

# THE PROPHETS

## 1. The Meaning of the Word “Prophet”

The Hebrew *nabi* means basically “proclaimer”. The plural is *nabi'im* and the phenomenon represented is *nabism*. The word implies not only a simple announcer, like a town crier, but someone with a cultic rôle. It is interesting to note that the Arabic word for a soothsayer or prophet is *kahin*, which is obviously a close cousin of the Hebrew *kohen*, meaning priest. It is sometimes suggested that prophets were not connected with the cult, and even that they opposed it. This is a false conclusion to draw, even though the prophets often attack an empty or formalistic religion which replaces heartfelt holiness with lengthy ritualistic parade. Their attacks express quite as much respect for sincere liturgy as for sincere prayer bearing fruit in good works.

Because of the frequency of future implications in the proclamations of the prophets, there is a distinct hint of prediction, even in the Hebrew use of the word. But in essence we should not think of the prophets simply as foretellers of the future, as the popular use of the word in English has come to suggest. Prophets “know the future” in the sense that they are passing God’s judgment on the present, and their message has primarily a present significance, clearly spelt out in ethical and religious terms, but also explained in terms of future consequences. We can turn to the ulterior understanding of prophecies as unveiling future reality, a little further on in our study.

## 2. Prophetic Claims

Prophets make a huge claim for themselves on the attention and respect of others. They are present in the Scripture in two forms: as writing prophets<sup>1</sup>, where we are given the prophetic message apparently in autograph or as part of a composed collection, and in the narratives of the history of Israel, where their words come embedded in historical context. Thus some of the minor prophets do not come in a narrative context at all, but only as a series of oracles. Isaiah contains collections of oracles but also quite a lot of narrative and some autobiography. Jeremiah has a far greater biographical element. Nathan, Michaiah, and Elijah are known to us only in reportage embedded in the histories.

The phenomenon of prophecy didn’t start with Hebrew history, nor was it confined to Jews. Before Israelites settled in Canaan, Numbers describes Balaam son of Beor, “the man with far-seeing eyes”; the court of Pharaoh has soothsayers and magicians who would occupy similar country. It is sometimes suggested that Israelite prophecy had died out with Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, who are palpably speaking after the Exile in Babylon; it was widely thought that no-one afterwards was found worthy to bear the message of the Lord. In fact, Joel, probably Isaiah 24-27, and Daniel may all post-date Malachi. Also the rôle of prophet was certainly consciously claimed by John the Baptist and by Jesus; furthermore, the New Testament itself is loaded with prophetic forms and experiences, throughout the Acts of the

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<sup>1</sup> The term “writing prophet” does not imply a prophet who writes his own oracles down, so much as a prophet who has a book named after him. It would be hard to locate an author, for instance, for the massive collection we call Isaiah; nor do I think that the book of Jonah, traditionally included among the Twelve Minor Prophets, was written by a prophet in our sense of the word.

Apostles, which includes prophets among the early Christians, and witness to this fact is everywhere from the Synoptics to the Apocalypse, not least in the life and claims of St Paul.

### 3. What sort of people were the prophets?

We should conceive of the prophets as personally very extraordinary people. They were powerful characters, and they were driven by a burning sense of their vocation as being of critical significance for those around them; but they were primarily *religious* characters, and this fact is never to be forgotten. They did what they did from religious motives and under obedience, to which there seems often to have been little or no admixture of personal will. Elijah sometimes comes across as totally integrated with his message, particularly in the confrontations between himself and King Ahab; but at other times he, Ezekiel and Jeremiah, Amos, and Moses before all of them, give us an image of a life convulsed by the agony they feel at the carrying of the Word to the world.

