

1. Prophecy in Israel and the Ancient Near East

The word 'prophecy' has come to mean 'the power of telling what will happen in the future'.¹ Consequently the prophets of the Old Testament are commonly understood as men who fulfil this function and their writings have been searched for predictions both of the life and death of Jesus Christ and of events due to take place at the end of time which from our point of view are still in the future. The definition is not entirely inaccurate when it is applied to the Old Testament prophets but it is misleading in two respects.

First it would be a serious limitation of their work to imagine that they were only concerned with future events. Any serious reading of the prophetic books reveals a concern with contemporary affairs upon which they comment often in the strongest possible terms. So it is frequently said that the 'pro-' in prophecy signifies not fore-telling but forth-telling.² They tell forth the message of God to the people of their own day concerning circumstances of their own day. Second, this sometimes involved predictions about the future based upon observation of the present and when this was so they were not slow to say what they believed was about to happen. But generally this future was near at hand. It concerned the coming fate of the people to whom they spoke and not events that should happen thousands of years hence. Destruction, defeat in battle, the fall of Jerusalem, the exile in Babylon were all future events of which the prophets spoke in advance before they happened, but they were to happen soon.

Yet besides this, they did sometimes look further into the future beyond the coming disaster and their faith in God enabled them to express hopes which were by no means immediately fulfilled. This is not to say, as some have done, that the prophets were speaking directly of the coming of

Christ or of the end of the world. Nothing was so definite in their minds. They were simply expressing the implications of their understanding of God for the future. It was then the Christian Church which recognized in the coming of Christ events which seemed to them to fulfil the prophetic hopes and promises. To these, as to the threats, we shall return later in this book.

Earlier this century scholars tended to regard the prophets as the founders of an Israelite religion which was quite distinct from other religions of the same day and age. They were working on the assumption that the books of the Law (Genesis to Deuteronomy) were written later than the prophets and therefore owed a great deal to their teaching. More recent scholarship has found that much of the material in those first five books of the Old Testament is quite ancient, having been preserved for many generations orally, even if some of it had not been written down until the period of the prophets.³ But some of it would already have been known in written form also by the middle of the 9th century when the classical prophets emerged. Therefore the prophets are to be seen not so much as innovators but rather as preachers who base their message on existing traditions, either by criticizing the way they have been understood or breathing new life into them when they had become fossilized.

Further the prophets used to be regarded as unique to Israel. Once again this is not wholly wrong, for nowhere else do we find men who can be compared with the great prophetic figures of the Old Testament. But more recent discoveries and studies have shown that in many other cultures, eastern and western, ancient and more modern, there are men and women who are not altogether unlike the Old Testament prophets. It is just as easy to make too much of these similarities as it is to make too little of them. When all has been said and done the 'classical' prophets of the Old Testament whose words have been preserved for us in the prophetic books do stand out as different from all other characters however similar they may seem superficially. From beginnings which were similar to those outside Israel Old Testament prophecy grew into something quite distinctive.

Several examples of this kind of religious person have been

collected together by J. Lindblom.⁴ He enumerates a number of characteristics which enable us to describe a person as prophetic⁵ and then uses this as a kind of check-list against which certain individuals and groups of people may be examined. They must be wholly devoted to the god whom they worship; they are inspired and under divine constraints showing signs of ecstasy and abnormal behaviour; they receive revelations from their god and announce them publicly; they have a special call from the deity to fulfil his purpose unconditionally. This would be a fair enough description of the Israelite prophets, but Lindblom goes on to show how groups outside Israel also fulfil these conditions. We too may look at one or two groups of people living in the Ancient Near East in the years between 2000 BC and 500 BC.

We turn first to the kingdom of Mari in Northern Mesopotamia which reached its high point about 1700 BC. This was the area from which some of Israel's ancestors came and the Old Testament tells how both Isaac and Jacob travelled back there to find their wives. (Gen. 25:20, 28:14). In AD 1933 André Parrot, a French archaeologist, unearthed some 20,000 clay tablets in the palace buildings of the king, Zimri-lin. These have thrown new light on many Old Testament passages. Among them were several tablets which contained references to men who, in some respects, seem to be similar to Israelite prophets.⁶ One tells of a man called Malik who had a dream in which he received a message from the god Dagon. He was to announce this message to the governor who would pass it on to king Zimri-lin. The message called upon Zimri-lin to be obedient to Dagon who would in return grant him victories over the 'men of the South'⁷ This account of a god sending a message to a king through another man reminds us of several Old Testament stories of prophets. Micaiah had a message from Yahweh for Ahab in 1 Kings 22. Elijah, too, received messages for Ahab from Yahweh (1 Kings 18 and 21). In the same way Isaiah confronted both Ahaz (Is. 7) and Hezekiah (Is. 37:21 ff.) with a message from Yahweh.

