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### Schools of the Prophets Paradigm for Pastoral Education

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# SCHOOLS OF THE PROPHETS PARADIGM FOR PASTORAL EDUCATION

By Richard M. Davidson

## Introduction

This essay examines the biblical data and counsels from the writings of Ellen White regarding the schools of the prophets, exploring how the Old Testament “schools of the prophets” paradigm might serve as a model for our pastoral education today.

**A. Why use the Schools of the Prophets as a “Divine Paradigm” for pastoral education?** Ellen White writes: “Our schools are to be as the schools of the prophets” (PH 145, Page 47). “The youth should be encouraged to attend our training schools for Christian workers, which should become *more and more like the schools of the prophets*.... Some will be trained to enter the field as ...gospel ministers” (8T 230, italics supplied here and elsewhere for emphasis). “You should endeavor to train the *very best class of workers*, who as teachers and ministers of the gospel will be able to educate others. All who are now connected with the work of education must not follow the same, same, old methods. *Our schools should be more after the order of the schools of the prophets*” (PH 158, “Testimonies Relating to Emmanuel Missionary College,” Page 7).

**B. Biblical passages referring to the “band of prophets” (time of Samuel) or “sons of the prophets” (time of Elijah and Elisha):** 1 Samuel 10:5, 10–13; 19:18–20; 2 Kings 2:1–18; 4:1–7, 38–41; 6:1–7; 9:1–10. The biblical text does not explicitly call these “bands” of the “sons of the prophets” schools, but the narratives make clear that such was their intended function (see 1 Samuel 19:18–20; 2 Kings 4:38; 6:1).

## Schools of the Prophets Paradigm

### I. Origin and Overall Goal of the Schools of the Prophets

The original divine purpose for the

education of Israel was through the family structure, just as this structure was designed to be the fabric of society as a whole. But during the time of the Judges the moral fabric of society deteriorated dramatically (Judges 21:25—“everyone did what was right in his own eyes;” 1 Samuel 3:1—“the word of the Lord was rare in those days”). Even the High Priest’s sons apostatized (1 Samuel 2:22), and God raised up Samuel to be a teacher (as well as prophet/seer, priest and judge) in Israel (see 1 Samuel 10:5, 10–13; 7:16, 17). Under God’s direction, Samuel founded “schools” called “bands of prophets” to train men qualified as leaders and counselors in Israel, to instruct the people in the ways and works of God (1 Samuel 19:18–20; Samuel is described as “leader” [Hebrew *natsab*, *Nif*. ptc.] over them; cf. Ed, Page 46). These schools were thus designed for those who “desired to search deeper into the truths of the word of God, and to seek wisdom from above” (PP, Page 635). These schools continued to function under the direction of Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2–9) and the students, then called “sons of the prophets,” were not actually prophets in the strict sense of the term, but students of the prophets receiving training for ministerial leadership in Israel. Ezra appears to have revived schools of the prophets after the Exile (see below under IV. B.).

### II. Entry Requirements

*Deep spirituality, high mental acumen and academic excellence* were expected. This is implicit in the biblical narratives describing students at these schools, and explicit in Ed, Page 46: “Samuel gathered companies of young men who were *pious, intelligent, and studious*. These were called the schools of the prophets.”

Age requirements are not explicitly

stated, but the schools of the prophets included at least some married students (2 Kings 4:1).

### III. Faculty Qualifications

The character profiles in the biblical narratives of Samuel, Elijah and Elisha—the explicitly named teachers in the schools of the prophets—provide a picture of teachers who (1) were well versed in Scripture; (2) maintained a close personal communion with God (a “progressive Christian experience,” FE, Page 223); (3) had received a special endowment of the Holy Spirit; and (4) were respected and trusted by the people for their learning and their spirituality. [See Ed, Page 46 for this fourfold summation.]

Ellen White further characterizes the teachers in the schools of the prophets (as well as what they should be like today): “There should be unselfish, devoted, faithful teachers, teachers who are constrained by the love of God, and who, with hearts full of tenderness, will have a care for the health and happiness of the students. It should be their aim to advance the students in every essential branch of knowledge” (6T, Page 152; cf. Pages 152–161 for a summary of the essential qualification of teachers in our colleges and seminaries). She especially points out the need for humility on the part of the teachers today, like in the schools of the prophets: “When teachers are willing to sit in the school of Christ and learn of the Great Teacher, they will know far less in their own estimation than they do now. When God becomes the teacher, He will be acknowledged, His name will be magnified. The students will be as were the young men in the schools of the prophets, upon whom the Spirit of God came, and they prophesied” (CT, Page 373).

