

THE OUTSPOKEN SERVANTS

THERE WAS A RICH MAN, well clothed and fed, who went to hell and there carried on a dialogue with Abraham. Toward the end of the story, as told by St. Luke, he said, "Then, father, I beseech thee to send the dead Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them lest they too come into this place of torments." And Abraham said to him, "They have Moses and the Prophets: let them hearken to them." But he answered, "No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." But he said to him, "If they do not hearken to Moses and the Prophets, they will not believe even if someone rises from the dead" (*Luke 16: 27-31*).

Though we do believe One Risen from the dead, we too, as children of Abraham, have Moses and the Prophets. After thousands of years, they are still potent. They can still testify to us lest we too come into the place of torments. Fascinating personalities on the human level, they possess a splendid privilege in the history of our race; they are uniquely related to the Action of God in the world.

Prophecy is inseparable from the Old Testament. There were times of plenty and times of famine as far as prophecy went too; but it took an event like the Incarnation to abolish it permanently as an institution. There were many prophets; few men are called *The Prophets*. The present brief examination of the institution hopes to clarify what these men were.

The first person in the Old Testament to be called "prophet" was Abraham, the Father of the Jewish nation. It was not until the time of Moses, however, that prophecy was established as a special institution. It was at the time of Moses that Yahweh promised to send prophets. The Israelites had been terribly frightened by Yahweh's manifestation to them on Sinai and for fear of death they implored Him not to let them hear His voice again. In answer God promised Moses that He would deal with His chosen ones through the intermediary of prophets. "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their kinsmen and will put my words in his mouth; he shall tell them all that I command him" (*Deut. 18:18*). Although this promise speaks only of a singular prophet, scholars indicate this is a collective singular in accordance with the Hebrew idiom and refers not only to Christ, but to the whole succession of prophets.

After this promise, nevertheless, until the time of Samuel there were but few references to the prophets, or as they were called in the ancient times, "seers." Explicit reference is made only of a prophetess, Deborah, and another unnamed prophet who proclaimed to the people that the sufferings inflicted on them by the Madianites were punishments for worshipping false gods. The infidelity of the Israelites to Yahweh was perhaps the reason why He sent so few prophets during this period. His promise had been accompanied by the implicit condition that the people should not make themselves unworthy of the favor.

But beginning with Samuel the prophets grew in number and influence and we find mentioned for the first time a "company of prophets." These men were not prophets in the highest sense, but it has been suggested that they wandered about spreading the oracles of Samuel among the people. At any rate, they were imbued with the spirit and enthusiasm of Samuel. Their prophesying consisted in singing the praises of the God of Israel while performing frenzied actions. During their prophesying they might mutilate their hands and faces. In moments of excitement, they even threw off their clothes, leaped and jumped about until they were overcome by exhaustion. They often prophesied to the accompaniment of tambourines, cymbals and lutes. It seems likely that such manifestations passed into Israel from Chanaan. But the fact that these phenomena were common to false religions does not mean that God could not use them for His own purposes. These prophets of Israel induced the people by their example to render worship to the Lord God Yahweh. They thereby not only wakened, but also strengthened the Faith of the Israelites in their God. To no other people had God sent any messengers like the prophets. The neighbors of the Israelites had their fortune-tellers, crystal gazers, and soothsayers, but to His chosen ones Yahweh sent His own heralds.

During the time of Elias and Eliseus, we read of the "disciples of the prophets" or, as they were called, "sons of the prophets." These men were not literally sons of the prophets, but the latter name is an instance of moral participation whereby they were called sons of the prophets because they were imitators of the prophets just as those imitating the faith of Abraham were called the sons of Abraham. These, no doubt, are the successors of the company of prophets under Samuel, but they do not seem to have carried out the same frenzied actions as they did at the time of Samuel. They led a common life, or at least came together at certain times, on Mount Carmel and in the neighborhood of the sanctuaries of Bethel and Galgal. The first mention of these prophets was at the time of the Judges

when one of them delivered a message of rephension from God to Achab. They were quite numerous; four hundred were said to be at the court of Achab.

