

## PROPHECY IN ISRAEL

It is due to the prophets that belief in the true God and worship of Him were kept alive in the world, before the coming of Jesus Christ. As the mouthpiece of God they spoke out : (a) for the general guidance of the people, (b) to condemn evil living, (c) to give consolation in distress. Ricciotti, in his *History of Israel*, describes the prophet as the spring which kept the oasis of true religion fertile in the desert of paganism. It is commonly thought that prophets arose only in moments of emergency, and that when all was well they were absent. The remarkable absence of a prophet during the three centuries or so before Christ certainly seems to lend colour to this view. For the people then were certainly on the whole faithful to God—far more so than before. But the explanation does not fit the much longer period preceding and during the exile.

Deut. xviii.15 f. announces that prophecy will be a regular feature in the life of Israel ; a living and constant sign of God's interest in His people—and their history seems to bear this out. There is a constant line—at least down to Malachias. Israel was on the whole flattered by their presence, concerned at their absence after Malachias and correspondingly delighted when the Baptist appeared.

The prophet, then, spoke *on behalf of God*. We often think of him as one who foretells, but this was only one of his many duties. The prophet had to communicate God's words to men.

The prophet therefore was essentially a man who was in communication with God in a special way—a way that was not shared by others. However much they differed in character and however much their functions developed and altered this is always true.

But it is true that over a period of a thousand years or so they did differ considerably, and it is possible to detect a broad division into two types. There is a text in 1 Kings ix.9, which runs as follows : "He that is now called a *prophet*, in time past was called a *seer*". The words used are *nabhi* and *ro'eh*. Notice that he does not say "There used to be seers, but *now* we have prophets", as though they had no connexion. His words imply something common and also something different—for a change of name implies some change of character—and the evidence bears this out.

*What were the earliest prophets—or rather seers—like ?* Moses of course is the first great example. But at the same time not typical of the early period. He is more like the later prophets and at the same time towering above them. He was on terms of intimacy with God

and he occupied a position of such prominence in Israel, as God's mouthpiece, that there was no equal to him found in later times. One has only to scan the five books of Moses to see this. The sacred writer does not exaggerate when he says: "And there arose no more a prophet in Israel like unto Moses whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. xxxiv.10). So also Joshua. The mantle of Moses fell as it were on him, and the Lord spoke through him to Israel much as He had done through Moses. And like Moses, he exhorted the people before his death, renewing the covenant again which had been struck by Moses.

It is during the period of *Judges* that we find examples of the type of *seer* that was evidently common in Israel at that time, e.g. Deborah (Jg. iv). The Bible calls her a prophetess but her functions are those of the typical *seer*. "She judged the people", i.e. solved cases of all kinds, besides formal lawsuits. Evidently she held a position of some importance, and if necessary could assume the function of leader of her people. She did this in the crisis that arose when the Canaanites in the North were oppressing Israel. Though Barac was the general, Deborah was the real leader, for she summoned Barac to the work; and it is Deborah who is chiefly extolled in the canticle in ch.v. She describes herself as "Mother in Israel" (v.7). This is all the more extraordinary when one considers the minor position usually occupied by women in Semitic peoples. The narrative however does not tell us a great deal about her functions. There is also a surprising dearth of information in the rest of the *Book of Judges*. It is only when we get to the *Books of Samuel* (I and II Kings) that we are further enlightened.

I Sam. ix presents Samuel to us as the typical *seer*. Saul and his servant, wishing to consult him, meet him on his way to sacrifice in a high place. He holds an honourable position in the town and is able to offer strangers a share in the sacrifice. He has been in communication with Yahweh the day before, and is able to tell them the animals lost by Saul's father have been recovered; and he hints at Saul's high destiny too. After the sacrifice Samuel invites Saul and his servant to his own home. Next morning he accompanies them out of town (Ramah) and then anoints Saul (x.1). Finally he predicts three signs to be fulfilled before Saul reaches home. These are fulfilled. Note here (1) *The seer* is the man of God. (He communicates with Yahweh.) He can apparently control his communication, for people expect to go to him with questions for which he can get answers at will. Apparently also a fee was required (ix. 7-8). (2) His chief function is to describe events (past, present and future) hidden from ordinary men. Usually it seems they are personal and even trivial matters, but sometimes of

national importance. (3) He clearly has a position of importance and honour. Note the details of the sacrifice, and note also that the whole company wait for their food till he has pronounced blessing on it. The whole picture is one of a sober, dignified, weighty person, standing high in favour with God, and in honour with men.

