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THE OFFICE OF THE PROPHET IN OLD TESTAMENT TIMES

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When one undertakes to make a comprehensive study of the men in the O.T. who bore the name "prophet," and of the activities of those who are said to prophesy, he is confronted with a bewildering and perplexing variety. He need not be very astute to observe that there is a marked difference between Saul, who stripped off his clothes and prophesied, lying naked all day and all night (1 Sam. 19:24), and Isaiah or Amos, whose thunderous "thus saith the Lord" exposed the moral corruption of the nation. Modern students of the O.T. seek to categorize the various kinds of prophets by coining such terms as "frenzied" or "ecstatic" prophets, "canonical" or "writing" prophets, "cultic" prophets, "false" or "professional" prophets, the "prophetic guild," and the like. But the Bible itself uses the term "prophet" to refer to all of these, and others.

In an effort to find a common definition which will embrace all the phenomena, etymology has been often resorted to, but according to my understanding, without positive results. The verb to prophesy, nibba' or hiithnabbe' is used preponderantly to signify the preaching of the message of God. An example of the usage is found in Amos 7:14 ff, which reads: "I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore-trees: and Jehovah took me from following the flock, and Jehovah said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel." While I have not analyzed every usage of the verb in the Old Testament, it surely must be safe to say that in the great majority of cases the word means to declare God's message. However, there are unquestionably a few places in the Bible where the word is used to mean "to behave in an uncontrolled manner." The verb is used of Saul when he lost his self control and hurled a javelin at David (1 Sam. 18:10), or when he stripped off his clothes and rolled about on the ground. It is also used of the prophets of Baal on Carmel when they danced about and cut themselves with knives (1 Kings 18:28,29). But the usage of the verb does not establish the meaning of the noun "prophet," because the verb was derived from the noun, and simply means to "play the prophet." It may well be that the "ecstatic" connotation of this verb is quite secondary, and is due to the fact that some prophets were of the frenzied type.

The primary meaning of the word prophet still needs to be considered. Some have tried to connect it with the verb naba', which means to bubble forth. This view is technically unsound, and has nothing to commend it except that it tries to establish a basis for the idea that ecstasy is fundamental to all prophecy. Of this I will speak later.

Professor Albright (with more plausibility) has connected the noun prophet to the Akkadian verb nabu, which means to call, to announce. He takes it in the passive sense as one who is called (by God). Others take it in the active sense, as an announcer, a proclaimer of a message. The etymological argument, however, is quite inconclusive, and we have no certainty as to the primary meaning of the root.

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What cannot be established by etymology may often be established by function, and to this purpose I direct your attention to Exodus 7:1, which reads: "And Jehovah said unto Moses, See, I have made thee as God to Pharaoh; and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet." Compare this with the parallel passage in Exodus 4:15, 16 which reads: "And thou shalt speak unto him, and put the words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do. And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people; and it shall come to pass, that he shall be to thee a mouth, and thou shalt be to him as God." In the second passage the word prophet is not used, but the same relationships appear to be in mind. These verses show that the prophet's function was as a spokesman for another. He delivered a message which had previously been given to him. In general terms, a prophet was considered to be a spokesman for God.

II.

In the light of the above definition, we are often perplexed by the very abnormal behavior of some who are said to be prophets. Note has already been taken of the strange actions of Saul; but his age seems to have witnessed quite a bit of this kind of thing. I Samuel 10:5 ff. relates the incident of a band of prophets coming down from a high place with the accompaniment of musical instruments, and prophesying. It is difficult to see how prophesying in this context could be preaching. Probably the act of prophesying here took the form of singing, or of giving what appeared to be uncontrolled utterances of an ecstatic nature. Perhaps the music in some way induced the utterances, for we observe that Elisha also employed the minstrel in preparing to prophesy (II Kings 3:15).