We have so far achieved a very superficial notion of prophet: a man of special psychic gifts or groups of such men and their disciples. To probe more deeply we must turn to the prime examples, *The Prophets*. But first, so that these heroic figures can be seen in perspective, we should say a word about the groups of prophets. With the advent of such groups prophecy was becoming an institution, and characteristic of such institutions a certain professionalism crept in. Many of the professional prophets were false prophets who lost sight of the institution of which they were a part. They often prophesied whatever their listeners would find most pleasant. They did not deliver Yahweh's messages, but they looked only for the triumph of their own ideas and their own interests.

From the year 800 B.C. onwards for three centuries, Yahweh was to call a whole series of extraordinary men to be prophets. They were distinguished from the professional prophets by their special calling from God. Hence, they were to be called prophets of special vocation. They did not owe their position to any ecstatic phenomena or to membership in any company of prophets. They came forward to speak without any other warrant than that God had ordered them to do so. The call was not restricted to any special tribe or particular family. God chose His prophets from all classes and conditions according to His own pleasure.

The diversity of occupations and circles to which these higher prophets belonged is significant. A few, especially in the earlier period, belonged to the class of professional prophets. Samuel had been one of these. But Eliseus had been a prosperous farmer, Amos a shepherd and a pruner of fruit trees, Ezechiel a priest of the temple, and Isaia a noble. Their common bond was an overmastering conviction that, temporarily or permanently, each had to forsake his way of life and deliver God's message.

Some of the prophets worked miracles by which the truth of their mission was attested. Hence St. Thomas says that prophecy is concerned with the working of miracles, as a kind of confirmation of the divine mission of the prophet. When Elias raised to life the son of a poor widow, she considered it a sign of his supernatural mission. "Now, by this I know that thou art a man of God, and the word of the Lord in thy mouth is true" (III *Kings* 17:24).

Elias worked another notable sign in showing the falsity of the cult

of Baal. He challenged the prophets of Baal to offer sacrifice to their god on Mount Carmel, as he would to his God. But the fire for the sacrifice was to be supplied by whichever of the deities was true. The throngs attracted by the spectacle witnessed the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal expend excruciating efforts throughout the day, to no avail. By evening they were covered with their own blood from their self-lacerations, but their altar was not getting warm. At the prayer of Elias, the fire of Yahweh fell and consumed his holocaust. And the people fell on their faces and believed in the God of Elias.

But valuable as they were to the confirmation of the prophet's mission, miracles were not essential for the gift of prophecy. Many of the true prophets of Yahweh performed no miracles at all. It was not essential that the prophet should commit his prophecy to writing either. Many of the prophets left no work for posterity, either because they themselves wrote nothing, or because, after their death, their disciples failed to collect their oracles. The books of Samuel, Kings and Paralipomenon provide the names of many of these among whom Elias and Eliseus are the most important. There were prophecies never taught orally but put into writing immediately. But the greater part of the prophetic books are, in all probability, a condensed report of the spoken prophecies. The spoken word was less figurative and sublime than the written; the written abounds in eloquence and richness of imagery. We use the terminology Major and Minor Prophets depending on how much of the written material we possess. This cannot be taken as a judgment of the personal worth of the prophet or his mission; it is terminology.

While collecting things that a prophet does not have to do to be a prophet, we cannot leave out prediction of the future, which is our most common idea when the word is mentioned. Prophets did not have to predict the future and many did not. But many did predict the future, and they did this as a sign that they were truly messengers of Yahweh. Deuteronomy enumerates the fulfillment of predictions as a criterion by which the true prophets can be recognized. If their predictions never came about, they were enumerated among the false prophets. God Himself gave a crucial test by which prophets were to be judged: "Even though a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if his oracle is not fulfilled or verified, it is an oracle which the Lord did not speak" (*Deut.* 18:22).