#### IV. Curriculum

##### A. Central focus upon Scripture.

Ellen White provides insight that in the schools of the prophets the students were not taught from the "study books that were in the common schools," but focused upon Scripture and upon "knowledge of Jesus Christ" (Spalding and Magan Collection, Page 357). "Holy Scriptures were the essential study in the schools of the prophets" ("The Advocate," 2/1/1900). In the school of the prophets, "the Word of God [was] lying at the foundation of all" ("Pacific Union Recorder," 8/13/1914).

##### B. "Chief subjects [not just sources] of study."

By the time of Samuel, there existed at least the Torah and parts of the Former Prophets or Historical books (Joshua and probably Judges and Ruth) and, by the time of Elijah and Elisha, perhaps more of the Historical books (Samuel and part of Kings?) and some Hymnic/Wisdom literature (much of Psalms and Proverbs; Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes). Thus, the study material for the schools of the prophets included Torah, the record of God's mighty acts in salvation history, collections of inspired psalms and poetry. Ellen White summarizes (Ed, Page 47): "The chief subjects of study in these schools were the law of God, with the instruction given to Moses, sacred history, sacred music, and poetry". When Ezra re-established the schools of the prophets after the Exile (this may be implied in the description of him as "a skilled scribe in the Law of Moses" [Ezra 7:6] and his public teaching of the Law [Ezra 8:1-12]; see 3 BC, Page 1134: "Ezra . . . became a teacher of the law and the prophecies in the schools of the prophets"), the Scriptures then included virtually all of the Old Testament. This inspired biblical material is thoroughly Christ-centered (including the typological focus of the sanctuary services and liturgy and hymnody, and the various lines of Messianic prophecies in the prophets).

##### C. A balanced focus upon doctrine (truth), ethics (goodness) and aesthetics (beauty).

The inspired, single-minded quest of David, as described in Psalm 27 (Verse 4: "One thing . . . will I seek"), is an intentional focus upon what the philosophers have called the "triple star of value" in human life: beauty (Verse 4: "to behold the beauty [no' am] of the Lord"), truth (Verse 4: "to enquire [baqar, to diligently investigate, the truth of a matter] in

his temple"), and goodness (Verse 13: "the goodness of the Lord"). Ellen White relates this three-fold focus to the curriculum and methodology of the schools of the prophets and what is needed in today's education: "How wide the difference between those schools taught by the prophets of God and our modern institutions of learning! . . . Were this principle [the call to excellence] given the attention which its importance demands, there would be a radical change in some of the current methods of education. Instead of appealing to pride and selfish ambition, kindling a spirit of emulation, teachers would endeavor to awaken the love for goodness and truth and beauty—to arouse the desire for excellence" (PP, Pages 594-595). A curriculum balancing these values will contain not only an emphasis upon doctrine (truth), ethics (goodness), but also aesthetics (beauty). This is modeled in the schools of the prophets in their subject areas of study: doctrine and ethics highlighted in the legal and historical portions of Scripture, and aesthetics underscored in the sacred music and poetry.

##### D. Emphasis on character development.

A close reading of the narratives related to the schools of the prophets reveals a deep spirituality pervading these educational institutions. Both of Saul's encounters with the "bands of prophets" finds a group of students filled with the Spirit, so much so that their experience envelops and "charges" the visitor with some of that same Spirit (1 Samuel 10:5-10; 19:20-24). Ellen White elaborates on the spiritual tone and its powerful effects in these schools: "The school of the prophets was a special school to get the endowment of the Holy Spirit of God and then go forth into the dark places of the earth and seek for those who would listen to the testimony that they had to bring" (Loma Linda Messages, Page 535). Again, "It [the Holy Spirit] came into the schools of the prophets, bringing even the thoughts into harmony with the will of God. There was a living connection between heaven and these schools; and the joy and thanksgiving of loving hearts found expression in songs of praise in which angels joined" (CT, Pages 67-68). "The Holy Spirit was eagerly sought for in the schools of the prophets" (RH 9/3/1908).

The character development of the students in the schools of the prophets was of a very practical nature.

