

has been a force to raise men's hearts from material absorptions. Thus it has contributed to that detachment and Christian brotherhood which beyond any sociology or socialism must be counted upon to redistribute the goods of the land in accord with social justice.

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## OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY AND MESSIAS PROPHECIES

THE average student of Theology is unconsciously led to identify prophecy with prediction and to associate the O.T. prophecies with the Messias. The prophets of the O.T. are regarded as the announcers of the Messias, and their prophecies as the predictions of the Messias, his person, his mission and his times. This is, to some extent, due to the theological studies of our younger years when we are taught that prophecy is the prediction of future events and that the O.T. prophecies fulfilled in N.T. times are a strong argument for the Christological doctrine of the N.T.

This, however, is only a part of the truth and can give rise to a misconception of the nature of O.T. prophecy and its Messianic import. The exact definition or description of the function of a prophet is given in Exodus, vii, 1 supplemented by Exodus iv, 15f. In Exodus vii, 1 God said to Moses: 'Behold I have appointed thee the God of Pharaoh: and Aaron, thy brother, shall be thy prophet'. In what manner Aaron was to be Moses' prophet is explained in Exodus iv, 15f, where God says to Moses: 'Speak to him (Aaron) and put my words in his mouth: and I will be in thy mouth and in his mouth, and will shew you what you must do. He shall speak in thy stead to the people, and shall be thy mouth; but thou shalt be to him in those things that pertain to God.' The last words are a paraphrastic rendering of Hebrew, 'thou shalt be to him as God'. From these two passages it appears clearly that the word *nabi* 'prophet,' whatever its etymology and original meaning, is used in the sense of 'spokesman'. Aaron was to be Moses' spokesman in the same way as Moses was God's. The same definition or description is given in Deut. xviii, 18: 'I will raise them up a prophet . . . and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I shall command him'. In all these passages the prophetic function is not restricted to any sphere of time; the prophet has simply to communicate God's message to men whether it refers to the past or to the

present or to the future. Hence, as Father Lattey has remarked, revelation and mission are the essentials of prophecy, but prediction cannot be considered strictly essential to prophecy (*The Religion of the Scriptures*, pp. 47f).

In order to understand better the nature of O.T. prophecy and its relation to prediction let us enquire more closely into the history of prophetism. From its very origin it appears as the impregnable bulwark of monotheism. As the Israelites had no organized and authoritative body of teachers who would keep alive in them their religious beliefs and the precepts of the moral law, God set up an institution that would safeguard the integrity of monotheistic religion and the purity of moral conduct. The prophetic mission, therefore, was not restricted to any particular field of activity, but extended over the religious life of the people in all its various manifestations, in the sanctuary and in the court, in domestic affairs and in political matters, in peacetime and on the battlefield. During the early years of Israel's settlement in the land of Canaan, when the Israelites came into contact with heathen peoples and superstitious practices, the prophet was, to a certain extent and so far as our scanty information of that period goes, the counterpart of the Philistine soothsayer. Man has an inborn tendency to pierce the veil which conceals the future from him, especially in certain critical situations. To satisfy this natural tendency the Philistines had a band of soothsayers, diviners and magicians who pretended to discover the future by means of superstitious arts. The Israelites on entering the land of Canaan would hardly have resisted the temptation to consult the heathen prophets and this would have seriously jeopardized their faith in Yahweh. In order to ward off this danger God gave his people persons who could foretell the future and disclose what was hidden from man, not by magical arts but by the knowledge derived from him. Thus Saul consulted Samuel about his father's lost asses (I Samuel ix, 6ff) and, some years later, consulted God again through the priests and the prophets concerning the issue of the war he was about to undertake (I Samuel xxviii, 6, 15). Gad, the prophet, advised David to depart from Maspha and to return to the land of Juda (I Samuel xxii, 5.) At a later date Jeroboam's wife consulted the prophet Ahias about her sick son (I Kings xiv, 1ff).

