a prophetic guild or priestly family. The question “Who is their father?” (10:12) points to issues of lineage and social belonging, not to the quality or legitimacy of the prophetic activity itself. If the prophesying were manifestly mad or shameful, one would expect expressions of concern, mockery, or attempts to restrain Saul. Instead, the narrative presents communal observation and questioning about identity and belonging. The proverb-like quality of the question (it becomes a מִשַּׁל, a “byword,” 10:12) suggests it entered common usage as a way of expressing surprise at unexpected spiritual gifting, not as a term of derision for madness.

Are the readers to think Saul has become *manic* in joining this prophetic band? Are readers to suppose this prophetic instrumentation is itself an ecstatic “orgiastic”? Robert Wilson assumes that because musical instrumentation was used by the prophetic band encountering Saul, “that trance may have been involved, for music is frequently used to induce trance.”⁹ If this is a trance, then it is one to Saul’s benefit. However, we have no real reason to suppose such a state.

The language of the text is such that readers find Saul so overwhelmed by the Spirit that he enters a state of being outside of himself (not necessarily a trance), but is this outside of sanity or outside of his un-Spirited self? Perhaps the Spirit opened up the possibility of a new identity that itself was better aligned with the rejected divine ruler, Yahweh. Is the rejection of Yahweh’s rule identified earlier in 1 Samuel 8:7 now taken up in the Spirited rule of this newly endowed prophetic monarch? This seems precisely the trajectory of the Former Prophets and tracing the exemplars of Spirit-empowered deliverers in the Judges.¹⁰ Such matters might elude the reader at this point if we presume we do not know what the content of Saul’s prophesying entailed. If the only basis of his prophetic life is the actions of joining the band, we might wonder what this band was doing with their instruments or what their instruments were doing to them. What does our collection

9 Wilson, “Prophecy and Ecstasy,” 332.

10 For several extensive treatments of this trajectory, see Lee Roy Martin, *Judging the Judges: Pentecostal Theological Perspectives on the Book of Judges* (CPT Press, 2018), 75–108, and Rick Wadholm Jr., *A Theology of the Spirit in the Former Prophets: A Pentecostal Perspective* (CPT Press, 2018), 119–138.

of 1–2 Samuel reveal about the contents of musical prophesying? The books of Samuel do not leave us with an unmetered rest but move us to find Saul later overcome by Yahweh’s troubling רוח and in need of an instrument of the liberating רוח to attune Saul yet again to the space of life.

Harping on Saul (1 Sam 16:14–23; 18:10; 19:20–24)

The freshly Spirited David of 1 Samuel 16:13 enters the court of the dis- and re-spirited Saul in 16:14. The departing רוח does not mean absence of רוח for Saul. It means a troubling רוח. While the רוח of liberation rushed upon Saul at his anointing to be king (10:6, 10) and to deliver Jabesh Gilead from Ammon (11:6), he now has a troubling רוח that rushes upon him from time to time (18:10).

This will lead to a number of episodic moments in which Saul’s is overwhelmed and finds some temporary reprieve at the harpistry of David (1 Sam 16:14–23). David’s Spirited instrumentation brings “relief” (the verbal cognate with רוח) to Saul in Saul’s moments of troubling spirit (“and it was a *relief* to Saul,” 16:23). Perhaps following the reading of Basher (and others), the reader is meant to hear in this that Saul can now “breathe freely.”¹¹ However, this relief will not always last. In 1 Samuel 18:10, Israel’s victory songs over the Philistines and her champion seem to heighten the troubled spirit of Saul, who is described as “prophesying in his house while David was playing the harp.”¹²

Many read Saul prophesying in 1 Samuel 18:10 (and later in 19:20–23) as “raving” and in direct contrast to his initial joining of the prophetic band at Gibeah in 1 Samuel 10.¹³ This is by those who may see themselves as generous in their

11 David E. Basher, “Saul and the Not-So-Holy Ghost: 1 Samuel 16:14–23 and Ghost-Induced Illness,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 144.3 (2025): 437–439. Basher provides an extensive discussion of ANE Ghost-induced illness as potentially behind what is happening to Saul, where he may suffer from the inability to catch his breath from such. Of further interest to this study is his noted connections for ANE treatment of such ailments, which involved the specific use of music.