In another tablet the man entrusted with the message is called a *muhhum*. He tells the king, 'The god has sent me'. What he has to tell is very different from the messages of the

Old Testament prophets – the king is to make ‘sacrifices of the dead’, probably human sacrifices, to the dead spirit of his father. All the same the way the message was conveyed is similar to that in the Old Testament. Elsewhere another *mubhum* brought a message from Dagon commanding the king to build a new city gate.

Yet another tablet tells of an *apilum*, meaning ‘answerer’. The message is from the god Adad to king Zimri-lin demanding from him a site for a temple, seeing that he has set him on the throne and built him a palace. If this demand were met then Zimri-lin would prosper further; if not, he would lose all he had. This calls to mind the conversation between Nathan and David (2 Samuel 7) which deals differently with the same question. David is told not to build a Temple for Yahweh, though Yahweh will build a house, a dynasty, for David. Any king who disobeys will be punished though the dynasty will continue. In the biblical story the message appears to come to Nathan out of the blue while the Mari text is not clear on this point. There the *apilum* may have been a person connected with the sanctuary who enjoyed the privilege of conversation with the god.

Finally there is a reference to people called *baru*, that is, ‘seers’. These people are rather different from either the *mubhum* or the *apilum*. Instead of receiving a message from the god and passing it on, they rather seek advice from him by means of omens. Here the similarities with the Old Testament prophets are less obvious.

It is clear from these texts that in an area with which Israel had close connections there were men who, like Israel’s prophets, were sent by the gods with a message to the king. In this respect they fulfil certain of the criteria set up by Lindblom. There is no mention of any special call, but we should not be too surprised at this since the texts are all brief and the same could be said of Nathan and Elijah in the Old Testament.

That there were prophets in Phoenicia to the north west of Israel we may be sure from 1 Kings 18 where we read of the prophets of Baal and Asherah. They are, of course, very different from the Israelite prophets. They bring no message from their god but only seek to persuade him, by prayer and

by cutting themselves, to do what they want. But the fact that the Old Testament actually calls them prophets indicates that they were sufficiently like the Israelite prophets to be recognized as such. There is also one other piece of evidence from this area. Curiously enough the document is an Egyptian one but it describes events which took place at Byblos in Phoenicia. It is called the *Story of Wen-Amon* and is dated about 1000 B.C.

Wen-Amon was an Egyptian who was sent to the port of Byblos to buy timber. While he was there he was robbed of the money with which to pay for it and was therefore detained in the harbour until the thief should be caught. He erected a tent on the beach and hid in it an image of his god, Amon, which he had brought with him on the voyage. During this time the king of Byblos went to his temple to offer sacrifice to Baal. While he was doing so a certain young man fell into an ecstatic trance and it was revealed to him that Wen-Amon had brought an image of Amon with him and hidden it in his tent. This information he passed on to the king. The rest of the story doesn't concern us.⁸ The important point for our purpose is that a god took possession of a man and revealed secret knowledge to him which he passed on to the king.

There is another Egyptian document even older than the *Story of Wen-Amon*, dated between 2000 and 1750 B.C. This one concerns Egypt itself and since it is sometimes called *The Prophecies of Neferte*⁹ it must be mentioned here, although the similarities with Israelite prophecy are not strong. The document is a piece of political propaganda supporting the present king. It does so by telling how a much earlier king, Snerfu, was seeking entertainment at his court. His courtiers recommended that a certain wise man or priest called Neferte be invited to entertain. The entertainment consisted of fore-telling all the evils and calamities which would take place in Egypt until a new king should come to the throne. Naturally, the 'new king' was the one for whom the document was written. The fore-telling of calamity at once links this with Hebrew prophecy, but there is none of the criteria demanded by Lindblom, no call, no possession, no inspiration. Neferte is much more like a Wise Man than a prophet.

These examples will indicate that in other cultures around

Israel there were men who in some respects resembled the Old Testament prophets and the phenomenon of prophecy may not be unique to Israel. All the same these resemblances remain somewhat rare and superficial. Certainly there is a world of difference between the *muhhum* of the Mari texts and an Isaiah or a Jeremiah, and if the texts we have examined throw any light upon the origins of prophecy in Israel, and we shall consider this in the next chapter, they throw no light at all upon Hebrew prophecy in the classical period from the 9th to 5th centuries B.C.

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