Another incident is instructive in this regard. We read in I Samuel 19:18 ff. that David fled from Saul and took refuge with Samuel, who had also with him a band of prophets who were prophesying. When Saul on three occasions sent messengers there to take David, the messengers were overcome by the Spirit of God and also prophesied. This can scarcely mean that the messengers preached, but that they were compelled to act in some strange way that prevented them from going about their intended business. Saul, therefore, set out to accomplish the task himself, but likewise was overcome by the Spirit of God and prophesied, stripping off his clothes and lying naked. Thus we see that to prophesy sometimes indicated very abnormal behavior; and while this was true more commonly in the earlier history of Israel, it was likewise known in later times. Jeremiah 29:26 refers to every man who is mad and acts as a prophet. Acting as a prophet and being mad are here practically equated. The context shows that Jeremiah is very much included in this reference, so that some people of his day, at least, regarded him as a mad man. It may be noted that several of the so-called writing prophets at times engaged in what was regarded as abnormal behavior, but this obviously was not the essence of their prophesying. Their prophesying had to do with proclaiming God's message, and their strange acts were subservient to this purpose. We may conclude then, that when the verb to prophesy is used to indicate strange behavior, this idea is secondary to the primary connotation of speaking in the name of the Lord.

III.

Many scholars have spoken of the prophets as having received their messages in ecstasy. Gunkel said: "The fundamental experience of all types of prophecy is ecstasy," and similarly Jacobi said: "Ecstasy is the essence of prophecy." They seem to mean that every prophetic oracle arose out of an ecstatic experience; that the prophets were transposed into some sort of trance, in which they received their revelations.

This seems to me to go far beyond the evidence. Those who present this view often refer to the experience of Balaam, who says of himself in Numbers 24:3 ff. "Balaam the son of Beor saith, and the man whose eye is opened saith, He saith who heareth the words of God, Who seeth the vision of the Almighty, Falling down and having his eyes open: ----." The words "falling down and having his eyes open" are taken to signify a trance-like experience. But we must remember that Balaam is consistently presented in the Old Testament as a pagan soothsayer, who was intent on getting the kind of oracle from God that he was being paid to obtain. Three times he set up the circumstances and went through the ritual that was supposed to obtain the required result, but each time he failed in his purposes because God was concerned to show that divination would not work against Israel. If this so-called prophet experienced a suspension of his personality in receiving the divine message, it might well be because he was out of harmony with that message, and God overwhelmed him in order to present it. It does not follow that other prophets who knew God better and were more conformed to His will should experience such a suspension of personality.

Indeed the true prophets knew the experience of being possessed by God so as to declare the word of God. Micah declared in 3:8: "As for me, I am full of power by the Spirit of Jehovah, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin." But if the prophet became the mouthpiece of Jehovah and the medium of divine revelation, he did not cease to be himself, and his message came through the organ of his personality. The personality of all the canonical prophets is reflected in their prophecies. It is clear then that our doctrine of verbal inspiration cannot be described as any "mechanical dictation" theory, and those who have so described it have grotesquely distorted it. The prophets had possession of their faculties; they had real interests; their minds functioned; and they were men of deep convictions. While they declared the Word of God, they were more than mere passive mediums of his message. The above is true even of Ezekiel, who did, more than some other prophets, receive revelations by visions.

IV.

In more recent years there has been an emphasis upon the relation of the prophet to the religious ritual of the nation. The older liberal approach was to pit the prophet against the priest, and to interpret such passages as Isaiah 1:10 ff., Amos 5:21 f., Hosea 6:6, Micah 6:6 ff., Jeremiah 7:21, and others, as if the prophet was disposed to abolish the sacrificial system. This viewpoint, spawned by the developmental theory of Israelite religion commonly associated with Wellhausen, practically made out that the prophets and the priests were exponents of two different religions. Now there is a complete reversal, and the trend is to indicate a close association of the prophet to what they term the cultus, and they sometimes refer to cultic prophets. For instance, it is pointed out that the prophet Samuel often is seen as officiating in religious ritual in the offering of sacrifices at various centers, and that he was related to the service of the temple and of the priest Eli from childhood. Elijah applied the term *nabi* (prophet) to himself, and yet the episode for which he is best remembered, the contest on Carmel, displays him performing the functions of a priest, as well as prophet. As for the writing prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah are all said to be members of priestly families, and it is noted that Isaiah received his call to the prophetic office while in the temple. However, these incontestable facts are given a new twist and pushed beyond the limits of the evidence. The Norwegian scholar, Nowinckel, regards both Jeremiah and Isaiah as temple personnel; and in the same vein Pedersen remarked that the prophets constituted a stable part of the temple staff. The effect of this has been to make out both the prophet and the priest as functionaries in the religious ritual.