12 The entire episode of 1 Sam 18:10 is absent from Codex Vaticanus (LXX^B) and minuscule 845, suggesting a possible later insertion into the Hebrew textual tradition. However, this variant strengthens rather than weakens the present argument: the episode’s presence in the MT demonstrates an editorial willingness to retain prophesying language even for Saul’s troubled episodes, suggesting that prophesying itself was not understood as inherently negative by the final editors. If the Vorlage of LXX^B lacked this episode, its inclusion in MT may represent an intentional narrative parallel to the prophesying episodes in chapters 10 and 19.

13 Joyce G. Baldwin, *1 and 2 Samuel* (TOTC 8; InterVarsity, 1988), 139, argues that “outwardly the two experiences [of his prophesying in 10:10 and here] were similar”; Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel* (NAC 7; Broadman & Holman, 1996), 201; Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, 37, 66; Robert P. Gordon, *1 & 2 Samuel: A Commentary* (The Paternoster Press, 1986), 160; Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, 2nd ed. (WBC 10; Zondervan, 2000), 188; J. Robert Vannoy, *1–2 Samuel* (CBC 4a; Tyndale, 2009), “This clearly does not mean that Saul gave a message from God, the most usual meaning of the verb ‘to prophesy’ (*naba*’). This is one of several places in the OT where ‘prophesy’ apparently has reference to some sort of frenzied behavioral activity (cf. 1 Kgs 18:29)—probably in this instance it was a display of an uncontrollable and raging anger,” 179n2; Robert R. Wilson, “Prophecy and Ecstasy: A Reexamination,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98.3 (1979): 321–37.

reading of the prophesying of Saul following his anointing. By this point in the stories of Saul, commentators have turned upon him in full force and cannot seem to help but denigrate his prophesying. Robert Bergen will go so far as to claim this tale “identifies Saul as a false prophet (cf. 1 Kgs 22:21–23) and therefore one who was not to be feared (Deut 18:22).” Bergen contends this is due to Saul’s “raving” identified by the unspoken murderous thoughts of Saul as if these are the contents of his prophesying.¹⁴ More tentatively, V. Philips Long indicates such a choice among translations, yet says nothing further either *for* or *against* such a reading of Saul as falsely prophesying and prefers to leave open the possibilities.¹⁵ This presupposes the contents of the prophesying based on the internal thoughts of Saul revealed by the narrator. Such inward violent thoughts may actually be in *response to* Saul’s own prophesying as opposed to the very contents of his prophesying.

The best that can be claimed directly from the text of 18:10 is that Saul prophesied, and in the midst of the prophesying, he acted in rage to kill David with the javelin he found in his hand. Perhaps Saul has taken on an objectified characterization where he prophesies at the instrumentation of David and a troubling spirit of God. The Hebrew construction warrants closer attention: וִיתְנַבֵּא שָׁאוּל בְּתוֹךְ-הַבַּיִת וְדָוִד מִגֵּן בְּיָדוֹ (“and Saul prophesied in the midst of the house, and David was playing with his hand”). The *hithpaal* stem (וִיתְנַבֵּא) grammatically indicates reflexive or iterative action—Saul found himself prophesying or prophesied repeatedly. The construction with בְּתוֹךְ (“in the midst of”) and the circumstantial clause with David playing creates a scene of simultaneity, not causation. The text does not say David’s playing *caused* Saul’s prophesying, nor that the prophesying was itself violent. Rather, two activities occur simultaneously: prophesying and David’s musical performance, followed by Saul’s violent action (וַיִּבְקֵשׁ, “and he sought/tried”). The narrative structure distinguishes the prophesying from the violence, suggesting they are not identical activities but sequential or competing impulses.

Should we understand David’s playing as provocative of Saul’s prophesying or, at the very least, suggestive of the songful nature of that prophesying? Is it possible that Saul has joined in prophetically singing declarations of victories for Israel and thus for Yahweh—perhaps even echoing the very songs of triumph sung by the women (1 Sam 18:7)—all the while troubled that such prophetic singing might include the victories of David alongside, or even surpassing, Saul’s own victories?

