

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Prophet and Community

IN THE FIRST article in this series I outlined some of the ideas which are currently proposed about the relationship of the community to law. There is a strong tendency to see the law not as the constituent element of community, its backbone, as it were, but rather as an instrument of the community. That is, the community is constituted by the special relationship which its members share with God. This relationship is antecedent to law, and it is currently the fashion to speak of the relationship in terms of covenant. The term has advantages because it includes the element of choice. Primarily this refers to the divine will: God has chosen his people for a special relationship to himself; but secondarily there is also the element of agreement: men enter into this relationship of their own free will. In the biblical, or more especially the Old Testament sense, then, community is a union of persons who are one because they have freely responded to the divine choice. Thus one can speak of community without mentioning law. Yet any human group needs some guide for its conduct, whether this be the conduct among members of the group or the conduct of the group in relation to its environment. Without such a guide, the group will be torn apart by the frictions of human social intercourse, or crushed or abandoned by the movement of history, because its conduct is unsuitable to its environment. Hence the necessity for law as a guide to community conduct: but a law sensitive to changes in the character of the members of the group and in the environment. Without such sensitivity the law can become as destructive as a total lack of law; in such a case, it becomes a source of friction within and without the community. Only law which displays this necessary sensitivity, with its openness to change, can claim to be biblical in the proper sense.

This raises a question: Just how is the community to exercise this sensitivity? What person or what institution is to provide for the necessary adaptability of the community's law? Given the nature of the bible and the history of modern biblical scholarship, it was inevitable that the question be posed in terms of prophecy. How did the biblical prophet relate to the community which claimed to be the people of God, and to the law of that community? Obviously this is a question of more than historical interest in a day when we are emphasizing the role of prophecy in the Church, and when it is often assumed that prophecy as such is anti-institutional.

It is something of a paradox that the classical view of modern scholarship on biblical prophecy saw it as being at once anti-institutional and a source of institutions. By 'classical view', I mean that based on the study of the sources of the biblical texts and expressed in a reconstruction of the history of biblical religion which recognized that it, like all things human, evolved.¹ According to this view, the first form of israelite religion was very primitive. God was

looked upon as the father of the people in a quite literal sense, and the people felt assured of his support as long as they performed the necessary rites. There was little or no question of morality. It did not matter how one conducted his life so long as he was faithful to prescribed religious practices. It was this form of religion and its institutions against which the prophets rebelled. They insisted on the worship of the one true God against the older view which indeed called for worship of the god of Israel, but thought of him as just one among other gods distinguished only by the fact that he happened to be the god of a particular group. Part of the originality of the prophets lay in their discovery that there was but one God, and that the worship of another was not just disloyalty to the tribal god. It was literally worship of nothing ('nothing' is in fact one of the common names for the gods of the gentiles in the prophets). Their other claim to originality lay in their insistence that ritual was not enough. God was essentially a God of justice, and it did not so much matter how you worshipped him in detail as how you lived your life in all its aspects.

The critical theologians of the last century summed this up by declaring in an unattractive phrase that the prophets discovered 'ethical monotheism'. So far they were seen as rebels, brilliant individuals who protested against the institutionalized religion of their day. Their protest seemed to succeed to a surprising extent, for their ethical monotheism was codified in the law. This demanded above all else that worship be given to Yahweh alone, but it also contained an elaborate expression of ethics – concrete guides to moral conduct. Ironically, in this view, the codification produced a new institution, unresponsive to change and tending to reduce religion to outward observance, the very thing against which the prophets had protested, though at least these observances were at a higher level than the quasi-totemism against which the prophets had originally fought.

I have dwelt at length on this view partly because it is the view which is still dominant in non-specialist circles, but most of all because it is still basic. Present-day study of biblical prophecy starts from a concern with the relation of the prophets to the cult and the law of Israel. While no *opinio communis* dominates current views on these matters, I think that it is safe to say that there is a large measure of agreement that the prophets were what might be called radical conservatives. That is, far from seeking an overthrow of the institutions of their day in the light of new insights, they were calling for a purification of those institutions in the name of a return to the true traditions of Yahwistic religion. The disagreement lies in determining just what these traditions were, and especially in deciding how the prophets came to know them and felt themselves authorized to criticize things in their name.