This, however, was only one aspect of the prophetic activity during this early period. The prophets were also the bearers of God's messages (Judges vi, 8-10; I Samuel ii, 27-36; xv, 2f); the people's intercessors (I Samuel vii, 5; xii, 23) and God's representatives in all that concerned his theocratic rights over them (I Samuel viii, 6-9; ix, 16; xii, 13-25; xv, 16-30).

During the reign of David, the prophets appear as the king's political advisers and his privy-councillors directing all their efforts

towards consolidating the newly-established monarchy. They are court prophets conveying God's messages to the king and exercising their influence over the government of the State. They do not mix with the people; they have no divine message to give them; they even seem to be indifferent to the people's needs. Nathan delivered to David the message that God would build a house to him (II Samuel vii, 4-17); he rebuked David for his sin with Bethsabee (II Samuel xii, 1-15) and later succeeded in securing the succession to Solomon against the rights of his elder brother Adonias (I Kings i, 11-40). Gad, another of David's prophets, advised the wandering king to return to his own country (I Samuel xxii, 5) and, later, announced to him the punishment which God was about to inflict upon him and his people for his sin in numbering the people and advised him to erect an altar and seek God's forgiveness (II Samuel xxiv, 11-18.) During Solomon's reign we know of one prophet only, Ahias (I Kings xi, 29.) Unlike both Nathan and Gad, Ahias was not a court prophet, but rather a political prophet, who urged Jeroboam to revolt against Solomon. While Nathan and Gad strove for the consolidation of the kingdom, Ahias was instrumental in bringing about its disruption. But it must be remembered that the division of the kingdom had already been decreed by God as a punishment for Solomon's aberrations; and Ahias, whatever his personal leanings may have been, was simply predicting what had already been determined by God. This explains why the prophet Semeias deterred Roboam from any attempt to bring back the dismembered tribes (I Kings xii, 22-24).

The disruption of the kingdom, the pernicious example set by Solomon with his foreign wives and their heathen deities as well as the religious practices of the unconquered Canaanites gradually led to idolatry or, at least, to a syncretistic form of religion which associated Yahweh with Baal, and sacrifices with ritual licentiousness. Moral corruption set in and played havoc among religious and domestic institutions.

It is against this dreary background of religious apostasy and moral degeneration that the activity of the prophets during the period which followed the division of the kingdom must be viewed. True to the religious traditions of their fathers, uncompromising in their attitude towards idolatry, undaunted by the people's opposition or by the king's threats, they taught and warned, they advised and rebuked, they promised and threatened, they laboured strenuously to bring the people back to Yahweh and his law. Indeed the history of prophetism from the ninth century onwards has been aptly summarized in these words: 'Four centuries of conflict with idolatry' (Cardinal Meignan, *Quatre siècles de lutte contre l'idolatrie*, Paris, 1903.) The heroic deeds of the prophet Elias, Eliseus' burning zeal for Yahweh, Isaias' scathing

denunciations of Israel's moral corruption and infidelity, Deutero-Isaias' forcible polemizing against the false gods, Jeremias' impassioned outbursts against the obstinacy of the people, their external ritualism and vain confidence in human help in face of imminent danger are too well known to be recounted here. Scattered throughout their discourses there are predictions of impending disaster, especially devastation of the land, deportation of the people and extinction of the wicked, and predictions of peace and welfare for the faithful Israelites.

Thus we see that the essential function of the prophet was the communication of a divine message. But whether that message was the recollection of past events or the denunciation of the present or the prediction of the future depended exclusively on God's will and on his plans concerning the mission of Israel. So also whether they warned or rebuked, consoled or threatened, condemned foreign alliances or encouraged kings to trust in God, announced disaster or foretold restoration, it was God's word which they communicated for the spiritual guidance of the people according to their particular needs. In other words the prophets were *forthtellers*, but not necessarily *foretellers*.

