

# WHAT PRICE PROPHECY?

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**W**HAT PRICE prophecy? It cost Jesus his life for identifying himself with prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. Jesus, moreover, did not just stumble upon this vocation. He deliberately chose it and he persistently sought it all through his ministry of preaching and healing. In his gospel Luke carefully draws the portrait of Jesus as a prophet. Luke even dims the light around John the Baptist, so that Jesus shines forth as *the prophet par excellence*.

To inaugurate his public ministry, Jesus turned to the prophet Isaiah. This solemn moment was reserved for a sabbath ceremony in the home-town synagogue of Nazareth. We read from Luke's gospel:

When the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed him, he unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me;  
therefore he has anointed me.  
He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor,  
to proclaim liberty to captives,  
Recovery of sight to the blind  
and release to prisoners,  
To announce a year of favour from the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that Jesus did not read from the regular liturgical cycle for the sabbath. Instead of that, he carefully unwound the scroll to a text of Isaiah normally not recited in the public ceremony. He chose carefully, to begin his prophetic ministry, and he himself was ministered to by the ancient prophet.

## *Prophets' ministering to prophets*

Isaiah spoke about the lowly, the broken-hearted and the captives. Because Jesus himself belonged to that group, he needed to hear the prophet's words for his own sake as well as for the people assembled before him. During his lifetime Jesus had nowhere to

<sup>1</sup> Lk 4, 17-19; Isai 61, 1-2.

lay his head, and so he could never sleep in a house of his very own.<sup>2</sup> He who came to give liberty to captives, was himself captured and imprisoned. He who gave sight to the blind, speech to the mute and mobility to cripples, was himself reduced to absolute silence, total immobility and the darkness of the tomb. Jesus the prophet became so thoroughly one with those to whom he ministered that he had to receive the strength and direction of the prophets' ministry into his own life. At the beginning of his public life he turned to Isaiah in order to discern the orientation of his own life. And when he came to the end of his life, he sighed for the 'release' promised by Isaiah to prisoners. He cried out: 'My God! My God! Why have you abandoned me?'<sup>3</sup>

In Jesus and the evangelists we meet a long tradition of prophets' meditating upon the prophets, and thus ministering to one another. Not only did Jesus and the evangelists turn to these extraordinary religious leaders, but already in Old Testament times these very prophets became disciples, contemplating the prophecies of earlier masters. The author of Isaiah 61, 1-2 found peace by turning to what are called 'The Songs of the Suffering Servant'.<sup>4</sup> These prayers and songs were wrung from agony and rejection. Their poet-author, mystic and saint, was drawing inspiration from Jeremiah and Hosea. He turned to these earlier prophets, not so much to understand the mysterious and dreadful happenings in his life as simply to sustain himself faithfully in God's presence. Many saintly prophets, therefore, paid a heavy price to form a tradition leading up to Jesus, prophet and martyr *par excellence*. No single one of them needed to receive prophetic ministry as desperately as Jesus, who at the same time brought the tradition to supreme heroism.

In order to appreciate better the reasons why prophecy exacted such a heavy cost, we will search out the role and place of prophetic tradition within the religion of Israel. It is our hope that this new understanding of Israel's religious origins will assist us as well in evaluating many disturbing forms of prophecy today. We the Church will be in a clearer position to offer prophetic ministry to men and women, who, like Jesus, are defending the poor and the destitute in our contemporary world.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Lk 9, 58.

<sup>3</sup> Ps 22, 2. In describing the last hours of Jesus, the evangelists also allude to Ps 69. Cp Mt 27, 34 with Ps 69, 22, and Jn 2, 17 with Ps 69, 8. Both psalms reveal a strong prophetic influence: cp Ps 22, 6, 11 with Jer 1, 5 and 50, 6-7.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Isai 42, 1-7; 49, 1-8; 50, 4-9a; 52, 13 - 53, 12.

*From secular liberation to popular celebration*

When we open our bible and begin to read, we are actually starting at the end of a long process! A prophet like Amos, expelled by the high priest Amaziah, or one like Jeremiah, hounded by his own family, were later accepted by the priesthood and all the families of Israel as God's messengers.<sup>5</sup> How is it, we ask, that such gifted, divinely inspired leaders were rejected during their lifetime, and yet after their ignominious deaths they were to become a normative part of Israel's religion? At one time priests excommunicated the prophets as 'heretics',<sup>6</sup> and at a later time priests quoted the prophets as God's inspired authority for true religion? We will attempt to follow the stages in Israel's religion in which this evolution took place. Each step, we will see, wrested its cost in blood.

