

THE PROPHETS AND THE PRESENCE

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AT THE SUMMIT of Israel's religious experience stands the prophetic encounter with Yahweh. Claiming neither hereditary right to the office nor political appointment, nor priestly anointing for the task, the prophet's sole credential is the awareness of having been called by Yahweh to speak and act in his name. Apart from the prophets, Israel's history remains unintelligible, for it is a history which, if not decisively determined by their counsel, was more often than not rejected, and was immensely enriched by their insight and revelation of the divine purpose.

It is precisely in the area of an overriding divine purpose to which the prophets testify that one should distinguish israelite prophecy from analogous prophetic phenomena in the ancient Near East. No one today doubts that old testament prophecy took its rise in a culture which was no stranger to the prophetic experience. The tablets of Mari provide abundant comparative evidence for ecstatic activity which is very similar to some of the earlier forms of prophecy in Israel. The spectacular discoveries at Ebla (Tell Mardikh) in Syria will open a whole new chapter on pre-israelite prophecy. Preliminary studies of this material have already turned up references to two classes of prophets, the *mahhu* (ecstatic) and the *nabi'utum* (note the same root as hebrew *nabi'*), the second of which brings immediately to mind the old testament counterpart.¹

Here we shall confine our attention to the classical prophets, ranging from 750 to 450 B.C., whose message, in its final redaction, is contained in the canonical books issued under their names. It must be said at once that, in these canonical writings, we do not have a perfectly coherent and chronologically smooth compilation of oracles spoken by the individual prophet. Isaiah, like Jeremiah and most of the prophetic books, is a selective crystallization of prophetic teaching, some of which may never have been uttered orally.

¹ Pettinato, T.: *Biblical Archaeologist* 39 (1976), p 49.

Much less may one assume that every oracle which an Isaiah delivered has been preserved in the isaian collection. In the case of Isaiah, moreover, we have not only a residue of prophetic statements made during his long ministry in the eighth century B.C. but also the oracles of later, unknown prophets who came under the influence of the greatest of Israel's prophets.

Because the prophetic word enters the mainstream of a living tradition, the text before us may often contain something other than the original and exact words of the prophet. Through the long years of oral and written transmission, both historical crisis and theological development have refracted the message, adapting it to the needs of a community open to prophetic warning or comfort. The aim is always to provide maximum impact for the original message here and now.

A prophet's preaching was not restricted to its original audience. As Israel journeyed through time, the message accompanied her, even if the historical circumstances to which it had been originally spoken had changed in the interval. The basic conviction underlying the process of tradition was that, once a prophet's word had been uttered, it could never in any circumstances become void. The time when, and the way by which, it reached fulfilment were Yahweh's concern; man's part was to see to it that the word was handed on.²

Today, as in few areas of biblical studies, a satisfying synthesis appears to have been reached as to the nature and function of prophecy. On the original meaning of *nabi'*, the technical word for 'prophet', there is now general agreement; the word has the basic meaning of 'called'. It is now apparent that *nabi'*, in one form or another, is found with this meaning in the vast linguistic territory of Mesopotamia and Canaan. The etymology suggests, accordingly, a person who is called to a particular task; in the case of the israelite *nabi'*, a person called by Yahweh and endowed with a charism proper to this vocation. Etymology has its uses but it does not take us very far. More important is a look at the prophet in action. What function did he serve? What distinguished him from other religious people in Israel? What specific experience provided his accreditation as one who spoke in the name of Yahweh? What is the testimony given by several prophets, forced by controversy to reflect upon the nature and authenticity of their call?

² von Rad, G.: *Old Testament Theology*, vol II (London, 1965), p 45.