One must over-ride nuances in setting up simple divisions in matters like these, but it is necessary to distinguish major currents of opinion concerning

¹ The view is brilliantly stated in Wellhausen, J.: *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (New York, 1957 – reprint).

the sources and justification of prophetic criticism. One school looks to the cult. It finds in the forms and practices of israelite worship the agent which passed on the authentic traditions; and these were the basis of prophetic criticism of the kind of life they found in the community of God's people in their time. The other school looks more to the concept of covenant as the source of prophetic ideas and prophetic authority.²

Those who look to the cult as the source of the traditions with which the prophets worked and of the position which gave their words authority, can begin their case by pointing out that all religions, even the most primitive, have an ethical element. They insist that one's relation with the divine is dependent not only on the performance of certain ritual practices but also on conformity to certain directions as to how one must live. In view of this it is antecedently certain that israelite religion, even in its earliest stage, had its ethical as well as its ritual code. As in all religions, conformity with such a code was a condition upon remaining a member of the community and joining in its religious celebrations. That is to say, the very fact of there being a religion and a cult implies a guide to conduct.

In addition, the bible itself indicates a specific code of this nature which was operative in Israel. The so-called torah psalms, 15 and 24, are evidence of this. They depict a would-be worshipper asking the priest the conditions which would render him fit to join in the worship. The answers are not in terms of ritual cleanliness or the like, but of moral precepts. To take part in israelite worship it was necessary to love justice and hate iniquity. Such priestly decisions and teaching was an on-going thing – Haggai 2, 10–13 is an example of the process at work even in the post-exilic period – which could form a body of law itself adaptable to changing conditions. Thus the apparatus of worship could provide the prophet with a body of norms against which he could judge the people.

What about his right to do so? Of course, the prophet is presented to us as

² For expositions of the cultic view of prophecy see Johnson, A. R.: *The Cultic Prophet in Ancient Israel* (Cardiff, 1962); Ahlström, G. W.: 'Some Remarks on Prophet and Cult', in *Transitions in Biblical Scholarship* (ed. J. Coert Rylaarsdam, Chicago, 1968), pp 131–156.

For the covenant theory see Williams W. G.: 'Tension and Harmony between Classical Prophecy and Classical Law', in *Transitions in Biblical Scholarship*, pp 71–92; Clements, R. E.: *Prophecy and Covenant: Studies in Biblical Theology*, 43 (London, 1965); Hillers, D. R.: *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets: Biblica et orientalia*, 16 (Rome, 1964).

It should not be thought that the authors mentioned on one side or the other say exactly the same thing. For instance, it is possible to combine the cultic idea with the covenantal through the hypothesis of a covenant feast (cf Ahlström), and many other combinations of these and other ideas have been suggested.

Still, it seems fair to treat these divisions as basic, even when they are due to different emphases alone. The difference in emphasis tends to make cult an expression of covenant or vice versa, and this means a basic conceptual division. A quasi-sacramental relationship based on a rite is quite different from one based on a kind of contractual agreement. These things are discussed in more detail in my book, *Kings and Prophets*, Bruce, Milwaukee (now, New York), especially ch. 6.

the recipient of a direct commission from God; but this is in no way public. It could not by itself justify the prophet's claim to speak for God, particularly when he was attacking cherished usages. Men would want some more visible mark of authority. Here once more the cultic theory of prophecy supplies an answer. The prophet was a recognized officer of the shrines. He had a regular place in the liturgy, and this place was to supply the divine answer to the petitions of the people. Psalm 60 is an example of the way this is thought to have worked. In verses 1-7 (1-5 in the english versions) there is a lament and a plea for salvation, and in verses 8-10 (6-8) God is represented as replying that he will indeed intervene. Who spoke for God in the temple service where the petition was made and the answer given? The claim is that it was an official of the shrine, a cultic prophet, who took the part of the divinity.

