

CHAPTER THREE

Prophecy in Ancient Israel

In Ancient Israel, religious experience, inspiration and revelation are closely bound up with prophecy. The word ‘prophet’ comes from the Greek *prophētês*, meaning ‘one who speaks out (proclaims)’. A prophet was understood to be a medium who proclaimed words coming from God.

Prophecy is central to the Torah. Abraham is called a prophet (Genesis 20:7), and in Genesis 18:2 we are told that he ‘stood before YHWH’. Hosea speaks of Moses as a prophet (Hosea 12:13), and in the Torah there was an accepted trust that YHWH would continue to raise up prophets like Moses (see Deuteronomy 18:15-18; Exodus 20:18-20; Numbers 11:10-30).

The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings are listed in the Hebrew Bible as the ‘Former Prophets’. Among these Samuel stands out (see 1Samuel 3). We read of the prophet Nathan at the time of David (2Samuel 7,12; 1Kings 1); also the prophet Gad from the same period (1Samuel 22:5; 2Samuel 24:11-14). In the tenth century we know of the prophet Ahijah at Shiloh in the reign of Jeroboam I (1Kings 11:26-40; 14:1-17); the prophet Shemaiah in Judah (1Kings 12:22), as well as Azariah (2Chronicles 15:1) and Hanani (2Chronicles 16:7). In the ninth century we know of Jehu ben Hanani in Israel during the reign of Baasha (1Kings 16:1-4); Jahaziel and Eliezer in Judah (2Chronicles 20:4,37); Micaiah ben Imlah in Israel during the reign of Ahab (1Kings 22:1-36), and Zechariah ben Jehoiada in Judah (2Chronicles 24:20ff). The legends surrounding Elijah and Elisha (see 1Kings 17 – 2Kings 13) highlight their special significance. In the eighth century we know of Jonah ben Amittai in Israel in the reign of Jeroboam II (2Kings 14:25-27), and Zechariah, a mentor of Uzziah of Judah (2Chronicles 26:5).

There were associations of prophets. We hear of the prophets that were associated with Samuel (see 1Samuel 19:18-24); or with Elijah (see 2Kings 2:1-18), or Elisha (see 2Kings 4). There were prophets associated with the temple and its cult (see 1 Samuel 3 for the story of young Samuel). Others were court prophets, kept by the king to offer spiritual guidance in areas of policy.

Most significant were the individuals who felt compelled to criticize the court and the temple officials and to call the rulers and the people to be faithful to the special relationship they were privileged to have with YHWH. Typically this made them unpopular at the time, but when events proved them right, their words were preserved and reflected on lest the lesson be forgotten. In contrast to ‘The Former Prophets’, these are called ‘The Latter Prophets’, or ‘The Writing Prophets’, since they have scrolls that carry their name. In the Tanak there are four scrolls: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and a scroll containing twelve prophets. The first reference we have to ‘The Twelve Prophets’ is in Sirach 49:10, from the beginning of the second century BC. This is confirmed by the Septuagint, which lists them as the *dodekapropheton* (Greek for ‘twelve prophets’). In the Latin Vulgate they are called ‘The Minor Prophets’ – a reference to their length when compared to the longer individual scrolls of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

We will be examining the ‘Writing Prophets’ in their historical setting: Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah in the eighth century BC; Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Jeremiah in the seventh century; Ezekiel, Isaiah 40-55, Haggai, Zechariah and Isaiah 56-66 in the sixth century; and Obadiah, Zechariah 9-14, Joel, Malachi and Jonah in the fifth century.

Prophecy as a common Near-Eastern phenomenon

The uttering of prophetic oracles is not something that was peculiar to Israel. Replace the name of the pagan god in the following texts with YHWH, the God of Israel, and you could easily think you were reading from the Bible.

I lifted up my hands to Baalshamayn, and Baalshamayn answered me,
and Baalshamayn spoke to me through seers and messengers;
and Baalshamayn said to me: Fear not because it was I who made you king,
and I shall stand with you, and I shall deliver you
from all these kings who have forced a siege upon you.

(from the period of king Zakir of Hamath about 780BC. See Coggins, Phillips and Knibb *Israel’s Prophetic Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 1982 page 9).

I, Ishtar, will go before you and behind you. Fear not.
(from Assyria about 680BC. See Coggins op.cit. page 5).