An interesting application of this new viewpoint has been given to the interpretation of the Psalms. The radical notion that the Psalter was the "hymnbook of the second temple" has been dropped, and instead, they regard the writers of the Psalms to have been these so-called cultic prophets. This means that the various Psalms each have some ritualistic background, perhaps occasioned by the events of the religious calendar. The prophet is then believed to have given poetic expression to the pious responses of the people during these religious occasions. Thus the Psalms are songs of the prophets designed to make the ritual acts meaningful.

Perhaps some good things can be said for this methodology. At least it has stopped the late-dating of the Psalms, and the relegating of many of them to the Maccabean age. One practitioner of this method states that he knows of only one post-exilic Psalm, the 137th. But obviously the reaction to Wellhausenism has caused the pendulum to swing too far to the opposite extreme, and the result has been another distortion. Who can sympathetically read the words of Isaiah in 1:11 ff. -- "What unto me is the multitude of your sacrifices? saith Jehovah: I have had enough of the burnt-offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he-goats"--who can read these words and then believe that Isaiah was a cultic official who participated in these very ceremonies?

V.

The step having been taken to make the prophet a temple functionary, the comparative religionists have gone one step further and sought to illustrate his role in Israel by comparing him with the functionaries of Babylonian ritual. The Swedish scholar Haldar noted that a certain Babylonian official was called mahhu. This word derived from the verb meaning "to rave", evidently signifying that his behavior was ecstatic. Haldar thus equated the mahhu priest of Babylonia with the prophet of Israel who many had presumed received his oracles in ecstasy.

The prophet in Israel is sometimes called a ro'eh, a seer. To him Haldar compared the Babylonian official called baru, which also derives from the verb to see. But the Babylonian baru was a seer in a different sense, since we know the technique by which he got his visions. He was one who saw by divination. There were different means by which he practiced divination: there was the observance of oil and water in a divining cup; or the omen might be received by observing the entrails and markings of the liver of a sacrificed sheep; or he watched the flight of birds or the movements of heavenly bodies, and such like.

The comparison of the Hebrew prophets with Babylonian diviners and ravers is a very extreme position, which doubtless is repulsive to us who accept the Biblical position that the prophets of the Old Testament proclaimed an objective revelation which was communicated to them by the living God. The comparison, however, does serve one useful function. It shows us to what depths some self-styled prophets in Israel had sunk, for we know that some of them indeed had adopted the methods of the pagan diviners. Micah declared that "the seers shall be put to shame and the diviners confounded" (3:7), and in 3:11 he denounced the prophets that divine for money. Indeed the Biblical evidence shows that the false prophets were often quite assimilated to the pagan religion of Israel's neighbors. And recently from the ruins of ancient Hazor has come eloquent testimony to the fact that divination of the Babylonian-type was known in Palestine, for excavators recently unearthed a clay model of a sheep's liver, fashioned to initiate the novice into the art of divining. (See the photograph in The Biblical Archaeologist of Feb., 1959.)

VI.

These above-mentioned false prophets are frequently mentioned by the great writing prophets. Isaiah complained that the prophet reeled with strong drink and was swallowed up with wine (28:7). Jeremiah declared that they commit adultery and walk in lies (23:14). He further declared that these prophets were professionals who really had no commission: "I sent not these prophets, yet they ran: I spake not unto them, yet they prophesied" (23:21). He maintained that they authored their own messages: "I have heard what the prophets have said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed. How long shall this be in the heart of the prophets that prophesy lies, even the deceit of their own heart?" (23:25,26). In addition to all of this, Jeremiah charges the false prophets with stealing one another's oracles. In 23:30 he says: "Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith Jehovah, that steal my words every one from his neighbor?" Professor Rowley says of them: "Instead of knowing the direct constraint of the Spirit of God, they were looking around for their oracles. They were the mere members of a profession, not men of vocation." For a modern application, we have not only the lying prophets who substitute their own wishful thinking for the message of God, but also we have even in our fundamentalist circles mere lookers for sermons, who do not know the compulsion of God's Spirit in their preaching.