In making a programme for studying the prophets

- our first step will be to get a sense of the standing of *the prophetic ministry amid the other institutions of Israel*. This we will do, today, by studying together the incident in 1 K 22.
- One of the genres that is very common in prophetic writing is the authenticating vision or *call of the prophet*. Isaiah 6, Jeremiah and Ezekiel 1, Amos 7 are all examples of the commissioning which lifts the message of the prophet away from his personal views or predilections, and into the realm of revelation from God. One of the most important jobs for us, who want to study the prophets and the phenomenon of prophecy, therefore, will be to examine these accounts and to see their significance and their influence across the whole board of the Scriptures.
- The constant presence of *miracle-working* amid the prophetic traditions is probably at its zenith in the half-legendary exploits of Elijah with the subsequent inheritance of Elisha. Therefore we ought to give some time to these traditions, noting their significance for later stories, for example those in the Gospel.
- We should spend some time examining the relationship between prophecy and *cult*. Much has been written about this, and it is instructive for us to see the prophets as members of the worshipping community. Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Samuel are actually introduced to us as priests.
- There is much to be learned from the *ethical* content of prophetic preaching. To proclaim the word of God is often equivalent to recalling people and their leaders to a renewed holiness.
- We need to adopt some attitude towards the *future predictions* the prophets make, and their meaning.

#### 1 K 22:1-40

In this passage the two kings of the Promised Land, Judah and Samaria, meet together to concoct an alliance against Aram. They decide to “consult Yahweh”, and we can clearly see the influence of the prophets, who form a unified school or college, which can be summoned as a whole, and which will deliver a co-ordinated message.

The prophet Zedekiah speaks ecstatically, and accompanies his prophecy with an allegorical symbolic act - in this case, the wearing of a pair of horns, symbolic of destructive power: the words of his prophecy are taken from this symbolism: *with horns like these you will gore the Aramaeans to death.*

One is free to believe that the other four hundred will have accompanied their messages with other symbolic activity.

The response of the king of Judah, after witnessing this manifestation of prophetic concord, is interesting. Suspicious, perhaps, of the strange unanimity of his brother's seers, he asks whether they represent the only view. From this, and from the lack of consternation at the idea, we can tell that the oracles of paid prophets such as these men attached to the court were known sometimes to be faulty. Why then were they employed? Probably because nine times out of ten the mere presence of allegedly divine inspiration was sufficient to precipitate a self-fulfilment.

This gives us a notion of employed prophets as resembling Church of England chaplains in the first World War: sent in on the eve of battle to encourage the troops and remind them that they *deserved* to beat the enemy. We might like to compare the ancient tradition of Balaam (**Num 24**) where the King of Moab sends for this Zoroastrian seer saying "I beg you to curse this people (i.e. Israel) for me, for they are stronger than I am. We may then be able to defeat them and drive them out of the country. For this I know: anyone you bless is blessed, anyone you curse is cursed." It is hard to decide whether the last sentence represents Balak's sincere belief, or simply his willingness to flatter the seer to get him on side. Balaam refuses to go, on divine instruction; and when eventually he is forced to go, he delivers on Israel not a curse but a blessing, because "he sees what Shaddai makes him see, he receives the divine answer, and his eyes are opened". In this Balaam shows himself a true prophet, unafraid to contradict a king in the name of his vision.

The portrayal in 1 K 22 of the true prophet Michaiah is masterly. At first he sides with the court prophets, but the king is too wise to believe this oracle and asks for the truth. Michaiah's answer is drawn from another prophetic genre, the interpreting of a simple contemporaneous sight. He draws the king's attention to a nearby flock of sheep, and from this image he interprets a true sign of the future. We could compare this to the first incident after the Call of Jeremiah, Jer 1: 11. The simple sights of an almond tree (called *watchful*, being the first to blossom in spring) and the cooking-pot on the boil *tilting from the North* (ie from Assyria) provide the prophet with his oracles. Jeremiah is incidentally perhaps the most inspired performer of symbolic acts - each of them in obedience to a divine command.

Michaiah then delivers his prediction by yet a third prophetic device: the description of dialogue overheard in the Court of Heaven. This is a pretty staggering claim for authenticity, and it is rendered more extreme in this case by the fact that the prophet is actually laying his own life on the line. He has already as good as predicted the death of the kings and the dispersal of their defeated armies, which is an act of great courage when they are both present in state with their courts assembled about them, together with 400 prophets who find themselves denounced by the lonely figure of Michaiah.. Now he attributes the death of Ahab, not to a misfortune on the battlefield, but to a direct intervention by God in the affairs of the court: the sending of a spirit of deception into the royal prophets.

