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# The Evangelical Quarterly

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## THE REALITY OF PROPHETIC REVELATION.

ACCORDING to Jeremiah i. 9 and xv. 19, the prophet is a man who speaks to others, interpreting the word of God. Therefore the idea of prophecy involves two elements, viz., a productive and a receptive element, or rather an active and a passive element. The receptive or passive element is: the receiving of divine revelation; and the productive or active element is: the preaching of that which was revealed by God.

It is easy to perceive that the receptive or passive element in prophecy is the main element; the prophet cannot interpret the word of God to others, unless God has spoken His word to him. Now it is our purpose to deal with this main element of prophecy, to discuss the reality of prophetic revelation.

To begin with, we are obliged to give some explanatory statement regarding the term *revelation*. Up to the middle of the eighteenth century revelation was constantly understood as the action originating with God, for the purpose of granting to man such knowledge as he could neither possess nor acquire from himself. In later times the use of the word "revelation" has been changed considerably; it now is very often employed to denote enrichment of human consciousness by the process of natural development, either with the co-operation of some divine action which may be called providential guidance, or even excluding every super-human action. Of course it would take far too much space to enter into a detailed discussion of the idea of "revelation"; but it will certainly not be out of place to investigate in what sense the prophets themselves refer to revelation.

A standing phrase equivalent to our "revelation" is not to be found in the Hebrew language. The word, which the English version has translated by "reveal" גלה (*galah*) properly means "to unveil," "to take away the cover from anything," and thus it also conveys the sense of acquainting anyone with what is hidden to

him. In this way it is used for the self-communication of the Lord to the prophets,<sup>1</sup> and also for the communication of the word of God by the prophets.<sup>2</sup> However it is not a specific word for "revelation," as it is also used in various other cases, e.g., when Jonathan says to David: "behold, my father will do nothing either great or small, but that he will *shew* it me" (Revised Version: "that he *discloseth* it unto me")<sup>3</sup>; or when Saul addresses his servants: "that all of you have conspired against me, and there is none that *sheweth* me that my son hath made a league with the son of Jesse, and there is none of you that is sorry for me; or *sheweth* unto me that my son hath stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as at this day?" (Revised Version, again: "*discloseth*").<sup>4</sup>

Once we find the Hithpa'el of the verb  $\text{עָרָא}$  (*yadhá*) employed to designate the divine revelation unto the prophets, when the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron and Miriam: "if there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will *make myself known* unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream."<sup>5</sup>

As a rule, however, the receptive element in prophecy is expressed by various periphrases, of which the most habitual are that "the Lord *said* or *spoke*" unto them,<sup>6</sup> and that "the *word* of the Lord *came*" to them<sup>7</sup>; in some instances "the Lord *shewed* me."<sup>8</sup> The prophet Ezekiel tells us how "the hand of the Lord was upon him"<sup>9</sup> or "fell upon him,"<sup>10</sup> and "the Spirit of the Lord fell upon him."<sup>11</sup>

If we put the question now, in what sense these expressions are meant by the prophets, the answer is given by the conspicuous fact that their preaching is interwoven with the formula "thus saith the Lord." Apparently they were firmly convinced that they had received and were reproducing what was in reality "the word of God." It was not a word that had sprung up from their

<sup>1</sup> 1 Sam. iii. 7, 21; ix. 15; Is. xxii. 14; Am. iii. 7; Dan. x. 1. In its Aramaic form  $\text{שָׁמַע}$  Dan. ii. 19, 22, 28, 29, 30, 47.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Sam. vii. 27; 1 Chron. xvii. 25.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Sam. xx. 2.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Sam. xxii. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Numb. xii. 6.

<sup>6</sup> e.g., 1 Kings. xxii. 14; Is. vii. 3; viii. 1, 5; Jer. i. 9; iii. 6; xi. 6; xvii. 19; Ezek. ii. 1; iii. 1ff; Hos. i. 2; iii. 1; Am. vii. 15; Hab. ii. 2.