We can even sample what the various writing prophets have to say about these false prophets. Ezekiel devotes his entire thirteenth chapter to denouncing them, and Micah remarks that the oracles that they delivered were conditioned by the fee they received; "Thus saith Jehovah concerning the prophets that make my people to err; that bite with their teeth, and cry, Peace; and whoso putteth not into their mouths, they even prepare war against him" (3:5).

VII.

The strange thing about this matter is that the false and the true prophets are referred to with the same word, nabi' (prophet). This raises the question as to how the true prophet of Israel was to be distinguished from the false. Externally, the distinctions between the two are not very much in evidence. Doubtless they dressed very much the same. And surely it must have appeared that their actions were very much the same. And since the false prophets are denounced for deceiving the people, it must have been that distinctions were not always easy, and they could not be based on externals.

One point of distinction among the true prophets must have been that sense of compulsion to prophesy. The record of Jeremiah's call in his first chapter shows his feeling of necessity to proclaim the message, a necessity which he could not side-step. But throughout his book there recurs this feeling of constraint. In 20:7,8, he complains that his message has made him a laughing stock and in verse 9 he would resolve to be silent, but he cries: "If I say, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name, then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with forbearing, and I cannot contain."

The other great prophets also were conscious of this compelling call to prophesy, often against their own desires. Moses would have liked to escape the obligation but could not. Isaiah's vision in the temple compelled him to answer the call of who will go, and to say, "Here am I, send me." Amos, Hosea, and others experienced a definite call which obligated them to speak out for God, and which gave a ring of conviction to what they had to say.

However, the great distinction between the messages of the true prophets and those of the false was not in the manner of its delivery, but in the content of the message itself. The false prophets were the yes-men of their times, currying favor with the political figures of the day and giving the messages that would justify the actions of those politicians. They were motivated by a policy of self-seeking, and were too shallow in their perception of God to know His mind on a given matter.

The true prophets, however, were moved by conviction, and preached on the basis of their knowledge of what God was and what He had said. These men had experience with God in their own lives, and their messages were in accord with what they knew God to be--in accord with what God had revealed Himself to be. Amos and Isaiah and Micah and others were compelled to proclaim the judgment of God upon unrepentant Israel because they had come to know God as the Holy One, and any other message would have been inconsistent with the known character of God. Hosea on the other hand appealed for his nation to give a proper response to the love of God because he himself had experienced a realization of that love in his own life. To say this is not to fall into the error of making the prophet himself the source of his own message, but only to emphasize once again that God spoke through the personality of His prophet, and conditioned the prophet by experience for the message he was to give. The false prophets on the other hand could prophesy peace and prosperity to a nation that teetered on the brink of moral collapse and of political disintegration, because they had no personal knowledge of God.

VII.

Finally, I will include just a word about the common conception of prophecy, which has to do with the foretelling of the future. Certainly the prophet did predict the future, as we all are aware. Furthermore, Isaiah made the ability to predict correctly the future a polemic against heathenism: "Let them bring them forth, and shew us what shall happen--or declare us things to come. Declare the things that are to come hereafter. . . ." (Isa. 41:22,23. See also 45:21 and 46:9,10.) But prediction was not the larger part of prophecy; it was as much the prophet's responsibility to interpret correctly the past and the present. An indication of this is given in the arrangement of the books according to the Hebrew Bible. What we commonly call the historical books are gathered together in the Hebrew Bible under the term "the Former Prophets." They are included among the prophets because they give God's interpretation of the nation's past.

Thus we have come full cycle back to the point of our beginning. The office of the prophet in the Old Testament was that of an announcer, a proclaimer of a message which he had received from God, regardless of whether that message concerned the past, the present, or the future.

B

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