It is hard to think of a more complete risking of the prophet's life and security as this one. But it will be paralleled, particularly in the biography of Jeremiah. Ahab has already shown himself complaisant to the idea of murder for his own advantage: he allowed his wife Jezebel freedom to murder Naboth for his vineyard, and Jezebel herself, a Canaanite, imported onto the holy soil of Israel 450 prophets of Baal, who were massacred at Mt

Carmel by Elijah. The king now interns Michaiah for the duration, and postpones his punishment until his return; which gives Michaiah the opening for his impressive parting shot at the king. Note well, however, that the prophet only takes this dangerous step by claiming for his message an absolute divine authority. He is making the acceptance of his prophetic message a moment of judgment between King Ahab and the God of Israel. Ahab can reject Michaiah and his interpretation of history. But if he does, he may well be rejecting the God of his fathers: even this is not beyond him.

This short passage displays a host of prophetic devices and genres, and is therefore worth your close attention. You will immediately see the tension between the royal powers (both, uniquely, represented here) and the true prophet, who inhabits a different world, and whose obedience is not for sale. You will note the presence of false prophecy, where the forms of prophetic behaviour have been delivered to the king, but where the substance of divine inspiration is absent.

These tensions centre upon the experience of the true prophet, who may well find them intolerable. Moses pleaded with God to take from him the burden of prophecy. Elijah asked to die rather than proceed with his prophetic career. Most prophets include in their sayings an overwhelming experience of their unworthiness or incapacity, and the contradiction they feel between the divine word and their own humanity. Both Moses and Jeremiah tried to suggest they were physically unable to speak. Isaiah protested his lack of personal integrity, and the unholiness of the national life in which he shared. Very movingly we read of the command of God overcoming their sense of unfitnes. 'Do not say "I am a child!"'

This syndrome of religious statements and emotions remains normative in Biblical tradition. St Paul too confesses to having a somewhat disappointing impact as a speaker, and in person, compared to the punch he packs as a writer. He is exactly as aware as any Old Testament prophet of the burden of his mission, of his own unworthiness, of his divine vocation to be an apostle, and of the obedience that will not allow him to lay down his task even when it brings him strife, weariness, failure, or danger. Prophets are, if you like, martyr-material.

I have pointed out to you several times the contrast between the religious establishment of Judah, based as it is in Jerusalem, around the divinely-sanctioned religious structures of Throne and Temple, and that of Samaria, with its usurped monarchy and its humanly-invented religious institutions. Of cardinal importance is the fact that the prophets were regarded as basically establishment figures in Judah, and as outsiders in the North. When we study the lives of the prophets, we shall occasionally find them migrating, as Amos did, the first of the prophets whose work comes to us in a book. The shepherd from Tekoa, south of Jerusalem, is shown to us prophesying in the Northern sanctuary of Bethel, where the priest Amaziah tries to expel him as a professional Southern prophet; there is more than a hint that he thinks Amos is a charlatan. Amos' dignified defence reminds us that despite the political division of the two kingdoms, they do share a common religious heritage, and Amos does not think it unaccountable that he should be sent to the North. Amos is very clear that the welcoming of prophets is a holy duty, and the presence of prophets is a sign of God's favour, even when they accuse the people of falsehood and irreligion: see the oracle on Israel (Am 2:6ff) where the rejection of prophets sits beside the seduction of Nazirites. The theme of a prophet announcing God's judgment is therefore present in the prophetic palate from the beginning.

### **The Call of the Prophet**

The testimony of the prophets to the reality of their vocation provides a genre of its own. They are clearly on the defensive as prophets, since part of their work involves the denunciation of others, which typically attracts the response, *And who gives you the right...?* As I noted above, they are their own fiercest critics, and their experience as prophets is usually highly uncomfortable. We should read together some of the narratives of vocation.

**Is 6 Jer 1 Ezek 2 - 3 Am 7**

The classical texts on the vocation of the prophet yield us much interest and information about the way they see their rôle. All of them place the initiative with God. The true character of monotheistic religion is summed up in these accounts. The one God is in total authority: there is nowhere else to go. Jonah's attempt to flee to Tarshish to get away from the Creator and Ruler of the Universe is a humorous presentation of the point; the retribution he incurs is in the form of the threatened shipwreck, the prophet's being tipped into a boiling sea, the episode with the big fish, and the experience after three days of being vomited onto the shore. If you want to see something real on the same lines, try the agonised lines of Jer 15:10-21, and the extracts from the so-called "confessions" at Jer 20: 7-18.