In this way the concept of the cultic prophet goes far towards explaining the activity of the prophets. It indicates a norm against which he could judge the actions of the people, and condemn or approve according as they met the norm or not. Moreover, the norm was flexible, since it was tied to the on-going life of the community and its constant re-interpretation in the priestly torah, which is properly translated 'teaching' but which came to mean law. Finally, the cult authorized the prophet to speak in the name of God. Even if a given prophet were not himself an official cultic prophet, the existence of such officials would familiarize the people with the prophetic office and make it easier to accept the prophetic claims.

All of this is plausible. Moreover, the evidence from the bible and increasingly from ancient near eastern texts seems to show that there were actually such official prophets. Still, to move directly from this fact to the claim that all prophecy was cultic and to find all the prophetic literature of the bible to be liturgical in origin, as do some extreme proponents of the cult-prophet theory, is to move too far too fast. It cannot be proved that any of the major prophets was an officer of the cult. Even a member of a priestly family like Jeremiah seems to have kept himself aloof from participation in the cult. Further, while it is probable that much of the law was preserved and handed on in the cult, much as the gospel is in our liturgical readings, it is impossible to admit that the cult was the origin of all law. On the contrary, it certainly was not in those cases which are borrowings from the common stock of ancient law. The most that can be said is that such law was eventually read as part of the cult, but even then it is not clear that it was given official status in the community because it was taken into the cult. It may well have been that it was read in the cult because it had already been given status in the community.³

Another popular view of prophecy and its relation to the institutions of Israel at the present time is that which sees prophecy as based on the covenant between Yahweh and his people. As a source for norms against which

³ de Vaux, R.: *Ancient Israel* (New York, 1961), Vol. 2, pp 384-386, has a balanced discussion of the problem of cultic prophecy.

the prophet could judge actions, the covenant would serve much like the cult. Just as there were conditions which had to be met if one wished to remain a member of the worshipping community, so there were conditions if one wanted to remain a member of the covenanted group. These are the laws. Moreover, in two of the great legal collections, the Holiness Code in Leviticus 17-26 and the Deuteronomic Code in Deuteronomy 12-28, the laws are connected with a series of blessings and curses which will be visited upon those who keep or fail to keep the laws. Such sanctions would explain the fierce tone of the prophetic condemnations, for, when they saw that the law was not being observed, they would know that the terrible curses which were attached to the law must come into effect. Thus the covenant theory would explain how the prophet got his norms and why he was so certain that punishment must come upon the people. Once more the prophet would be working out of a tradition, not as an innovator.

The covenant theory does not of itself justify the prophetic office in the way that the theory of the cultic prophet does. This is one of the reasons why the two are often combined. In this way the prophet becomes an officer charged with proclaiming the message of a cult which was essentially a celebration or a renewal of the covenant.

In the first article in this series I pointed out some of the objections to the covenant theory of prophecy. The trouble is that there is no rigorous proof that the prophets' norms could have come only from a covenant tradition. Many of these norms are actually mentioned in connection with covenant, but not with covenant alone. There are alternative explanations of the source of the norms: for example, they may be part of cultic torah! As long as it is not established that a norm is exclusively connected with covenant, reference to such a norm does not prove that the text where the reference occurs must be connected with covenant. There is the same difficulty with the relation of prophetic threats and the curses connected with the covenant. The problem is that such curses are not the exclusive property of covenants. They may, for instance, be connected with law codes such as the Holiness Code or, to go outside the bible, the babylonian Code of Hammurabi which concludes with an extensive series of curses designed to protect the code. There was, in fact, a literary form, a stock of curses common to ancient semitic literature which could be applied to a number of objects. For example, exactly the same curses sanction the code of Hammurabi and a treaty or covenant written a thousand years after the law code. For this reason a prophetic threat may sound very much like a curse connected with covenant, but one can never be certain that the threat is actually taken from the covenant. It may well be taken from that common fund of curses, or from the sanctions of a law code.