Fear not, Ashurbanipal! (The goddess Ninlil is speaking)
Now, as I have spoken it will come to pass: I shall grant it to you.
Over the people of the four languages and over the armament of the princes
you will exercise sovereignty ...
[The kings] of the countries confer together:
Come, [let us rise] against Ashurbanipal ...
Ninlil answered: [The kings] of the lands I shall overthrow,
place under the yoke, their feet in [strong fetters] ...
Fear not! As she that bears for her child, so I care for you;
I have placed you like an amulet on my breast. Fear not, my son whom I have raised.
(from Assyria about 660BC See Coggins op.cit. page 6).

Within the Bible itself reference is made to ‘prophets’ outside Israel. One thinks of the ‘prophets of Baal’ that were challenged by Elijah (1Kings 18:18). The most well known example is Balaam who was hired by Balak to curse Israel, but who was unable to resist the power that caused him to utter a blessing instead (see Numbers 22-24).

Future prediction

Though we commonly speak of prophecy as ‘the foretelling of future events’, in biblical prophecy prediction of the future is a secondary aspect. The divine message spoken through the prophet was directed to people’s present situation. It sometimes contained a warning about the future consequences of people’s behaviour and sometimes held out a promise of wellbeing in the future. Such future predictions were generally couched in very general terms. When they are precise in their content they refer to the future of those to whom the words were addressed, and are conditional on their response to the divine revelation.

At times the prophets look to the past, for they were conscious of belonging to a sacred tradition to which they were striving to be faithful. At times they refer to the future: the future which their contemporaries were bringing upon themselves, for good or ill, and the future that was assured because of the fidelity of their God, YHWH. The key focus of the prophets, however, was not on the past or the future; it was on the present. From their communion with God they came to inspired insights into what was to be done or not done if the people were to be open to the blessing God was offering them. However, the prophets frequently backed up their words with threats and/or promises. Sometimes, they judged that things had gone so far as to be irreversible. Mostly, however, their predictions were conditional on how the people responded: whether they repented or went on behaving badly while ignoring the prophetic warnings.

To grasp the way future prediction was understood in the Older Testament we need to examine the ways in which the theologians of that time thought of the interaction between the divine and the human. At first glance their approach appears simple. God knows everything. It follows that God knows ('sees') the future (see Isaiah 41:21-24; 44:7,24-26; 45:21; 46:9-10; 48:3-8; 55:10-11), and can reveal the future to his prophets. Closer examination reveals that their understanding is more subtle. The Older Testament theologians looked at reality as taking place on two levels. There is the observable arena of human historical events and there is the mysterious, transcendent level of divine purpose and will. The second level is the one of ultimate significance and it is constantly influencing the first, but it does not remove the reality of human freedom, the importance of repentance, the necessity of co-operation with grace, and the possibility of sin delaying and even thwarting God's will in the short term.

On the horizontal plane of human history, the future is necessarily unpredictable, for it emerges as a result of the intersecting of many independent free decisions. We can sometimes see the way things are heading, and we can make probable predictions in limited areas with some confidence, but we cannot foresee the future in any definitive sense. God, to whom everything is present, sees these future, free decisions, but it is inaccurate to say that God foresees them, for this implies that he sees the future before it happens. God, who does not exist in time, sees what is future to us, not because he sees it before it happens, but because its actual happening is present to God.

Various phenomena connected with prophecy

We should avoid having a too narrow idea of the kinds of experiences and ways of expressing them that were included under the umbrella of 'prophecy'. Prophets offered advice based on observable data: the build up of military forces, the effects of social unrest, the probable results of political alliances, and other factors, played a significant role in attempts to formulate policy and make good decisions. Even the prophecies associated with the Pythian prophētēs at Delphi were based on a gathering of information from the wide clientèle who consulted the oracle, even though it was thought of more as a form of intuitive divination based on inspiration which was judged to be from the gods. Helmer Ringgren in his article 'Prophecy in the Near East' (see *Israel's Prophetic Tradition*, Cambridge University Press 1984 pages 1-11) gives a number of interesting examples of this form of prophecy from ancient Assyrian texts.