The biblical narratives give insights into their daily experience in the days of Samuel and Elijah and Elisha, and reveal that the students were receiving knowledge of practical godliness, learning to trust God in experiences of hardship and challenge. Ellen White summarizes the practical side of the training: "A spirit of devotion was cherished. Not only were the students taught the duty of prayer, but they were taught how to pray, how to approach their Creator, how to exercise faith in Him, and how to understand and obey the teachings of His Spirit" (Ed, Page 47). She further expresses the wish that Christian educators today may "bring into our schools the spirituality that was seen in the schools of the prophets" (PH 145, Page 46).

##### E. Corporate worship, involving sacred music.

Special emphasis was placed upon corporate worship and, in particular, praise of God in sacred music. Saul finds the students of the school "prophesying . . . with a stringed instrument, a tambourine, a flute, and a harp before them" (1 Samuel 10:5). Ellen White elaborates on the importance of music instruction and music in the worship experience of the schools of the prophets (see PP, Pages 593-594). She describes an occasion at Battle Creek College when the Holy Spirit's manifestation was similar to the times when the Spirit was poured out on the students in the schools of the prophets in the days of Samuel (1 Samuel 10:5-10), and then adds: "The Lord would be glorified if hallelujahs of rejoicing were heard in our schools" (Special Testimonies on Education, Page 79). Summarizing the importance of musical training in the curriculum, she writes: "The art of sacred melody was diligently cultivated in those schools of the prophets." This involved "sacred, solemn, psalms of praise to the Creator, exalting His name and recounting His wondrous works." Such music served a "holy purpose, to lift the thoughts to that which was pure and noble and elevating, and to awaken in the soul, devotion and gratitude to God" (ST 6/22/1882).

**F. Evangelistic outreach:** A striking example of evangelistic outreach by personal influence is found among the school of the prophets narratives in Scripture: Saul's contact with the students in the school leads to his conversion (1 Samuel 10:5-12; Verse 6: [when Saul met the prophesying/praising students he was] "turned into another man"). Other examples in the lives of Elijah and Elisha and their

students represent outreach spreading a divine influence beyond the confines of their school: Elijah anointing Hazael king of Damascus (1 Kings 19:15; 2 Kings 8:8–15); Elisha's contact with and instrumentality in the conversion of Naaman, commander of the Syrian army (2 Kings 5); and the student of Elisha being sent to anoint King Jehu (2 Kings 9:1–13).

Ellen White catches the impact of these accounts and application for today, and counsels: "Let the workers be educated as were the youth in the schools of the prophets....Let every effort be made to arouse and encourage the missionary spirit....Let each be taught to work for others, by practical labor for souls just where he is" (7T, Page 148).

**G. Physical training.** Biblical narratives dealing with the schools of the prophets reveal examples of the students in these schools involved in manual labor/physical exercise (2 Kings 6:1–7). Ellen White comments: "The physical as well as the religious training practiced in the schools of the Hebrews may be profitably studied.... And now, as in the days of Israel, every youth should be instructed in the duties of practical life. Each should acquire a knowledge of some branch of manual labor by which, if need be, he may obtain a livelihood.... Every student should devote a portion of each day to active labor" (PP, Page 601).

## V. Teaching/Learning Methodology

**A. Oral instruction based upon the Hebrew Scriptures.** The instructional methodology in the schools of the prophets appears to have been largely oral—instruction combined with discussion. We find, for example, Elisha in Gilgal, with "the sons of the prophets sitting before him" (2 Kings 4:38). This oral instruction no doubt was coupled with and founded upon the study of Scripture. Ellen White amplifies: "In both the school and the home much of the teaching was oral; but the youth also learned to read the Hebrew writings, and the parchment rolls of the Old Testament Scriptures were open to their study" (cf. Ed, Page 47).

**B. "Incarnational" teaching model.** Reading the narratives revolving around the schools of the prophets gives the impression that the teachers (Samuel, Elijah, Elisha) employed what we might today call an "incarnational" model of education: see the various occasions of discussion and miracle linking disciples and teacher; note especially the "incarnational"

implication of Elisha's "sitting before them" and the ensuing discussion at the meal table (2 Kings 4:38–41) and the dynamic settings of students' "prophesying" and praising as they traveled to and from worship or met with their teacher (1 Samuel 10:5; 19:20). Ellen White gives a detailed summary of this "incarnational" teaching-learning methodology in the schools of the prophets: "This is the way in which the schools of the prophets were conducted. Time was given in class for a faithful study of the thoughts presented. Hearts were warmed, and the voice of praise and thanksgiving was heard. The sacred gospel was humanized, as in the teachings of Christ. Much was accomplished for both teachers and students. Time was given for each to partake of the heavenly repast—to study the truths presented and then to add that which he had received from God" (CT, Pages 436–7; see also the preceding two paragraphs in her description of the collegial, egalitarian manner of the instruction).