While we might expect the troubling רַח of God to grant space to Saul at David’s Spirited playing (1 Sam 16:23), it appears in this text that, instead, Saul’s

¹⁴ Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, 201.

¹⁵ V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel* (TOTC 8; InterVarsity, 2020), 190.

blues turned outright *bellicoso*. Is this a song being played and sung that suggests something akin to the prayer of Hannah that Yahweh “raises the poor ... seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor” (1 Sam 2:8) in light of his previous day’s hearing of the viral pop limerick that received playtime in Philistia: “Saul has slain his thousands, but David his tens of thousands” (1 Sam 18:7; 21:11; 29:5)? Perhaps that very tune gets playtime on David’s harp without intent of greater victory for David, except in the troubled spirit of Saul. Has Saul found himself joining in the chorus of that pop song that grates upon his last string?

The contents of what Saul may have “prophesied” are not given. One would need to discern from other passages the potential nature of such contents and activity. Is his violent response to David one *in accord with* his prophesying (as Bergen argued)? Or is it one in which his madness responds *against the very language* of his prophesying?

The javelin incidents (18:10–11; 19:9–10) present the most significant challenge to reading Saul’s prophesying positively, and they require careful attention. In both instances, Saul is described as prophesying while simultaneously attempting violence. However, several factors suggest the violence contradicts rather than expresses the prophesying. First, in 16:23, David’s playing provides relief (רָחַם) from the troubling spirit—the music and Spirit work together for Saul’s good. The later episodes reverse this: the troubling spirit rushes upon Saul (18:10; 19:9), and music no longer brings relief but becomes the context for internal conflict. Second, the narrative distinguishes the prophesying from the violence temporally and grammatically: “and Saul prophesied ... and David was playing ... and Saul sought to pin David to the wall” (18:10–11). The prophesying and the violence are sequential actions, not identical ones. Third, the text never says Saul prophesied *against* David or that the prophesying itself was violent or incoherent. If the content of his prophesying resembled other prophetic songs in Samuel—declarations of Yahweh’s sovereignty, reversal of fortunes, exaltation of the humble—then his violent response may be an attempt to silence or resist what the Spirit is declaring through him. Saul becomes the tragic figure who speaks divine truth while rejecting it, who sings the Spirit’s song while rebelling against its implications. The prophesying remains valid as Spirit-speech; Saul’s heart remains rebellious.

If we take seriously the possibility that Saul’s prophesying in 18:10 involves actual prophetic content rather than mere raving, Hannah’s song in 1 Samuel 2:1–10 provides the most obvious template for what such Spirit-inspired musical prophesying might sound like. Hannah’s prayer-song celebrates Yahweh’s reversal of fortunes: “He raises the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a throne of honor” (2:8). This theme of the humble being exalted would be particularly provocative for Saul to hear or sing in the context of David’s rising popularity. Hannah’s song is

explicitly described as a prayer that assesses divine activity in human affairs—it is forth-telling about Yahweh’s character and ways, not foretelling specific events. Yet it is presented as paradigmatic of Spirit-inspired speech (note how it anticipates themes that recur in the Magnificat, Luke 1:46–55). If Saul’s prophesying follows this pattern, he may be singing truths about Yahweh’s exaltation of the humble (David) that his own pride cannot accept, creating the internal conflict that erupts in violence. The Spirit speaks through him truthfully, while his heart rebels against that truth.

His prophesying would be noted again later as he seeks to kill David in chapter 19. David has fled to Samuel at Naioth near Ramah. When Saul discovers this, he sends three troops of soldiers to capture David. In each case, the troops encounter prophets prophesying and find themselves joining this ever-growing prophetic choir. Finally, Saul goes to Naioth and finds himself overcome by the divine Spirit and prophesying. Here at Naioth, he “fell naked ... and prophesied ... all that day and night” (19:23–24). This story has been read as a clear indication of the madness of prophesying in 1–2 Samuel. Yet, readers may be missing the rhetorical significance of the context.