Let us now consider the place which messianic prophecy held in the prophetic mission. From what we have said it appears clearly that the prophets were not invariably and necessarily bearers of bad news, announcers of impending ruin, 'prophets of woe' (*Unheilspropheten*) as they are sometimes called; they were also messengers of good news, announcers of a new era of bliss, 'prophets of weal' (*Heilspropheten*.) This brighter aspect of the prophetic mission is complementary to the more gloomy and dreadful message of destruction forming together what may be called the programme of the prophetic mission when idolatry was at its highest, a programme formulated in God's words to Jeremias: 'to root up and to pull down and to waste and to destroy' and then 'to build and to plant' (i, 10), that is, to announce the removal and destruction of all obstacles and the setting up of a new order based upon righteousness and an unshakeable faith in God. From their written records that have come down to us we can easily reconstruct the whole plan and method of their preaching. They first taught and warned, but as the people remained obstinate and insensible to their warnings, they threatened them with destruction. But as God's promises made to and through the Patriarchs could not be frustrated by man's iniquity, the prophets predicted that out of the general extermination a remnant would be saved and through it Israel would be reborn. The new Israel is then described in messianic colours. Sion will be once more the capital of the new kingdom; an offshoot from David's stock will sit again on David's throne and will reign over all nations. All enemies will be completely exterminated, and the righteous will enjoy everlasting peace. The messianic prophecies are, therefore, a complement and a counterpoise to the prophets' threats, and are generally embedded

in a gloomy context as a flash of lightning on a dark night. Let us illustrate this by examples :

In the group of prophecies ix, 8-xi, 16 Isaias warns the people about the disaster which is to come (ix, 8-x, 4), he then predicts the downfall of Assyria, which, in God's plan, is the instrument of Israel's chastisement (x, 5-19) and the deliverance of a remnant (x, 20-23.) Then, unless the text has been disarranged, the prophet describes the approaching of the invading army of the Assyrians, the devastation of the land of Juda (x, 24-34), the restoration of the land through an offshoot from the stock of Jesse (xi, 1-9) and the glorification of Sion (xi, 10-16). We observe the same scheme in Isaias xxviii-xxxv. Samaria will fall like a faded flower, but it will flourish again and the Lord will be its garland (xxviii, 1-6). The drunkards of Juda will be severely punished, but only to be purified as corn separated from the chaff (xxviii, 7-29). The people will be punished for their rejection of Yahweh's advice and their trust in human help, but a remnant will be saved (xxx, 1-26 ; xxxi, 1-32 ; In Jeremias xxiii, 1-8 the promise of the messianic king follows the denunciation of the unworthy rulers of Juda. The restoration promises in xxx-xxxiii, though not connected with their immediate context and forming a separate group of prophecies, are logically related to Jeremias' denunciation of Jerusalem's sins and the threat of coming doom. After having atoned for their sins in exile, the people will return to their homeland. Jerusalem will be rebuilt ; Yahweh will enter into a new covenant with his people ; the Davidic king will no longer be cut off nor the people rejected. Ezechiel severely rebukes the selfish and neglectful rulers of Juda and then promises a Davidic prince that will rule over the people who will enjoy all the blessings of peace and justice (xxxiv, 1-31).

We need not pursue this survey any further. Threats and promises are inseparably bound up together according to a well defined plan in the writings of all the prophets of the monarchy, but neither of them is an essential element of O.T. prophecy. The prophets announced God's word, and God's word was always adapted to the religious needs of the people. In time of religious orthodoxy they endeavoured to keep the people united with the bonds of Yahwistic faith ; in time of apostasy they laboured to bring the people back to Yahweh, threatening the backsliders with dreadful calamities and consoling the faithful with the promise of an age of bliss. They were the exponents of true religion, the intermediaries between God and the people and God's representatives in all that concerned his theocratic rights over the people. The prediction of the future, especially the messianic future, occupied a secondary place in the prophetic mission.

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