If the prophetic calling brings disaster to the prophet, it is not surprising that he should become one with his own message. Here the name that springs immediately to mind is that of Hosea, whose fate it is to marry a prostitute, so that Israel can see in him a modelling of the relationship between God and faithless Israel. In much the same way all the prophets of whose biography we know anything find themselves put through similar symbolic stories to be a sign to others. We should look at Ezk 12:1-20, the mime of the exile, and at Jer 28, the dispute with Hananiah. It is worth recalling the story of Isaiah walking around Jerusalem naked for two years, in order to symbolize the naked worldliness of the royal foreign policy, which shamelessly engaged in vain alliances with Gentiles to try to play one off against another, instead of trusting God to fight their battles.

Ethically the prophets have a profound affinity with Deuteronomy, that very conservative source which is constantly recalling the Israelites to the certainties of the covenant. The very simplicity and starkness of the formulae speak for themselves: *You will be my people, and I shall be your God. Never forget the deeds of the Lord. Keep my laws and sincerely respect my ordinances, and your life will be long in the land.* Prophets speak with similar conviction and economy. Their aim is to impart a call to truthfulness and humility which can be instantly understood. This is why the prophets hit so hard at any notion of compromise or syncretism with the ways of Canaan. Faith in the one God cuts across all the complexities and hidden folds of the more instinctual and visceral religions of the pagan world. Israel's faith is comparatively stark and austere. The prophets give ethical shape to this simplicity. *This is what Yahweh asks of you: only this....* It has a fine and unitive appeal, but it is not realistic. In fact human life does not become simplified when we try to be obedient. Still, the aim of the monotheistic faith is single-heartedness, an integrity based in the oneness of the God we worship. That such an integrity is far above us only points up even further the exalted nature of the Lord. To this the prophets bear united witness, especially in their ecstatic experience of the Most High. But note that the moral excellence of the prophets is not always recognisable to us: see the incident of 2K1, which is tacitly condemned by Jesus in Lk 9:54ff.

There is a seam running through the whole history of religion about the significance of cult. We need to absorb the various perceptions of cultic behaviour at every stage. The way in which cult or liturgy aims to provide a guaranteed way of transcending the mundane tenor of most of our lives, and the danger of this programme, are well known to everyone here from the atmosphere of Sunday Mass in their local church buildings. By surrounding our behaviour with signs and symbols, special garb, particularly portentous language, etc., we hope to train members of the Church regularly to put off their workaday responses, and

make room for a mode of behaviour which will welcome the awareness of God and of the Kingdom of Heaven as a reality amongst us. The dangers are equally well-known: that the liturgy simply becomes a mode of external behaviour, whose contact with our real lives is minimal; that it becomes an attempt at self-deception, and a cover for a basically irreligious life; that it brings true religion into disrepute by encouraging communitarian falsehood on a regular basis. How often are genuflecting Catholics actually bowing their minds in accord with their bodies? How often is the liturgical proclamation of the Gospel greeted with full interior attention, as opposed to a bored and distracted silence? These thoughts, questions and feelings fill the oracles written by prophets against their own people: *not* because the prophets are typically opposed to liturgical cult, but because *they actually value it* and want to make sure it is continually being purified. The sustained mockery of idolatry, which the prophets never cease to attack, is a department of their liturgical sensitivity.

Future prediction - what we might like to call the warning or monitory mode of prophecy - is everywhere. The conclusion often drawn is that prophetic inspiration is a business of private revelation of future facts, giving an inspired prophet a message which will eventually be validated. If we consider the predictions of prophets to be an extrapolated dramatising of their hatred of something perceived to be unworthy in the present, we shall get a better sense of the meaning of prophetic prediction. Prophets certainly had a "sixth sense" awareness of the meaning of infidelity and sin. They are unafraid to draw obvious but unwelcome conclusions about folly and the cutting of moral and religious corners. We say that someone is a religious genius when he or she sees religious facts in their true light. We are politically correct to say that the hunting-down of heresy which characterises much of our history is completely misguided. Prophets would never say such a thing. They know the true consequence of wrong belief and wrong religion, and they predict the terminus towards which these things infallibly lead their devotees. Herein lies much of their irreplaceable value and their claim to be listened-to.