A word of caution is in place here. Analysis of the prophetic experience should not force us back to a lengthy psychological study of this phenomenon. An earlier generation, marked by names like Holscher and Lindblom, concentrated heavily on the psychology of religious experience, the phenomenon of ecstasy, and similar subjective states, to the neglect of functional and institutional aspects of the office. While the psychological analysis of the prophets has reached the point of diminishing returns, a new range of possibilities opens up when the prophet is understood within the larger tradition of Israel, and more specifically as the authentic spokesman or delegate of Yahweh in the government of his people. No longer is it possible to see the prophet as an isolated figure on the landscape of Israel's experience with her God. Not only is the prophet heir to and nourished by an antecedent tradition; he enriches that tradition as the spokesman or officer of Yahweh's heavenly government, serving as a line of communication between the Lord and his vassal people. While the prophets saw the historical realm as the proper context for divine activity, they never claimed to give us a full-bodied picture of an historical situation, complete with detailed sequence of events. What they communicate is insight into historical events insofar as they touch Israel's relationship with Yahweh. Within the complexity of unfolding events they discern the master-plan of a living and purposeful God. In a word, the prophet is more concerned with shaping the future than predicting it.

The covenant overtones of the prophetic office are unmistakable; to this the prophet bears a distinctive witness, rarely by explicit mention, but constantly in the presuppositions of his message which is nothing less than a word from the divine Sovereign to vassal Israel. The tradition in which Israel of the prophets is situated can be called one of covenant responsibility. The prophet Micah phrased the question which Israel might raise concerning the divine demand and answered it in one of the finest lines of prophetic proclamation.³

The experience of prophetic call can be specified in some cases by appeal to an image, rooted in the religious imagery of the ancient Near East, but given fresh currency in the prophetic literature. This is the image of the divine council to which the prophet is granted access. The true prophet is one who has stood in the council of Yahweh. Standard examples of this image, which is obviously the israelite counterpart of the council of El in Canaanite religion, are

³ Micah 6, 6-8.

found in 1 Kings 22; 19-28; Psalm 82, 6, 1-12; Jeremiah 23, 18-22. Two passages in the isaian collection deserve attention. The first is the classical vocation scene in Isaiah 6. From the council of Yahweh comes the invitation: 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?'⁴ Before the assembly could even begin a discussion of the question, the answer comes immediately and almost brusquely from Isaiah: 'Here am I, send me!' Contrast the spontaneous offer of Isaiah with the hesitations of another scene depicted in 1 Kings 22, 19-23. On a grander scale second Isaiah, preparing for Judah's return from the babylonian captivity in the sixth century B.C., participates in the divine council of Yahweh and his angelic hosts. The heavenly ministers are enlisted in the task of making ready the highway for the advent of Yahweh in language whose joyful lyricism is one of the highpoints of old testament prophecy. Note the succession of plural imperatives which effectively dramatize the scene and communicate a note of urgency in the comforting message to the exiles. Second Isaiah is assigned to convey the official proclamation of deliverance, with Yahweh pictured at the head of a triumphal procession through a transformed land.

In the case of Jeremiah, at least, the vexing and never wholly resolved problem, of discerning between the true and false prophet, was settled within the framework of this same image.

Now who has stood in the council of Yahweh,
to see him and to hear his word?
Who has heeded his word, so as to announce it?

And in the same passage, Yahweh is made to say:

Had they stood in my council,
and did they but proclaim
to my people my words,
they would have brought them back from evil ways,
and from their wicked deeds.⁵

Once sent by the council of Yahweh, the prophet becomes a messenger bearing the word he has heard; the word may be one of judgment or comfort.

If the fundamental experience of the prophet is an awareness of having been delegated by the divine council, it is no less true that this experience implies a new and distinctive relationship with the

⁴ Isai 6, 8.

⁵ Jer 23, 18, 22.

numinous, the holy, or any other term we may choose to express the One who transcends our visible world. Whether the call comes through an auditory experience or a vision – and the manner of divine summons differs with each prophet – the person so addressed comes to a new and intense realization of the living God, his justice, holiness, and covenant claims upon his people. The prophet, in his experience of the transcendent, is not merely a bearer of the word; he is formed by the word, invited into a fellowship with Yahweh by means of which he shares the divine pathos as well as the divine wrath which can break out at any moment upon faithless Israel. The prophet might more appropriately be described as one who not only receives the word of God but who is possessed by God and empowered with his spirit.⁶