**C. Making the Bible "come alive" in personal experience.** The teaching methodology obviously went far beyond mere impartation of intellectual data. As the biblical narratives imply, it involved making Scripture "come alive" and real in the experience of both teacher and student. As Ellen White put it with regard to the students' experience in the Old Testament training schools: "As they studied the word and the works of God, His life-giving power quickened the energies of mind and soul, and the students received wisdom from above.... Sanctified intellect brought forth from the treasure house of God things new and old, and the Spirit of God was manifested in prophecy and sacred song" (Ed, Pages 46–47).

**D. Spirit of cooperation vs. competition.** The motivational spirit underlying study at the schools of the prophets is also apparent in the biblical narratives, where the students under Samuel were seen as a united "band" or "company," (Heb. *khebel* or *lahaqah*, 1 Samuel 10:5; 19:20) working and worshiping together without any evidence of rivalry or competition. The same is apparent in the congenial atmosphere implicit in the scenes of the schools of the prophets under the leadership of Elijah and Elisha. This spirit of cooperation and unselfish motivation is highlighted by Ellen White (PP 595).

**E. Lofty motivations for excellence.** Ellen White points out how, instead of fostering a spirit of pride and emulation, in the schools of the prophets there was the endeavor "to awaken the love for goodness and truth and beauty—to arouse the desire for excellence. *The student would seek the development of God's gifts in himself, not to excel others, but to fulfill the purpose of the Creator and to receive His likeness*" (PP, Page 595).

**F. Student respect for instructors.** A spirit of congeniality and respect is also stressed with regard to the students for their teachers. This is underscored in biblical accounts of the schools of the prophets by the humble self-designations (2 Kings 4:2; 6:3), courteous forms of address (2 Kings 6:5), and respectful actions (2 Kings 2:15) employed by the students in their interaction with Elisha. Ellen White appeals to students in her day to be like those in the schools of the prophets that upheld teachers and administrators: "Students, never be found disparaging the schools which God has established.... When each student in our institutions of learning acts his part with fidelity, as Daniel acted his part in wicked Babylon, these institutions will resemble the schools of the prophets. No wrong influence will then go from the students. As consecrated instrumentalities, they will help to do the work they see necessary to be done. They will help to carry the burdens borne by the president and the teachers, and instead of disparaging the school, they will speak of the excellence and personal merit of the teachers" (Notebook Leaflets from the Elmshaven Library, Volume 1, Page 83).

**G. Intensity and diligence in study.** Implicit in the biblical narratives is a mood of intensity and diligence of study among the students at the schools of the prophets (see, e.g., 1 Samuel 10:5; 19:20; 2 Kings 4:38). Ellen White elaborates by pointing out that in the study of Scripture the student then (and now) should "grapple with difficult problems" and find in the Word "subject for the deepest thought, the loftiest aspiration" (PP, Page 596). "In the reverent contemplation of the truths presented in His word the mind of the student is brought into communion with the infinite mind. Such a study will not only refine and ennoble the character, but it cannot fail to expand and invigorate the mental powers" (PP, Pages 596–599).

**H. Older, more-experienced students mentoring younger ones.** In the schools of the prophets, we find the example of *older and more experienced workers (Samuel, Elijah, Elisha) instructing younger workers, working together in the ministry, allowing the younger workers an opportunity “to carry every burden that their youth and experience will allow. Thus Elijah educated the youth of Israel in the schools of the prophets; and young men today are to have a similar training”* (Ev, Page 683). The example of younger workers being trained as he associates with and imitates the older worker is likewise illustrated in Elijah’s mentoring of Elisha (1 Kings 19:21). (Ron E. Clouzet, “A Biblical Paradigm for Ministerial Training” [DMin diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1997], 114–115).

**I. The principle of “supersession”:** **students trained to supersede their teachers.** The mentoring of Elisha by Elijah also illustrates the biblical principle of “supersession” in which “*the destiny of those trained for ministry is to supersede the ministry of their predecessors*” (Clouzet, 116; cf. 115–116 for further discussion of this principle and of how its outworking in the lives of Elijah and Elisha typifies the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus).

## VI. Faculty-Student Relations

The biblical picture is one of close and intimate associations between faculty and students in the schools of the prophets. The students not only were “sitting before” their teacher (Elisha) in the academic setting (2 Kings 4:38), but also “living before” him in various domestic activities of their daily routine (2 Kings 6:1)—the Hebrew phrase in both cases is the same, implying equal intimacy in both academic endeavors and daily life.