Among the true prophets of Yahweh there are predictions which at first sight appear never to have come about. The preaching of Jona in Ninive provides a clear example. God had sent Jona to Ninive to announce

that the great city would be destroyed in forty days time. This prediction never came about, but there is an explanation. Instead of continuing in their evil ways, the Ninivites began the most severe penances. God had mercy on them and the city was preserved. This episode gives evidence of the conditional aspect of prophecy even where the form of the announcement is absolute. The explanation is found in *Jeremia*: "But if that nation which I have threatened turns from its evil, I also will repent of the evil which I threatened to do" (*Jeremia* 18:18). Because the city did penance, therefore, God did not destroy it. Although his prediction never came about, the reputation of Jona as a true prophet is saved.

Some prophets worked miracles, some did not. Some wrote their prophecies, some did not. Some predicted the future, some did not. But they all had one thing in common. They were the mouthpieces of God and all were charged to deliver the word of God. Their sole rôle was to communicate to men the knowledge of divine revelation. That the prophets be spokesmen of God, two things were vitally necessary: revelation and mission. God must speak to the prophet and commission the prophet to pass on the knowledge to men. St. Thomas gives the reason for these conditions when he says that prophecy consists essentially in knowledge and secondarily in speech.

It essentially consists in knowledge because, "Prophets know things which are far removed from man's knowledge" (II-II, 171, 1). The prophet, then, knows secrets which he could not know of himself without divine revelation. After receiving the prophetic knowledge, he must be commissioned to unfold to men God's secrets and to transmit in the name of Yahweh a teaching of truth. The mission to communicate truths to others is usually accomplished through speech. Hence St. Thomas says, "Prophecy consists secondarily in speech in so far as the prophets declare for the instruction of others the things which God has taught them" (*Ibid.*).

In addition, there are some examples of symbolic actions accompanying the speech. In evidence of these, Isaia played the rôle of a captive in order to impress on the Israelites the necessity of reliance on their God rather than reliance on the Egyptians. Yahweh ordered him to go for three years without clothes or shoes to represent the subjection of Egypt and Kush to Assyria. This action of Isaia impressed on the people the uselessness of reliance on Egypt and Kush, themselves doomed to subjection and captivity. By the symbolic action of breaking a potter's vessel, *Jeremia* foretold the destruction of the Jews because of their sins. This same

Jeremia predicting the Chaldean domination over Israel walked the streets harnessed like an ass.

One guarantee of the reality of the prophets' revelation and mission was the moral character of their teaching. The true prophets never condoned the vices of the people, never foretold blessings and prosperity to sinners. Nor did they ever encourage the Israelites in the false belief that God would protect and favor them simply because they were the descendants of Abraham. They never spoke the things their listeners found most pleasant to listen to. Unlike the false prophets, they never prophesied good news to win the favor of kings as happened when Achab consulted four hundred prophets about the outcome of a battle with Syria. They all assured him he would be victorious in battle. It was Michea, a true prophet, who raised his voice in protest against their lying spirit. The true prophets never demanded payments for their services as did the false prophets who prophesied for gifts. Often the predicting of good or evil depended on the gifts they would receive. In contrast, the true prophets were messengers of Yahweh and conveyed only what He Himself told them.

A further test of the prophet's supernatural revelation and mission was his whole life and character. The lives of the false prophets were far from being exemplary. Drunkenness, greed, lying, and dissolute living were often prevalent. In contrast to these evil ones, the true prophets of Yahweh lived lives of extreme simplicity. They went about dressed in the skins of animals and mantles of goat hair as did John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets. They endured all sorts of privations and dangers. They never feared to offend men by their actions. Their one thought was to communicate to men the knowledge of divine revelation. The Angelic Doctor says that an evil life is an obstacle to such a mission. "For prophecy requires the mind to be raised very high in order to contemplate spiritual things, and this is hindered by strong passions and an inordinate pursuit of external things" (II-II, 172, 4).