It cannot be said, therefore, that we can demonstrate that prophecy was based on covenant. Neither can we demonstrate that it was based on cult law and the office of cultic prophet. It would be unwise to insist on detailed connections in these circumstances. However, certain more general relationships would seem well founded. The cult provided torah, a norm against

which the prophet could judge the actions of his people. So also did the covenant. Even in its simpler forms, when its conditions are not stated, as in the covenant with Abraham, a covenant sets up a relationship between persons. Any personal relationship depends upon the observance of conditions which are established, if not by explicit agreement of the partners, by the usages of time and place. Thus the covenant even in its simplest form would supply norms which an acute observer could apply. He could call attention to the fact that the implied limits had been transgressed, and that this would normally mean the rupture of the relationship. In fact, of course, by the time of the writing of Deuteronomy, which took place before the appearance of most of the prophets who have left their names to biblical books, the conditions governing the covenant between Israel and Yahweh had been made explicit. Hence, one way or another, the covenant like the cult offered the prophet norms for judgment.

Then the cult-prophet would provide at least an example of a man who claimed to speak for God, and his activity would help people to accept the prophet because his actions would not be entirely unfamiliar. This was the figure of Moses, who is presented in some of the oldest layers of the traditions as mediator of a covenant between Israel and Yahweh. If there was one mediator, why not others, even if they must be lesser figures? In fact, once again the book of Deuteronomy makes the thing explicit. Moses was a prophet, and other prophets are to be expected, and they are to function within the covenant framework.

I would be sceptical of anything more precise than this. It seems impossible to work out the details of a prophetic office based on cultic torah. It seems equally impossible to work out details of a 'covenant, whether as an institution or a part of the cult, with sharply defined offices and so on. What seems clear is that there was a body of law which people were used to hearing, taught by priests or preachers who were presented as standing in the place of Moses. This is enough to provide a background for prophecy as it is usually seen nowadays. The prophet did not speak out of a uniquely personal insight. He spoke from a background of law which was familiar enough even if not well observed.⁴ He spoke from a back-ground which provided a place for the preacher who proclaimed or appealed to the law as a necessary adjunct of the most sacred activities. The prophet was not a 'loner', speaking from exclusive personal conviction in condemnation of institutions. Rather he spoke against an institutional back-ground. He appealed to the law of the institution against the institution which abused it, and he spoke from a platform provided by the institution, or at least to an audience which institutional usages had prepared to hear him, if not accept

⁴ What is said here and in the rest of this survey should not be taken to mean that the prophets simply repeated and applied old ideas. They worked from a traditional base, but they were also great innovators. For a discussion of this problem see Fohrer, G.: 'Remarks on Modern Interpretation of the Prophets', in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80 (1961), pp 309-319.

him. He called for reform of the institution, reform in its own terms which he accepted, but which he saw the institution or its members rejecting in action. In this way he helped to keep the community alive; for a community can exist only as long as it retains a structure, which is to say, as long as it is institutionalized; but it remains alive only as long as it is able to adapt its institutional expression to changing circumstances. By crying out against abuses, the prophet was working for just this sort of change. And if it is correct that the law and the prophets were codified and accepted by the institution of israelite religion as early as the sixth century, as one author claims,⁵ it would seem that the community was ready finally to listen to the prophets and make necessary changes, if not in time to save its old institutions from catastrophic change, at least in time to keep itself going.

This may seem like very little. After all, it lost its place of worship, its royal house, and its political independence. Surely anyone would have said that it had lost everything which marked it as a special community. Moreover, all its prospective leaders were dragged into exile. And yet, while every other community which so suffered in those times, and a great many did during that upheaval of empires which took place in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., only this one survived and then renewed itself. The prophets may not have achieved the reforms they sought when they sought them, but their work of preservation and renewal was still not in vain.

⁵ See Freedman, D. N.: 'The Law and the Prophets', in *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, IX (Leiden, 1963), pp 250-265.