In the writings of the Older Testament there are many examples of the astute reading of the signs of the times by the prophets. In fact it was because events showed that they were right that their words, generally ignored at the time, were recognised as true and so from God. People came to acknowledge them as real prophets, and saw to it that their words were preserved, in the hope that later generations, through prayerful reflecting on their words, would not repeat the same mistake.

Astute observation of the signs of the times was not the only ‘tool’ at the disposal of prophets in the ancient world. In ancient Babylon, for example, we find predictions based on observation of the movement of the stars (astrology), and of the condition of the liver of sacrificial animals, and other phenomena. These observable data were regarded as signs of the divine presence, action and will in history, and so as indications of the kind of appropriate behaviour that would please the gods and so ensure a favourable outcome.

In Israel predictions based on what was considered magic were forbidden (Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10-12; Isaiah 44:24-26; 47:13-14; Jeremiah 10:2). This is expressed well in the following statement from the Book of Deuteronomy. The words are placed on the lips of Moses:

Though these nations whom you are to dispossess listen to their soothsayers and fortune-tellers, the Lord your God will not permit you to do so. A prophet like me will the Lord your God raise up for you from among your own kinsmen; to him you shall listen.

– Deuteronomy 18:14-15

However, the fact that such statutes needed to be repeated suggests that the behaviour they were attempting to eliminate was a continuing problem.

It would be wrong for us to limit Israel’s prophets to intelligent and prayerful discernment of their times. Furthermore, we should not think of prophets as being in the one mould. The fact that a number of different words are used to describe them is an indication of this – names such as *nābî’* (‘prophet’), *rō’eh* (‘seer’), *hōzeh* (‘one who enlightens’), *’iš ’ēlohîm* (‘man of God’, a wonder-worker). Dreams, visions, ecstasy, trance, as well as perceptive and critical judgment, both of the times and of the will of YHWH, and many other factors were at play in the prophetic experience and in the way this experience was conveyed.

True and false prophets

In our reflection on the profile of a prophet, we should note that the claim to be a prophet never did then (and never does now) guarantee the truth of the claim. Speaking in a way that was consistent with the essential faith of Israel was one criterion. However, there were plenty of ‘prophets’ whose function was to support the court and the temple. Their soothing words were welcomed, but proved false. The words of the prophets that are contained in the Hebrew Canon were preserved because they spoke out at a time of crisis in Israel, and events proved that they were right in the general thrust of their challenging words. They tried to warn the political and cult leaders and to get the people to change their ways and be faithful to the covenant with YHWH. They objected to the violence perpetrated against the poor and disadvantaged by those who wielded power in the land.

They failed, and the annihilation of Israel and the subjection of Judah was the price paid. Too late, the words of the prophets were accepted as true, but at least they were preserved in the hope of not repeating the mistake.

Words that reveal YHWH

The key element that reveals a prophet as genuine is his understanding of YHWH, an understanding that is necessarily imperfect, but which is treasured as offering a genuine insight into God. It is here that we are to look to find the essence of prophecy. The prophet's inspired vision penetrates beyond the horizontal plain of historical events. The prophet is primarily concerned with the overarching providence of God, a providence that transcends the plain of human decision but is always present to it, gracing it. God's purpose transcends human decision and indecision, as does God's promise for the future. Whether or not we will enjoy God's blessings depends on whether or not we choose to respond to grace. But independent of our response, God's providence covers our future. It is God's grace that now and in the future inspires both our actions and our will to do them.

Prophecies of warning ('curses') were primarily faith-statements, for they reminded the listeners of who God is, of the fact that God's judgments are just, and of God's 'anger', that is to say, God's passionate concern for repentance and passionate determination to right what is wrong. On the human, historical plane, they functioned as warnings to bring about repentance, lest evil bear its rotten fruit. Prophecies of blessing were also primarily faith-statements, reminding people of God's transcendent, loving providence. In addition they were hope-statements, encouraging fidelity and obedience so as to establish the conditions in which God's will could be realised, and God's blessing enjoyed.