First, the prophesying reads as closely tied to that experienced at Gibeah when Saul was first overcome by the Spirit of Yahweh and joined that prophetic band. One can hear the echoes of encounter and joining ringing through the movements of each account. This is also signified by the refrain of Saul “also being among the prophets.” In neither case are the contents of the prophesying ever given explicit lyrics. The vagaries leave open the question of content.

Second, it is stated that Saul “prophesied before Samuel.” If we are to read this as madness, then the prophets already in the presence of Samuel (and all too likely, Samuel himself) are a part of the madness. Wilson argues that the story of 1 Samuel 19:18–24 reveals “typical prophetic behavior to be a form of *uncontrolled* trance” and, thus, that “there is no question that typical prophetic behavior is evaluated negatively” in the thinking of the compiler of 1–2 Samuel.¹⁶ Is this how the text intends for the readers to perceive such prophesying? Or might we hear the presence of Samuel as harmonizing Saul with the prophetic band (and by implication, with Samuel) in confessing the ways of Yahweh rather than opposing Yahweh? The narrative specifically states that when Saul’s first messengers arrive, in 19:20, they see “the company of the prophets prophesying, with Samuel standing as head over them” (הַנְּבִיאִים נִבְּאִים וּשְׂמוּאֵל עֹמֵד נֹצֵב עֲלֵיהֶם וִירָא אֶת־לֵהֻקֶּת). Samuel is not merely present but “standing appointed over them” (עֹמֵד נֹצֵב), a phrase suggesting leadership and oversight, not passive observation. This is structured, organized prophetic activity under prophetic leadership. When the messengers

16 Wilson, “Prophecy and Ecstasy,” 334–335, original emphasis.

and eventually Saul himself join in the prophesying, they are incorporated into an activity that Samuel is directing. To read this as mass insanity would make Samuel the conductor of madness—an interpretation that contradicts his role throughout 1 Samuel as a reliable prophetic voice and judge.¹⁷ The more natural reading is that Samuel's presence sanctifies and validates the prophetic activity, and that those who encounter this Spirit-filled community find themselves overwhelmed by that same Spirit and incorporated into legitimate prophetic expression. The text portrays not contagious madness but contagious inspiration.

Third, the disrobing of Saul in 19:24, often interpreted as “naked,” may not mean “naked” (ערם) in the absolute sense (cf., Job 22:6; 24:7, 10; Isa 58:7).¹⁸ The semantic range of ערם encompasses both complete and partial nudity, with context determining the precise meaning. Isaiah 20:2–3 provides a particularly relevant parallel, where the prophet walks “naked” (ערום) for three years as a prophetic sign—a passage widely understood by commentators as referring to the removal of outer garments rather than complete nudity. Similarly, in Job 24:7, 10, those described as ערום still possess some covering but lack appropriate or adequate clothing for their circumstances. Micah 1:8 likewise employs ערום in the context of prophetic mourning, almost certainly indicating the removal of outer garments rather than absolute nakedness. The term itself is morally neutral, describing a state of being without inherently positive or negative connotations. In Saul's case, the prophetic and royal context strongly suggests a parallel to Isaiah's prophetic disrobing: in fact, only that Saul removed the clothing fitting to his office. To remove his royal garments would be to remove his kingly claims in the very presence of the one who anointed him king and of the one he fears may become king. To be “naked” in this way is to indicate the laying aside of claims of his royal prerogatives for the sake of David. This prophetic act serves as Saul's submission to the mind and will of Yahweh rather than opposition to such. Saul's prophetic stripping in this narrative evokes the earlier telling of Jonathan's previous disrobing in order to give David his accoutrements of royalty (18:4). What Jonathan did out of love for David in chapter 18, Saul may be doing out of yielding to the overwhelming Spirit in chapter 19. Yet Saul is doing so following the lead of the prophetic Spirit.

17 Notwithstanding the well-argued claims of J. Richard Middleton concerning narrative indications of Samuel as undermining Saul in “Samuel Agonistes: A Conflicted Prophet's Resistance to God and Contribution to the Failure of Israel's First King,” in *Prophets, Prophecy, and Ancient Israelite Historiography*, ed. Mark J. Boda and Lissa M. Wray Beal (Eisenbrauns, 2013).