During the period of *Judges* then, prophets were not of the outstanding type of the preceding period—Moses—nor of the later period. This may have been because Israel was not very faithful to God during that period. 1 Sam. III.1 seems to suggest this as a reason, but not explicitly. In other words, God possibly withheld his communications as a sort of punishment. But He did not continuously act like this, for at later periods when Israel was equally unfaithful (e.g. 600 B.C.) God sent prophets—e.g. Jeremias; while, once more, after 300 B.C., when they seem to have been quite faithful, there was no prophet for about three centuries.

The type of prophet with whom we are more familiar begins to appear—or reappear—at the time of Samuel. In fact Samuel himself seems to embody in himself the qualities of both seer and prophet. As Ricciotti has observed, there appears to be some connexion with the change in social conditions. *As the unity of the people began to re-assert itself, so did the familiar figure of the prophet emerge.* Under Moses and Joshua they had been one people. They were split up in the time of the Judges. They united again under Samuel. The emergence of the typical prophet can hardly fail to have some connexion with social conditions. He had a more official character. He spoke to the nation in place of God. (This was practically impossible in the time of *Judges*.) Whereas in "*Judges*", *the seer was merely there to be consulted, now the prophet gave God's orders when God wished, and did not wait to be asked.* Again, the seer usually confined himself to a particular case (e.g. Saul's asses)—but the prophet proclaimed aloud the basic principles of morality and religion. He was God's mouthpiece and ambassador to the nation. Thus Jeremias said, "For I am speaking now this long time, crying out against iniquity, and I often proclaim devastation" (Jer. xx.8). There were many things of national importance he had to speak about—e.g. immorality and idolatry, and the dangers of foreign alliances. Elias is the typical prophet. Though of course each prophet differed in many ways from every other, yet there are certain great features in common. They are all utterly devoted to the cause of God and are fully prepared to suffer death for Him. They all say the same thing: "Yahweh has spoken". That is enough—come what may. "If the Lord speaks, who will not prophesy?" asks Amos (III.8). The call of God was decisive. Some, like Jeremias, accepted reluctantly, but they accepted

(Jer. xiv). Indeed there seems to have been something compulsory in the call to prophesy (e.g. Ezech. iii.1-4).

The prophet was a man of God not only because he spoke for God, but also *because he led a life of heroic sanctity*. Here at least there was freedom of choice. They did devote themselves whole-heartedly to God's service; and that meant to expose themselves to danger—sometimes imminent danger of death. No doubt the people recognised the prophet as from God, but his stern denunciations of their sins, though often bringing them to repentance, equally often exasperated them to the point of persecuting him and putting him to death. See for example the way Achab and Jezebel persecuted Elias; or the tradition which relates that Isaias was sawn in half by Manasses. No doubt these acts were done by kings. But the people were just as bad. Very often the prophets' work of recalling to God met with little response and even hostility. "Behold", says God to Jeremias, "I have made thee this day a fortified city and a pillar of iron, and a wall of brass over all the land to the Kings of Juda, to the princes thereof, and to the priests and to the people of the land" (Jer. i.18). "And they shall fight against thee, and shall not prevail, for I am with thee, saith the Lord".

The prophet always had this prospect before his eyes when called by God. And often the worst happened. He never yielded an inch, never watered down the commands of God, never curried favour with the great and powerful as he might so easily have done—and as the false prophets nearly always did, e.g. Jer. viii.11, xiv.15. The attitude of the people was what one would expect of worldly and superficial men. It fluctuated between reverence and persecution, between confidence and complete lack of understanding. Unfortunately in their moments of exasperation the people frequently killed the prophets. Then—smitten with compunction—they raised monuments to their memory (Mt. xxiii.29).

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