Almost all great creative moments in the bible began as *a response* to a serious 'secular' crisis of suffering and destitution. The price of prophecy is heard already in 'the affliction of my people . . . [and] their cry of complaint'.<sup>7</sup> This *first* stage in the formation of the bible will be repeated in many ways during the later prophetic stage. Israel, enslaved in Egypt during the fourteenth century B.C., overrun by the Philistines in the eleventh, deported by the Babylonians in the sixth, each time was reduced almost to extinction; the hardships seemed unbearable, the voice of lamentation fell like a heavy shroud.<sup>8</sup> The agony was written in heavy lines across the face of each Israelite. It was so obvious that no revelation at all was needed to observe it. Therefore, we call it 'secular'. The term 'secular' is not derogatory at all. It simply means that everybody knows about it from the ordinary process of living.

The *second* stage begins when *a person of faith is moved with compassion* and with a determination to act. This person, in biblical history, was a Moses who led the people out of Egypt, a David who broke the philistine hegemony and re-established israelite independence, a Cyrus who fulfilled the Lord's will to free his people and to rebuild his holy city.<sup>9</sup> The work of each leader was primarily a 'secular' liberation — to free slaves, to restore human dignity, to provide a decent way of life. Cyrus is a case all by itself, but Moses and David acted under a clear and strong impulse of faith. By faith they realized that God intended to accomplish far more than they themselves were conscious of. Within the secular work then there

<sup>5</sup> Cf Amos 7, 12 and Jer 12, 6.<sup>6</sup> Cf Jer 27, 1-19.<sup>7</sup> Exod 3, 7.<sup>8</sup> Cf Lam 1, 2, 12.<sup>9</sup> Cf Exod 3; 1 Sam 17, 46-47; Isai 44, 28.

lay a mystery of the Lord's goodness, summoning his people beyond normal 'secular' goals and strength. Prophets too will later exact such hopes from the people. To risk everything for hopes glimpsed only intuitively by faith is always a terrifying and therefore a painful experience.

Once liberated, the people would now celebrate, but mostly in a secular way. No longer slaves, they acted as free people moving about as they dreamed and hoped. No longer chained to regimented tasks, they sang and danced. Certainly a religious spirit permeated their songs of gratitude and their hymns of exultation; yet even a highly stylized song such as that of Moses is much more secular than religious in its details.<sup>10</sup> At this *third* stage the religious aspect expressed itself in spontaneous, *popular devotions*. The dancing and celebrating will swing more freely than what is appropriate for sanctuary worship. We are reminded of the overwhelmingly secular form of a prophetic hymn at the end of the book of Amos:

The days are coming, says the Lord,  
When the plougher shall overtake the reaper,  
and the vintager, him who sows the seed.  
The juice of grapes shall drip down the mountains,  
and all the hills shall run with it.<sup>11</sup>

*From liturgical celebration to prophetic threat*

Out of this mostly secular background, *liturgical worship* drew its rubrics and symbols. This *fourth* stage in the formation of the bible prepares immediately for the prophetic reaction. What was once secular was now adorned in sacred vestments. Military marches by armies against an enemy or by people fleeing out of Egypt were transformed into liturgical processions.<sup>12</sup> Liberation from hunger was celebrated by ritual banquets.<sup>13</sup> Not only were religious symbols emerging out of secular actions, but 'inspired' words like hymns, creeds and confessions of faith were composed to accompany the liturgical actions, and to communicate their full significance. What we know to be the bible as an inspired book is beginning to take shape. The purpose of these holy actions and words was, of course, the worship of God; yet they achieved this purpose not by what they were in themselves but by their power to stir wonder, adoration and fidelity in the worshipping community.

<sup>10</sup> Cf Exod 15.

<sup>11</sup> Amos 9, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Cf Pss 24, 68.

<sup>13</sup> Cf Deut 26.

When this liturgy tended to forget the voice of suffering out of which it emerged in stage one, then we have arrived at *stage five, the prophetic reaction*. Prophets condemned sanctuary ritual, even when carried out according to all the rules, if it had degenerated into a formalistic way of supporting the wealthy against the poor or the powerful against the weak. Religion had succumbed to superstition and supported serious injustice, when it stated that those who were healthy, well dressed and independent must be godly, while those who were sick, ragged or destitute were necessarily less holy, if not downright sinful. We recall at once the question put to Jesus as everyone was staring a crippled person into hopeless embarrassment: 'Rabbi, was it his sin or that of his parents that caused him to be born blind?'<sup>14</sup> Religion has twisted out of shape an earlier promise by God to bless the good and to punish the wicked.<sup>15</sup> The statement ought not to be turned around to say that those blessed with health are good people and those suffering sickness are sinful people.