Positioned at the intersection of divine transcendence and immanence, serving the awesome holy One who breaks into history in judgment as well as blessing, the israelite prophet understands the presence of God, in past, present and future, as the mainspring of the prophetic mission to Israel. His basic insight may be described as an awareness that the eternal is in active, personal, and redemptive relation with ongoing temporal events to the extent that history itself achieves unity and intelligibility solely from the presence of Yahweh working within that process. This vision of history, which owes more to the vision of the prophets than to any other individuals encountered in the Old Testament, is a direct outgrowth of Israel's faith, her radical openness to the absolute. It has been trenchantly defined by Millar Burrows:

The basic, distinctive presupposition of all ancient ideas about history is the conviction that in human history the one eternal, living God is working out his own sovereign purpose for the good of his creatures, first for his chosen people, and through them for the rest of mankind.⁷

Recall that the hebrew faith-centred view of history has been strikingly reaffirmed in the understanding of old testament revelation proposed in the documents of Vatican Council II:

He so manifested himself through words and deeds as the one true and living God that Israel came to know by experience the ways of God with men, and with God himself speaking to them through the mouth

⁶ Micah 3, 8.

⁷ Dentan, R.; ed. *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* (New Haven, 1955), p 128.

of the prophets, Israel daily gained a deeper and clearer understanding of his ways and made them more widely known among the nations.⁸

In the prophetic view of the divine presence, whose transcendence and immanence exist in a strong but fruitful tension, we meet the God who was, is and will be present and actively working in what, on the surface, appeared to be only the interaction of Israel with her environment in the ancient Near East. Since the prophets stood within a tradition which they sought to apply creatively to a new situation, it will be useful to remember that Israel understood herself as a people liberated and then invited into an entirely new form of existence at the time of the exodus. Against the background of freedom gained and responsibility assumed the prophets delivered their message to Israel.

For the prophets Israel was not a conglomerate of twelve tribes thrown together by some accidental association, but an historical fact of unique significance, a witness to God's saving purpose as this was first demonstrated in the exodus. 'I am Yahweh your God who brought you from the land of Egypt' stands at the centre of Israel's faith and provides the basis for the prophetic address to this chosen community. As we have insisted more than once, the prophets are the inheritors of a tradition which can be traced to the exodus and ultimately to the call of Abraham. To this last name second Isaiah appeals as late as the sixth century B.C.:

Look to Abraham your father
and to Sarah who bore you;
for he was but one when I called him,
but I blessed him and made him many.⁹

But the highest ideals can degenerate into lifeless conventions; too often there is but a short step from sincere worship to empty ritual. The old testament prophets do not hesitate to expose a people smugly complacent in her election to privileged relationship with Yahweh. Amos unsparingly brought the reminder of judgment which would fall upon a nation unfaithful to the demands of covenant. In a masterstroke of irony, election itself has become Israel's liability.

You alone have I favoured,
more than all the families of the earth;

⁸ *Dei verbum*, 14.

⁹ Isai 51, 2.

therefore I will punish you
for all your crimes.¹⁰

The opening lines of Isaiah's 'Song of the Vineyard' poignantly disclose the sense of divine hurt over Israel's failure to understand and respond to God's presence in her past.

Let me sing for my beloved,
my lover's song concerning his vineyard.
My beloved had a vineyard
on a fertile hillside.
He spaded it, cleared it of stones,
and planted the choicest vines;
he built a watchtower inside it
and even hewed out a winepress.
For he hoped it would yield grapes,
instead it yielded wild grapes.¹¹

What is important to grasp in this and other divine laments is the tragic failure of Israel to discern the saving purpose of Yahweh in her history. This is a perennial problem, reaching to our own times, because our thoroughly secular and pragmatic view of things sees history exclusively in terms of the interplay between human and other natural forces. We are all too ready to seal off into separate compartments our faith and our historical judgments, constructing a kind of split-level existence. It was precisely the task of the prophets, conscious of God's presence in Israel's past, to avert this detachment of the divine purpose from the course of historical events.