<sup>7</sup> e.g. Jer. ii. 1; xviii. 5; Ezek. vi. 1; vii. 1; xii. 1; xiii. 1; xiv. 2, 12; Zech. iv. 8; vi. 9; vii. 4, 8; viii. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Jer. xxiv. 1; xxxviii. 21; Ezek. xi. 25; Am. vii. 1, 4, 7; viii. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ezek. i. 3; iii. 14, 22; xxxvii. 1; xl. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ezek. viii. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ezek. xi. 5.

own mind, but they realised it as produced by an external mighty power which to their notion was no other than the Lord Yahveh, the God of Israel. They spoke what the Lord had spoken to them; their preaching was not figuratively and metaphorically, but literally and actually the announcement of the word of God.

This conviction displays itself in a very prominent manner by the introducing of God speaking in the first person, not only when the prophet's preaching is preceded by the formula "thus saith the Lord," or even when this formula is inserted in his message, but also when this formula is altogether lacking. It is of frequent occurrence in prophetic preaching that the speech passes into the first person, and the Lord is introduced speaking, without any indication at all that there is a transition from indirect into direct phrase.<sup>1</sup> Such could only be an inexplicable audacity, were it not founded on the firm and lucid assurance of the prophets that God in reality had given all these words as His own into their mouth.

Moreover, our attention is drawn to the fact that the prophets often are able to point out with accuracy the time when and the place where the word of God came unto them.<sup>2</sup> Such statements present an irrefutable testimony that the prophets understood the speaking of the Lord unto them not in a metaphorical sense, not as a reproduction of some psychical process that took place in their own mind, but as an objective reality. Without any doubt they mean to declare that they actually had an experience not originating in their own consciousness. Just as one man speaks to another at a certain time and in a certain place, God has spoken to them at such a time and in such a place, which they can indicate exactly. And this testimony is greatly corroborated by the decided distinction between the point of time when God was speaking to the prophet and when He was not. We call attention to Jeremiah's conflict with the false prophet Hananiah. After the bold word of Hananiah while breaking the yoke from Jeremiah's neck: "thus saith the Lord: even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all nations within the space of two full years," Jeremiah, silent, went his way;

<sup>1</sup> e.g., Is. iii. 4; v. 3ff; x. 5ff; xi. 9; xiii. 3, 11ff; xxvii. 3; xli. 1ff; xlii. 1ff; Jer. v. 7; xvi. 21; Hos. iv. 5ff; vi. 4ff; Jo. ii. 25ff; Am. v. 12, 21; Mic. i. 6; Zech. ix. 7ff.

<sup>2</sup> For the time when, see Is. xvi. 13, 14; Jer. iii. 6; xiii. 3, 6; xlii. 7; Ezek. i. 1; iii. 16; viii. 1; xii. 8; xl. 1; Zech. vii. 1-4, etc.; for the place where, see Jer. xviii. 2ff; Ezek. i. 1 iii. 23, 24; viii. 1, etc.

he had nothing to answer because the Lord had not spoken to him. But then the word of the Lord came again to Jeremiah, and he had to turn back and tell Hananiah what his God had said to him.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most important data is also, that the prophets discern explicitly between their own word and the word that the Lord had spoken unto them. Repeatedly prophecy assumes the form of a dialogue between the prophet and his God<sup>2</sup>; and in more than one case the prophet's notions and sentiments are expressed in antithesis with the ideas that are suggested to his mind by the divine subject, assuming the form of objections against the word of the Lord.<sup>3</sup> Especially in the case of Jeremiah these objections assume the nature of pleadings in favour of the sinful people threatened with God's severe judgment.<sup>4</sup> In view of this it is unquestionable that the prophets positively discern between the contents of their own mind and the result of the divine subject's action. They have understood their preaching and announced it to others as the result of that divine action. And they have not had in mind a development, an evolution of their own consciousness with this action, but explicitly the inspiring of new ideas and conceptions, which often constituted a peremptory antithesis to their own notions. Now and then this even went so far, that they tried to defend themselves against these new conceptions, but the divine subject proved itself too mighty for them, and compelled them, in spite of themselves, to assimilate and reproduce the contents of the inspiration.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the prophets deliberately declare that the divine revelation they are preaching is not coming forth from "their own heart." They place themselves continuously in irreconcilable antithesis to prophets who are wont to speak without divine charge, without divine inspiration. These "false" prophets the Lord has "not sent" and "yet they ran"; He has "not spoken to them, yet they prophesied."<sup>6</sup> They prophesy "lies in the Lord's name"; they prophesy "a false vision, and divination, and a thing of nought, and the deceit of their heart."<sup>7</sup> So we see that the prophets are very well aware of the antithesis between divine revelation and the human mind; with the "false" prophets

<sup>1</sup> Jer. xxviii. 10ff.