Teachers and students worked together in manual labor (2 Kings 6:1–4; cf. MM, Page 81: “For many years it has been presented to me that teachers and students should unite in this work [vigorous physical exercise in the open air]. This was done anciently in the schools of the prophets”). They at least

sometimes shared meals (2 Kings 4:38). Teachers showed concern for the financial situations of the students (2 Kings 4:1), developed deep trust relationships (2 Kings 9:1–10), and shared a mutuality of interest in each other’s welfare (2 Kings 2:1–6).

Ellen White suggests that our schools today should be more like the schools of the prophets, and then refers to them not only as “training schools” but as “family schools, where every student will receive special help from his teachers, as the members of the family should receive help in the home” (6T, Page 152).

## VII. “Delivery System”

**A. Location:** The main location for Samuel’s training school was at his hometown of Ramah (1 Samuel 19:18; cf. 7:17), with another campus apparently at the location of the ark at Kirjath-jearim (1 Samuel 7:1–2; cf. Ed, Page 46). Samuel may have had “extension centers” at the other major points of his yearly circuit: Bethel, Gilgal and Mizpeh (1 Samuel 7:16). Later, especially in the time of Elijah and Elisha, other “campuses” were apparently established: Bethel (2 Kings 2:3), Jericho (Verse 5), and Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38). The location of all these sites is significant in that they constitute places important in the history of God’s mighty acts for Israel, thus promoting a historical consciousness in the minds of the students.

**B. Size:** The narratives speak of a “band” or “company” of prophets in connection with Samuel (1 Samuel 10:5; 19:20), indicating a significant-sized group. The “sons of the prophets” in the days of Elijah and Elisha were comprised of a “student body” of considerable size in each location—at least 50, even up to 100 and perhaps more (2 Kings 2:7; 4:43).

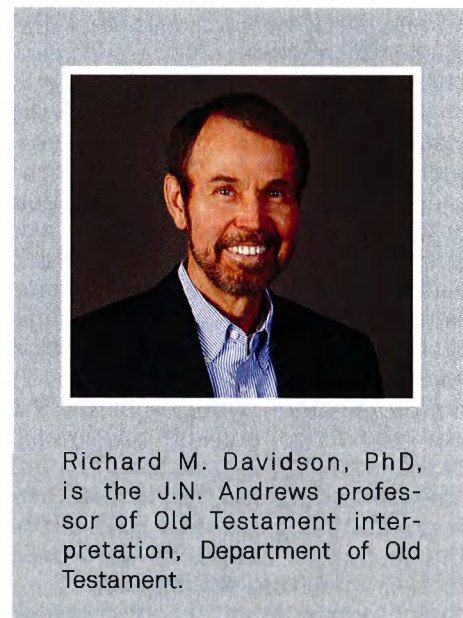
**C. Living facilities and arrangements:** The narratives give some evidence of communal living, including eating together (2 Kings 4:38) and formal living quarters (2 Kings 6:1–2). There is also evidence of rural conditions with students (and apparently at times teachers) supporting

themselves by manual labor (2 Kings 6:1–7; cf. Ed, Page 47: “*The pupils of these schools sustained themselves by their own labor in tilling the soil or in some mechanical employment*”).

**D. Length of training:** No data is available on the length of time the students spent in the schools of the prophets, but Ellen White notes in the context of these schools, that *Elisha spent “several years” in ministerial training under his mentor Elijah* (PK, Pages 224–5).

## Conclusion

The inspired data in the Bible and the writings of Ellen White give a rather comprehensive profile of the schools of the prophets in Old Testament times. Ellen White urges that our training schools for ministers and teachers become “more and more like the schools of the prophets” (8T 230). I conclude with questions for Adventist colleges and theological seminaries to ponder: How much of this Old Testament profile is relevant today? Do our current curricula and delivery systems measure up to the school of the prophets paradigm? In what ways can additional elements of the paradigm be incorporated into our pastoral educational models?



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## Resources for Further Research

See especially Ron E. Clouzet, “A Biblical Paradigm for Ministerial Training” (D.Min. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1997), chapter 4 (pp. 97–117); Ellen White, *Education*, chapter 6, “The Schools of the Prophets” (pp. 45–50); idem, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, chapter 58, “The Schools of the Prophets” (pp. 592–602); idem, CD Rom entries under “The Schools of the Prophets” (192 entries).