Prophets heard a voice of agony and cried out in protest. What they attacked was not as blatantly wicked as forced labour in Egypt, nor as the cruel monster Goliath! The sorrow this time was of a different sort. Isaiah lashed out against a people so hardened as to overlook the misery of the poor, yet basking in the warm glow of the altar fire. Clouds of incense and concatenation of prayers accompanied each new moon and sabbath; every action was correctly performed according to the minutest rubrics.

What was wrong, and what made all these sacred ceremonies, says the Lord, 'loathsome to me' was the failure of the people to 'hear the orphan's plea [and] defend the widow'.<sup>16</sup> Isaiah offered hope for the future, provided 'you are willing and obey'. Jeremiah went to such extremes as to announce the destruction of the city and temple.<sup>17</sup> Isaiah too had seen the end of the Davidic dynasty, so that nothing remained of it but a stump or root in the ground.<sup>18</sup> Priests and other religious leaders wanted to kill Jeremiah; tradition says that Isaiah died a martyr. The prophets innocently suffered the price which they were exacting of the people. Prophets would have disqualified themselves had they deserted the community to which they were ministering.

God summoned the Assyrians and then the Babylonians to pillage and destroy as the prophets had threatened.<sup>19</sup> Out of the ashes,

<sup>14</sup> Jn 9, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Cf Deut 27-28.

<sup>16</sup> Cf Isai 1, 10-16.

<sup>17</sup> Cf Jer 26.

<sup>18</sup> Cf Isai 11, 1.

<sup>19</sup> Cf Isai 10, 5-6; Jer 1, 10; 27, 1-7.

however, a new Jerusalem arose.<sup>20</sup> The prophets, by persevering not only with words of doom but also with a message of new hope, sustained the people's faith.<sup>21</sup> Later, Israel could look back to the prophets as people who made their survival not only possible but also worthy of a new lease on life. The temple authorities eventually placed the prophet's words after the Torah of Moses in the 'Bible'.

*Suffering, the price of prophecy*

Suffering was the price, not just for prophecy but for the entire bible. The bible would not have been *authenticated* as the inspired word of God without the signature written in tears and blood by the poor and the afflicted! No matter how correct and valid were sanctuary worship and priestly instruction, if these did not speak the language of God's compassion for the lowly, then they stood condemned by the prophets as loathsome and superstitious. Suffering imparted the seal of good theology, which prophets would insist upon. God who speaks each word of the bible must be known primarily as *Saviour*, full of compassion, as the first of the ten commandments states very clearly.

Suffering took many forms, both with the afflicted and needy as well as with leaders like Moses and the later prophets. Moses endured the agony of hopes so great as to reach beyond his comprehension. Even when the desert offered brackish water and little food, he could never let the grumbling populace return to the fleshpots of Egypt. The opposition rose so vehemently against him that even Moses doubted if the Lord would help this rebellious people. He 'struck the rock twice'.<sup>22</sup> This 'sin', shrouded in mystery, brought severe punishment:

Because you were not faithful to me in showing forth my sanctity before the Israelites, you shall not lead this community into the land I will give them.<sup>23</sup>

The poignancy of this indictment moves us to tears even today as we read the death scene of Moses. From Mount Nebo the Lord showed Moses the beautiful land.

The Lord then said to him: 'I have let you feast your eyes upon it, but you shall not cross over'. So there in the land of Moab, Moses, the servant of the Lord, died, as the Lord has said.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Cf Isai 54.

<sup>23</sup> Num 20, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Cf Jer 31; Isai 40.

<sup>24</sup> Deut 34, 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> Num 20, 11.

No matter how urgent the desire, how painful the cost, Moses could not run ahead of the people and cross the Jordan by himself. As such, he typified prophecy in its most severe crisis. A prophet, no matter how violently persecuted, never deserted the community he or she served. If like Jeremiah they announced destruction, then innocent as they were, they suffered with the sinful people as the city came crashing upon them. For Moses's perseverance in suffering with a sinful people, later generations declared: 'Since then no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face'.<sup>25</sup>

The price of prophetic suffering appears again in the continuous mysterious open-endedness of their lives. God calls the prophets to work for goals beyond their comprehension and therefore beyond their normal endurance. Just as Moses had to be corrected and disciplined, so too the prophets like Hosea and Jeremiah, or later like Second Isaiah, author of the Suffering Servant Songs, had to submit to divine purification. The hebrew word for this type of purging discipline is *mūsār*; it occurs in such key passages as:

But he [the suffering servant] was pierced for our offences, crushed for our sins,

Upon him was the *chastisement* [*mūsār*] that makes us whole [a variation on the word *shalôm*],

by his stripes we were healed.<sup>26</sup>

Surrounded by inscrutable but transforming suffering, religious leaders turned for help to the tradition of the earlier prophets. Jeremiah contemplated Hosea; Second Isaiah meditated upon Jeremiah and Hosea; Jesus looked to all these prophets. In their suffering and self-cleansing dedication, they set a tone for appreciating Moses as the greatest of the prophets.

At times these prophets argued against God and questioned his trustworthiness, like Jeremiah in his confessions:

You are just, O Lord, but I still must dispute with you!

You have become like a liar, like water [that dries up] without trust.

You seduced me, Lord.<sup>27</sup>

Jesus too flung words at God close to despair, yet absorbed into mystic prayer.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Deut 34, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Isai 53, 5.

<sup>27</sup> Jer 12, 1; 15, 18; 20, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Cf Mk 15, 34.

Prophets, consequently, suffered the full weight of their message. More than anyone else, they underwent the agony of faith, thrusting them onwards without a clear sense of direction. They did not know the outcome even in some of its important details. They realized only one thing: to be true to God, they must remain with the suffering poor, even with the wicked in their doom and destruction. What price prophecy? It is the price of *not* speaking *for* the poor but *with* them. It is the price of identity with the most destitute. Since these people in their helplessness cannot dictate the terms of the future, neither did the prophets have the power to see the future any more clearly. The ultimate price of prophecy was to risk everything to be on the side of the poor and the helpless, without any other assurance of success than the conviction that such is the will of God. And God is faithful.

### *God as Saviour*

Prophecy thus vindicated or revived the basic biblical intuition of God. More than by any other title, God undoubtedly wants to be known as Saviour. As was mentioned at the beginning of this article, God entered the biblical narrative when the people were embroiled in severe crises like slavery in Egypt or the babylonian exile. God's first response was: 'I have witnessed the affliction of my people. . . . Therefore I have come down to rescue them'.<sup>29</sup>

In the bible, God wanted to be known first and foremost not as creator, nor as *one* God, nor as the God of truth and orthodoxy: not even as the God of exemplary moral living. The primary title or epithet of God was 'Saviour' of the poor and destitute. The prophets, all the way to Jesus, ministered first to the underprivileged and the outlaw.<sup>30</sup>

No matter how glorious and triumphant the sacred liturgy, we are worshipping a saviour God who will not tolerate our liturgies, once they drown out the sobs and groans of the suffering. When liturgy and doctrine become insensitive to this voice of pain, prophecy roars its protest!

At what price? For the Old Testament prophet, persecution and rejection. For the prophet Jesus, humiliation 'even unto death, yea, death on a cross!'<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Exod 3, 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> Cf Lk 5, 30-32.

<sup>31</sup> Phil 2, 8.



*Conclusion*

Prophets often strike us as 'secular' people. They seem far more anxious about feeding the hungry than about celebrating a dignified liturgy. They are often slipshod about ritual and rubrics, yet they will cautiously seek out every political turn to defend 'outlaws'. Modern prophets have thrown themselves into open confrontation with the police and the government, in USA over the Vietnam war, in South and Central American nations over the harrassment and the torture of political prisoners. Prophecy at times challenges church authorities, as once in the bible it stood up against the legitimate priesthood of temple and sanctuary.

What price prophecy? Prophets must pay the cost of persevering unto death within a religious system which they know is doomed to overwhelming sorrow. They will thus repeat the cycle of biblical religion: from secular oppression to popular celebration. Once the chains of oppression have been broken, prophets shall be vigilant, so that popular celebration does not degenerate into the oppressive dictatorship of the radical left. Prophets must also observe whether or not new forms of ritual, drawn from the secular scene, do not succumb to stiff rules of superstitious, self-righteous worship.

What price prophecy? Prophecy seeks to maintain a sensitive ear and a listening heart for the sobs of the poor. No liturgy, however valid its ritual and priesthood, is acceptable unless the congregation hears the groaning of God's people. Likewise, no liberation is authentic unless it risks its life for hopes of universal peace beyond the dreams, yet deeply embedded within the faith of traditional religion.

What price prophecy? It pays the cost of serving ancestral religion so that later generations remember the tears of their forefathers and mothers.