<sup>2</sup> Is. vi. 8ff; Jer. v. 1ff; x'. 18ff; x'i. 1ff; Ezek. xi. 13ff; Am. viii. 1ff.

<sup>3</sup> Jer. i. 4ff; Ezek. iv. 13ff; Hab. i., ii.

<sup>4</sup> Jer. xiv., 15. Cf. also Am. vii. 1ff.

<sup>5</sup> Jer. xx. 7-18.

<sup>6</sup> Jer. xxiii. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Jer. xiv. 14. Cf. also Jer. xxiii. 16, 25, 26; Ezek. xiii. 2f, 6ff, 17.

are only the considerations of human reason, but the true prophets vindicate for themselves the possession of divine revelation ; their prophetic preaching is not the result of their rational considerations, but the delivering of a message wherewith they have been charged by God.

From all this it is manifest that the prophets, as they claim revelation, communication on the part of God, never understand this otherwise nor wish it to be understood otherwise than in this way, that in objective reality there was introduced into their mind through deliberate action of the divine subject, clearly distinct from their own subject, some content, which in no way originated in their own consciousness.

That this was not only the purport of the prophetic testimony, but that it also was understood in this sense by the auditors, is clear on the one hand from the custom of consulting the prophets to learn the will of God,<sup>1</sup> on the other hand from the frequent occurrence of the prophetic testimony, transposed in the third person, in the historical narrative of the Old Testament.\* These phenomena can only be explained by a general belief of the people, that the prophets in reality received divine revelations. Their claim without doubt was understood in an objective sense. This argument cannot be weakened by the fact that the prophets mostly were resisted by the people and their message was rejected. For it was not the fact of divine revelation in itself which met with objection, but the people did not believe that *these* prophets were gifted with divine inspiration. Clearly this is to be seen in Jer. xliii. 2, where the "captains of the forces," having asked the prophet to pray for them unto the Lord that He might show them the way wherein they might walk, and the thing that they might do, account for their refusal to obey the divine message in this manner : "Thou speakest falsely ; the Lord our God hath not sent thee to say, go not into Egypt to sojourn there." Even the "false" prophets indeed, who were always enjoying peculiar popularity, claimed in the same fashion the reception of the word of God. Credit was given to their testimony, whilst the testimony of the true prophets was repudiated.

The significance of this impression made by the prophetic testimony on the hearers is not to be disregarded. Then either

<sup>1</sup> 1 Sam. ix. 9 ; 1 Kings xxii. 5, 6 ; 2 Kings iii. 11 ; viii. 8 ; xxii. 13, 14 ; Jer. xxxvii, 17 ; xlii. 1ff ; Ezek. xiv. 1ff.

\* 1 Sam. xv. 10 ; 2 Sam. vii. 4 ; xxiv. 11 ; 1 Kings xii. 15, 22 ; xiii. 1, 20 ; xiv. 18 ; xvi. 1, 7, 12 ; xvii. 2, 8 ; xviii. 1 ; xx. 35 ; xxi. 17, 28, etc.

the prophets, knowing how their testimony was taken, would have rendered themselves guilty of an extremely reprehensible proceeding by not contradicting this opinion, or they must have meant their testimony exactly as it was understood.

The famous Dutch critical scholar, Abraham Kuenen, has tried to explain the testimony of the prophets in this way, that they only meant to give expression to the certainty and seriousness of their religious and moral conviction. Their perpetual "thus saith the Lord" is interpreted by him as the rendering of their subjective, but unshakable conviction as to the truth of the opinions they were uttering.<sup>1</sup> So their testimony is taken in a purely metaphorical sense. But it is hardly open to contradiction that this explanation is purely arbitrary. It originates in the wish of its author not to acknowledge the reality of supernatural action, of divine inspiration in the prophets, without stamping them as impostors. It does, however, not stand on sure ground; and positively does not do justice to the statements of the prophets themselves.