18 Against a preponderance of commentators on this passage that read “naked” in its absolute sense rather than culturally mediated and understood in its literary sense here. As one example of what seems a failed attempt at careful readings of clothing regarding the Saul/David narratives in 1–2 Samuel with specific regard to these texts, see Ora Horn Prouser, “Suited to the Throne: The Symbolic Use of Clothing in the David and Saul Narratives,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 21.71 (September 1996): 27–37 (32).

Thus, it is here that one might find suggestive elements of the prophesying of Saul as indicating his prophetic act of debasement before Samuel (and David) as submission to the will of Yahweh. Here we may encounter Saul actually in his right[eous] mind as yielded to Yahweh. A mind, for that day, attuned to the Spirit. His embodied prophesying would thus accompany his vocal prophesying as declaring Yahweh's will rather than embodying and speaking madness. Perhaps the books of Samuel might offer a clearer indication of lyricized musical prophesying to accompany the unlyricized prophesying of Saul.

David's Postlude (2 Sam 23:1–7)

The (almost) last words of David in 2 Samuel 23:1–7 (and its preceding song in chapter 22) provide precisely the sorts of explicitly lyricized prophetic material to be sung and instrumentalized that the earlier Saulide narratives implied but never quoted. That our text has called these the “last words of David” (דברי דוד האחרונים) is significant despite further Davidic words following in 2 Samuel 24 and into 1 Kings. The significance of such a postlude (whatever its earlier origins as a textual tradition) lies in its explicit identification of David's prophesying as simultaneously musical (“Israel's singer of songs,” נעים זמירות ישראל), Spirit-empowered (“the Spirit of Yahweh spoke through me”), and oracular (נאם). That our text has called these the “last words of David” is significant despite further Davidic words following in 2 Samuel and into 1 Kings. These “words” follow upon an extended Davidic psalm in chapter 22 (cf. Ps 18), which itself prophetically lays claim to the victory of Yahweh and the salvation of Yahweh's anointed.

However, the postlude of David is emphatically the “oracle of David... Israel's singer of songs” whom “the Spirit of Yahweh spoke through” (23:1–2).¹⁹ The language of “oracle” or “utterance” (נאם) is only used as the voicing of two other human characters in the OT—Balaam (Num 23:3–4) and Agur (Prov 30:1)—but is used extensively of the divine voice across the prophetic writings.²⁰ It has been argued that Agur says nothing which would not already be apparent, and Balaam should be “viewed as an ecstatic”—meaning negatively.²¹

Mahri Leonard-Fleckman contends that *ne'um*, as indicating the “prophetic,” is not actually prophetic if such utterances “communicate neither insights about the future nor any new information beyond already known truths.”²² This begs

19 According to Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, McCarter actually proposes that verse 2 describing David as speaking by the Spirit is a late addition based on “much later, extrabiblical references,” however, Leonard-Fleckman contends that by such criteria as McCarter proposes would mean also the deletion of verse one as late addition, “Utterance of David, the Anointed of the God of Jacob,” *JBL* 137.3 (2018): 667–683 (675).

20 Leonard-Fleckman, “Utterance of David,” 673–674.

21 Leonard-Fleckman, “Utterance of David,” 674.

22 Leonard-Fleckman, “Utterance of David,” 673.

the question about precisely what “prophecy” entails. The presupposition being that the prophetic is foretelling rather than prominently forth-telling, that may or may not include foretelling. The prophets of the OT are not prophets because they are predictors but are prophets for declaring the words and embodying (in some fashion) the will of Yahweh. This would not require clear predictive elements. It can be the assessment of divine involvement in life that proclaims the revelation of the God of Israel.