G. von Rad has seen clearly that the prophetic reproach is not simply for a violation of this or that law. It goes much deeper, underlining a failure to discern the saving purpose in the swiftly moving current of historical events.

Everything depends on the *events* between Israel and her God, on the gradient of the progress in all the manifestations, proclamations, ceremonies, deliverances, conflicts, and punishments which occur, and on what place all these events have in the great area of tension constituted by promise and fulfilment which is so characteristic of Israel's whole existence before God. The historical utterances of the Old Testament cannot be abstracted from their historical context and taken each as at rest in itself.¹²

¹⁰ Amos 3, 2.

¹¹ Isai 5, 1-2.

¹² von Rad, *loc. cit.*, p 371.

The prophetic relation to the past is therefore one of discernment. God was present in Israel's history, and no amount of well-intentioned existential interpretation of the Old Testament, with its tendency to concentrate on individual response at the expense of saving events, may be permitted to obscure the prophetic concern for interpreting real events within a perspective of faith. In certain historical events the transcendent has entered the sphere of time and place; history is therefore understood beyond but in line with its human context, as the locus of God's purposive and efficacious activity.

Since the prophetic speech is directed, above all, to the nation as it exists here and now, we may expect plenty of evidence for a belief in the divine presence operative in the present moment. The crises facing Israel are never, in the prophetic oracles, interpreted apart from the divine dimension; they lack any adequate solution if taken only on the human plane. For example, before the menacing coalition of North Israel and Syria in the eighth century B.C. no person in Judah could feel secure. To this threat, which struck directly at the throne of David, Isaiah brought the word of Yahweh and its climactic insistence upon trust in the divine promises long ago made to David. This was the message to King Ahaz.¹³

Beyond the play on the word 'faith', note that the controlling idea or image of this whole dramatic episode is the sign of Emmanuel (God with us). Only in the divine presence, actively working in the present moment, can Judah find deliverance. Faith means leaving room for the sovereign purpose; it presupposes a radical elimination of all trust in human calculations and measures of self-help. The same theme is expressed in a later oracle, addressed to King Hezekiah, threatened by the advancing army of Assyria.

For thus says Yahweh, the holy one of Israel: By sitting still and keeping quiet you will triumph; in quiet and trust shall your victory come about.¹⁴

No political contrivances or military actions are to stand in the way of Yahweh's plan for Judah. Isaiah contrasts the powerful, active, and saving presence of Yahweh with the pitiful expedients dreamed up by men who have lost confidence in Yahweh's ultimate will to save. Little wonder that some commentators have called this extraordinary advice 'utopian'. To the same king and perhaps in the same historical crisis is addressed the remarkable oracle in which Assyria is described as the rod of Yahweh's anger, the instrument of

¹³ Isai 7, 9.

¹⁴ Isai 30, 15.

his judgment.¹⁵ Once again the test laid down for ruler and people is that of quiet trust in Yahweh present and actively working out his plan for Israel.

If Isaiah preached in the context of disaster momentarily averted, Jeremiah was called to be the interpreter of Jerusalem's downfall and exile. The circumstances are different but the same shared faith moved both prophets. Though Jeremiah knew no peace, either in silence or in speaking, the conviction of Yahweh's presence, even in what appeared to be irremediable disaster, is the key to understanding his message. His 'confessions' are spontaneous outpourings of personal grief, providing us with a glimpse of intense interior suffering. He is probably the only prophet whose very relationship with God was a problem. Isolated from all except his enemies, Jeremiah gives the lie to the commonly held notion that the genuinely religious person always possesses that nicely balanced, integrated personality, freed from tensions, doubts and frustrations. One overwhelming reality alone sustained this man; it was the presence of Yahweh promised him at the moment of his call. More precisely, it was a realization of the presence of Yahweh at work in this tragic moment of history. A divine presence active only in Israel's past would be slight comfort to a man living in 587 B.C.