Indeed, it appears rather a strong assertion, that the prophets should have introduced their own conviction as to any religious or moral truth with the formula "thus saith the Lord"; and it must excite still more astonishment, that they should have chosen the expression "the Lord spake unto me" for indicating the rising of such a religious or moral conviction in their mind. Moreover, how could they describe the struggle of their soul with such a rising conviction in the form of an antithesis between their own wish and the will of the Lord? But the explanation given by Kuenen completely breaks down before the fact of their pointing out the time and place of the Lord's speaking to them. Is it exegetically defensible to interpret their statement: at such a time and in such a place the Lord spake unto me in this way: at such a time and in such a place I became convinced of this or that religious or moral truth? And what about their explicit declaration that they did not prophesy out of their own heart? Would it not have been misleading in a high degree if they only meant to oppose their own conviction as just and true against the erroneous opinion of their adversaries? Psychologically and exegetically, justice is done to the testimony of the prophets and to the impression it made on the auditors, only when their "thus saith the Lord" is understood in a literal sense, from an

<sup>1</sup> Kuenen, *De profeten en de profetie onder Israel*, passim, especially II, 102f.

objective experience. The divine revelation, which they claim, is meant as a making known to them by the Lord's action of things that were not known to them by their own reasoning.

Of course with this the reality of prophetic revelation is not scientifically proved. It cannot be scientifically proved. By the means of a true scientific unbiassed exegesis it can be proved that the testimony of the prophets claimed real divine revelation. But this does not produce evidence to the soundness of this claim. The truth of their testimony cannot be settled by scientific investigation. It is at last a matter of belief. Whosoever believes that the Bible is the word of God, also believes that the prophets are speaking the truth when they assert that God has spoken to them; whosoever does not believe that the Bible is the word of God, cannot believe the reality of prophetic revelation. As far as scientific exegesis goes, it only can be decided that the prophets in reality claimed divine revelation. But this can be ascertained beyond doubt; it is exegetically false to put into their mouth anything else than what they obviously meant to say themselves.

This has been acknowledged by later critical scholars as for example Gunkel. In contrast with Kuenen this learned German willingly admits that the prophets mean to say that the Lord in reality spoke to them. Their testimony is not to be taken figuratively but literally; and then he raises the question how their claim ~~to~~ is to be accounted for. It is impossible for him to accept it; but it is equally impossible for him to disapprove of them as impostors. So he tries to explain their "thus saith the Lord" by the psychological method, and finds the base of their testimony in the phenomenon of ecstasy.<sup>1</sup> This remarkable psychical phenomenon, well-known to psychologists, is found among all peoples of the earth, and as a rule is regarded as a token of "possession" by a superhuman power. In ecstatic trance the soul is disposed to receive hallucinations and illusions of every kind; voices are heard, visions are seen. Now the prophetic testimony, according to Gunkel and others, is to be explained as the result of such ecstatic experiences, which were regarded by the prophets as inspirations from Yahweh, the God of Israel. They found themselves, just like Shamans and other ecstatici, in a state of possession, but the power by which they felt themselves possessed was "the Lord."

<sup>1</sup> Gunkel, *Die geheimen Erfahrungen der Propheten Israëls*, vol. I. of *Suchen der Zeit*, 1903, pp. 112-153; reprinted in *Die Propheten*, Göttingen, 1917, pp. 1-31. Gunkel has been followed by others, especially by Hölcher, *Die Propheten*, Leipzig, 1914.

We may appreciate this attempt to do better justice to the prophetic testimony; it is a considerable step in advance of the arbitrary and violating interpretation of Kuenen. Nevertheless we cannot accept the explanation of Gunkel. For it appears that the actual data whereon he grounds his theory are wholly insufficient. It is necessary to enter into some details, in order to demonstrate that the strict historical method of Gunkel, as he himself calls it, has not succeeded in delivering the actual proof that the prophetic testimony can be sufficiently explained from a purely human base. This, however, in our next article.

*(To be continued.)*

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