The postlude draws upon the song which precedes it (2 Sam 22, paralleling Ps 18) and ties up the message of the books of Samuel as an *inclusio* with Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2:1–10. Both songs celebrate Yahweh’s exaltation of the lowly and the salvation of Yahweh’s anointed (משיחו, 1 Sam 2:10; cf. 2 Sam 22:51; 23:1). Both are explicitly prayerful-prophetic poetry that declares divine reversal: “He raises the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes” (1 Sam 2:8); “You delivered me from the violent” (2 Sam 22:49). The echoing vocabulary of divine rock (צור, 1 Sam 2:2; 2 Sam 22:3, 32, 47; 23:3), salvation, and anointing creates a theological frame around the entire narrative. The exaltation and salvation of the anointed of Israel by the Rock. The turning of lives from suffering and lack to blessing and plenty, but for the wicked to destruction and undoing. The lyricized emphatic prophetic words of 2 Samuel 23 become the lens of hearing and seeing the prophetic songs of 1–2 Samuel and thus of Saul. It is here, in the spelled-out words of sung prophesying, that readers seem meant to hear the contents of singing oracles in the extended saga. This plays a later foundational role in the reception of Davidic hymnody as prophetic, not for its predictive values alone (or even requiring such), but for its declarations of the revelation of Yahweh’s person and plans.

The connection between musical instrumentation and prophesying, evident throughout the narratives of 1–2 Samuel, receives explicit theological affirmation in the Chronicler’s reception of this tradition. Specifically, 1 Chronicles 25:1–31 organizes the Temple musicians who “prophesy” (מתנבאים) with musical instruments—cymbals, harps, and lyres. This later text makes explicit what the Samuel narratives imply: that musical performance attuned to the Spirit constitutes a genuine mode of prophetic activity, not a descent into madness.

Conclusion

It is here at our finale that we may find ourselves now coming to hear the types of Spirited singing that the prophesying of 1–2 Samuel intends. The lyrics of these songs give voice to the instrumentation without words in the middle. If one is to hear the prophesying of Saul and the unnamed prophetic bands, one should hear the prophesying of David (and Hannah). Though many see Saul among the crazed, the shape of our text suggests he is better viewed in his contrast to “Israel’s singer

of songs” who “utters” the songs of the Spirit of Yahweh but also submits to such and remains attuned. Saul speaks the words and joins in the harmony, but he will not, in the end, commit. His discordant ways rebel against the melody of the Spirit. The very Spirit who sings through him and to him. In this way, Saul is raving, but not according to the Spirit. He raves against the Spirit. Yet when he prophesies, he harmonizes with the Spirit and (even if for a brief moment) is made new, unfolding and participating in Yahweh’s will.

This reading challenges scholarly consensus not merely for the sake of revisionism but because it appears to better account for the narrative’s own rhetoric and theology. If the Samuel narratives intended to portray prophesying as inherently mad or orgiastic, they would not have consistently associated it with divine Spirit activity, musical instrumentation, and the submission of even a failed king to Yahweh’s purposes. That Saul prophesies in response to the Spirit—even when he later rebels against that Spirit’s direction—suggests that prophesying functions as a category of divine address that transcends the moral character of the prophet. This has implications for understanding prophecy throughout the Former Prophets: prophetic activity is not validated or invalidated by the prophet’s subsequent obedience or disobedience, but by its origin in the divine Spirit. The music metaphor that structures these narratives invites readers to hear prophesying as attunement to divine harmony—an attunement Saul briefly achieves but ultimately abandons, while David sustains it as “Israel’s singer of songs.”

The implications of this reading extend beyond 1–2 Samuel to our understanding of prophecy throughout Scripture. If prophesying can be authentic Spirit activity even when the prophet subsequently rebels (as with Saul) or when the prophet’s character is questionable (as with Balaam, Num 22–24), then prophecy functions less as validation of the prophet and more as testimony to the sovereignty of the Spirit. The Spirit speaks through whom the Spirit chooses, even using that speech to judge or redirect the speaker. This understanding resonates with the New Testament’s distinction between spiritual gifts and spiritual fruit (1 Cor 12–13; Gal 5:22–23)—one may prophesy accurately while lacking love or maturity. It also helps explain how the Psalms attributed to David could be received as prophetic Scripture despite David’s moral failures: the Spirit’s use of David as a conduit for musical prophecy does not require David’s perfection, only his attunement in those moments of inspiration. The music metaphor proves apt precisely here: an instrument can be badly maintained or poorly used most of the time and still, in skilled hands and in moments of proper tuning, produce beautiful and true music. Saul was such an instrument—capable of harmonizing with the Spirit when overwhelmed by it yet ultimately choosing discord.