This brings us to the third form of the divine presence, that of the future in so far as the future is open to a new intervention of Yahweh. Classical prophecy remained steady in the conviction that God's promises to his people would somehow be realized within the context of historical events. The prophets and the community to which they minister were nourished by two fundamental elements, memory and expectation. A second Isaiah, for example, constantly urged his people to recall past saving events; they were the pledge of a future redemptive act which the past event foreshadowed.¹⁶

When and how these promises were to be fulfilled are never made clear; Yahweh's plan for his people called for faith and not calculation. This surprisingly serene anticipation of a future saving work is explained by G. von Rad:

The reason why the delay of the fulfilment of the promises experienced by Israel (like the delay of the Parousia in the early Church) did not develop into a deep-seated crisis was simply that Israel knew well enough that Yahweh was the master, and not the servant, of his words. In the end, therefore, the question could never be one of

¹⁵ Isai 10, 24-25.

¹⁶ Isai 46, 9-10.

fulfilment, taken by itself; it was a question of Yahweh and his lordship.¹⁷

No exact guidelines for this future can be laid down; this would be to trivialize old testament eschatology, to mock the mystery inherent in the divine purpose. Only in the broadest lines does God's future redemptive work emerge, and under richly coloured and varying images. The ancient aspiration of the human heart for peace and harmony in the human family comes to beautiful expression in the isaian vision (attested also in Micah 4, 1-3) of an era when justice and peace will replace war.¹⁸

Jeremiah draws upon the ancient ideology of covenant to describe a radically transformed future in which the will of God shall be written upon the human heart, with the new person offering perfect obedience to the divine initiatives. His proclamation of the new covenant, coming at the darkest moment of Israel's history, is at the heart of jeremian eschatology. It lifts the human spirit beyond tragedy and despair, and while it explicitly avoids any break with Israel's Sinai tradition, Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant resolutely affirms the power of Yahweh to change the most recalcitrant will. Here is a faith-centred affirmation that the saving act of Yahweh touches not only the events of history but reaches even the most radical centre of opposition to the divine will, the human heart.

Shifting from individual to nation, Ezekiel's eschatology reaches a climax in the vision of the valley of dry bones, brought to life again by the power of Yahweh's spirit. As always, the message of hope presupposes the power of Yahweh over human frailty; here it is expressed in the most drastic form possible, the power to raise the dead to life.

So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.¹⁹

In another passage Ezekiel develops further the image of future renovation introduced by Jeremiah:

I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. My spirit will I put within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall

¹⁷ von Rad, G.: *The Message of the Prophets* (London, 1968), p 269.

¹⁸ Isai 2, 4. ¹⁹ Ezek 37, 10.

dwelt in the land which I gave to your fathers and be my people, and I will be your God.²⁰

The final phrase leaves no doubt that Ezekiel understands the saving act of Yahweh within the framework of the old covenant. The same hope, in the face of disastrous defeat and exile, is sounded in different keys by other prophets of the sixth century B.C., especially in the oracles of second Isaiah.

The many voices sharing this hope in a new presence of God within history harmonize in the conviction that God's saving plan could not be frustrated by the disorder and alienation of the present time. There were promises to keep, and neither national tragedy nor individual sin could thwart the fulfilment of those promises which, admittedly, were only obscurely and inchoatively grasped by the prophets themselves. What they fully and clearly comprehended were human obtuseness and perverse resistance to the saving plan of which they were the messengers. The prophetic hope in the Old Testament is an extraordinary expression of faith in the dependability of God, terrible in wrath and astonishing in compassion, establishing justice but promising forgiveness. It was this hope which countered the temptation to despair over the persistent evil of men.

A direct line leads from this hope to the christian belief in a future which God has promised in the Parousia, when the Lord will come again. But that is a wholly new chapter, built around a radically new expectation. We may conclude by observing that the old testament hope, growing out of a triple divine presence, has had a powerful influence on our modern world insofar as it continues to think of history as a meaningful succession of events leading to a goal. Even marxism in its most secularized form must acknowledge its debt to hebrew prophecy, which gave an ultimate meaning to history. The prophetic experience of divine presence, in the past, present, and future, all to be realized in God's time and not ours, is an inheritance ready at hand to those who believe in God's power to heal our world.

²⁰ Ezek 36, 26-28.