It was the duty of the prophets to maintain and develop the knowledge and practice of the Old Law among the Chosen People, lead them back when they strayed, and gradually prepare the way for the new kingdom which the Messiah was to establish. All the activities of the true prophets were aimed at promoting these ends. They were the defenders of the moral law. They vehemently denounced disobedience to Yahweh and idolatrous worship of any other deity. In particular, the duty most incumbent on them was denouncing and recalling the people from their evil

ways to the true service of God. Yahweh told Isaia, "Cry, full-throated and unsparingly; lift up your voice like a trumpet blast; tell my people their wickedness, and the house of Jacob their sins" (Isaia 58:1). Jeremia, too, told the people that the Lord God Yahweh was a merciful Lord, but He was also a just Lord and His justice demanded that the evil ways of the Israelites should not go unpunished. He told them that the hour of final chastisement was approaching because God had sent His heralds, the prophets, and they had not listened nor amended their lives.

But the prophetic literature is not entirely devoid of encouragement and consolation. Since God had promised from the beginning that He would not entirely reject His people, the covenant would never be entirely dissolved. A faithful remnant would be preserved even in the times of the most absolute infidelity to Yahweh. This doctrine of the remnant became a commonplace in the prophetic books.

The function of the prophets, then, could be placed under a fourfold heading: they were the religious and moral teachers of the Jewish nation; they were at times political advisors to the kings; they were the social reformers of their age; they were the heralds of the future Messias. Concerning this last task there had been references to the Messias prior to the prophets but these allusions had been rather general and indistinct. As time went on, however, the prophets developed these references according to a clearer and more defined pattern. They described Him as a victorious king, a Prince of Peace, a priest according to the order of Melchisedech, a humble servant of Yahweh who would freely offer up his sufferings for the sins of mankind. He would be a prophet and a mediator of a New Covenant between God and the human race. It was the prophets, therefore, who prepared the way for the Messias and the kingdom of God which He established on earth.

If the prophets prepared for the Messias, they could not expect to be more popular than was He. Their vocation was in general a dangerous and unrewarding one. Amos was told to return home because of his unwelcome prophesying in Israel. Hanani went to prison for telling Asa, king of Juda, to trust in the Lord. Jeremia was three times cast into prison, spending many days without food or water in a miry dungeon. The prophetic vocation led Uria and Zacharia to their deaths. And according to ancient traditions, Isaia was sawed in two by Manasses and Jeremia was stoned to death. The prophetic vocation, however, was not entirely one of thanklessness. Under such kings as David, Ezechias and Josias they were held in

honor. At times even Jeremiah was reported to have won the confidence of the princes and all the people.

While rejecting and persecuting individual prophets, Israel did not doubt that God could speak through the prophets. When the prophetic institution ceased to exist at the time of the Machabees, Israel awaited its reappearance. But they waited in vain because its necessity had ceased. Prophets were unnecessary because the religious revelation and moral code were full and clear. They were unnecessary, too, because the people were instructed by the scribes and doctors. The period of Old Testament prophecy, however, did not close until John the Baptist appeared preaching penance and announcing the coming of the kingdom. He was the last of that long line of devoted prophets before Jesus Christ, the crown and consummation of all their prophecies.

Into that Israelite society the prophets cut like scalpels into a diseased body. Without them Israel could never have lived. Without them Israel could never have known about the Messiah. Without them kings could not have ruled. Without them there would have been no religious, social, or moral reforms. Yahweh's messengers were men who defied all established patterns of thought. When they stood up and proclaimed, "Thus saith the Lord," their sole objective was the good of Israel. They never shrank from their duties; indeed, they were under a moral compulsion to deliver the messages of God to His chosen ones. To no other people in the history of mankind has God ever sent any messengers like the prophets.

—Leonard Tracy, O.P.

SOME SERIOUS THOUGHTS ON THINKING

UNLESS THE PHILOSOPHER attempts to supply the wisdom which his age needs, he has reneged on the social obligation of his calling. One of the most serious needs of this age is wisdom's judgment upon the value of human knowledge. Our contemporaries find this the crucial problem determining their attitude toward the natural sciences, the nature and end of man, metaphysics, the proofs for the existence of God.