Predictions, therefore, are statements concerning God's fidelity, and it is especially this that accounts for the preservation of the prophecies. These prophecies also included statements about human sin and human repentance and their probable effects. The prophets were not always correct when they predicted what the effects of people's behaviour would be. But events did show that the general thrust of their message was true. The community saw to it that their words were preserved, for they did reveal YHWH and they did provide a good critical standpoint from which to look at the behaviour required of people who were in a covenant relationship with YHWH. Eichrodt in his *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (OTL: London, 1970, pages 410-411) writes:

The predictions of prophets ... are always associated with that to which the prophets testify, a direct awareness of the whole control of providence, so they subordinate each single historical event to its context in the activity of God, which makes the whole development of history serve his kingdom. Their limitation consists in the fact that they are trying to show the way along which God is leading, whereas God is always transcendent and far above all human capabilities, and so his march through history cannot be imprisoned in human words. He carries his plans home and attains his objective with all the freedom of the Creator; so, while prediction can make statements clarifying the plan and assuring us of its existence, it can never determine the exact line it will take or calculate beforehand its individual stages. So prediction demands humble obedience to the mystery of the divine work of realisation and, like the rest of what prophets preach, it confronts the hearer with the question of a faith which refuses to let itself be led astray by unexpected delays, changes of front, or reconstruction.

Critique of contemporary behaviour

Central to prophecy in Ancient Israel is the critique which the prophets make of their contemporary society in God's name. Personal encounter with YHWH sharpened their awareness of the contrast between social behaviour and authentic religious insights. Their task was to 'declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin' (Amos 4:12), insisting that sin must be punished (so including a call to repentance), but also insisting that there was something that transcended punishment, namely, YHWH's fidelity to himself: YHWH's promises would be kept. The prophets express the conviction that authentic divine communion demands and expresses itself in authentic human behaviour, and where this behaviour was not present they challenged their contemporaries to change their ways.

The Genesis of a Prophetic Scroll

The Older Testament is the fruit of centuries of reflection by people who were convinced that their God, YHWH, the lord of creation and the lord of history, had chosen them in love and had a special mission for them in the world. They believed that there was a special providence guiding their history. They kept reflecting on it to remember God's love and covenant with them, and to discern God's will, as well as to learn from their mistakes, and so become more sensitive, attentive and faithful. They cherished their traditions, including the reflections of those who went before them, but they knew that no words, however sacred, can comprehend the mystery that is God, and so they kept questioning, refining and adapting earlier insights in the light of newer revelation. The history of the development of the Older Testament is a history of prayerful debate, discussion and refinement, always in the light of historical experience.

In his *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Westminster, John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1996) Joseph Blenkinsopp states that the prophetic books of the Old Testament reveal a:

cumulative process of appropriation, assimilation, and adaption that ... shades off into an increasingly frequent recycling and reinterpreting of older prophetic material.

The scribes responsible for the prophetic scrolls were faithful to the words (originally spoken, but later written) that they inherited, for they saw them as an inspired expression of the action of YHWH in their history. They pored over them, wanting to discover the will of YHWH. They also reflected on the meaning of past events for them and for their contemporaries. It would make life easier for us if they had kept their comments and reflections separate from the inherited texts, but that was not their way. They expressed their reflections in comments within the text, and in the way they restructured and rearranged the material. They also reinterpreted the texts in the light of their contemporary experience and presented the text in ways that shed light on what was happening to them and to their contemporaries. This makes it difficult at times to know with certainty which parts of the text can safely be attributed to the original prophet, and which parts are the result of later scribal-prophetic reflection.

In any case, inspiration has to be thought of as covering the whole process of transmission including the insights of the prophets and scribes that diligently explored, reshaped, and added to the material that they inherited. It is good to take the text as we have it and to explore why the final editors presented in the way it is. However, as Blenkinsopp (page 22) also states:

As difficult and hypothetical as it no doubt is, the reconstruction of the editorial history of prophetic books remains a task of major importance both historically and theologically.

In the course of history the words of the prophets of Ancient Israel have inspired people from every culture. Their meaning has also been covered over, much as wood is covered with layer upon layer of paint till we have no idea of its native beauty. People continue to use the texts to claim divine authority for their own prejudices and unexplored assumptions. The texts have purified cultures. Cultures have also accommodated the texts to support their failure to be converted by them. We cannot avoid bringing our own assumptions to the text in the questions we ask of it, and so in the answers we find. But at least we must make the effort to check what we claim as our insights by examining the meaning of the words used – the meaning then, not now – and the literary forms, and the way the editors chose to link their sources. We will speak of this in Chapters Five and Six.