

"Thus says the Lord . . . "

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Modern man often finds the books of the prophets forbidding and unintelligible: forbidding because of the many condemning judgments on the nations and even on the chosen people themselves; unintelligible because he conceives the prophet as some kind of fortune teller or an eccentric person, the 'beatnik' of his era. (Isaia went about naked and barefoot for some time and Ezechiel drew on a clay tablet a besieged city, Jerusalem and lay beside it for a number of days.)

This article aims at removing some of these obstacles to hearing the word of God by the mouth of His prophets. Before one can consider the message of the individual prophets, a notion of what a prophet is, how he relates to the Salvation History which precedes him and some knowledge of his historical setting is an indispensable aid. The message of four of the pre-exilic prophets: Amos, Osee, Michea and Isaia, will then be viewed with reference to the Covenant.

Nabi

Basing his study on the etymology of the word *nabi*, prophet, Dr. Albright says that the prophet is one who is called (by God), or one who has a vocation (from God). The certainty of their selection by God for a particular mission, the reception of a message from God and subordination to Him are dominant characteristics of the genuine prophet. (see Amos 7; Is. 6; Jer. 1 & 20; Ez. 1) Once convinced of being laid hold of by God, of being called by Him, the prophet is given a commission to warn the people of the perils of sin and to preach the reform of true religion and morality. Through God's denying having sent false prophets declaring peace

in Jer. 14 and Ez. 13, the need of a divine commission is manifested. "Lies these prophets utter in my name, the Lord said to me. I did not send them; I gave them no command nor did I speak to them." (Jer. 14:14)

Nineteenth century Biblical scholars (especially Protestants) fancied that the prophets were innovators of a new religion. This opinion, however, is not tenable. It is generally recognized today by all scholars that the prophets were vitally aware of their tradition and were taking steps necessary for its renewal and growth. The Covenant at Sinai is the central act of this tradition and the event which gives meaning and continuity to the message of the prophets. God Himself delivered His people from bondage in Egypt, led, nourished, and protected them during their journey to Sinai where he formed a covenant with them. His strong hand molded them into a community, the people of God. The story as related in Exodus 1-24 inseparably relates the two series: the deliverance from Egypt and guidance in the wilderness; and God's revelation at Sinai, the giving of the Law and the making of the Covenant. Ex. 3:12 describes the first as preparing for the second; and the second is based theologically on the first. Evidence for the theological dependence is found in the opening verses of chapter 19 which describe the Loving Providence of God as bearing His people up on eagle wings and leading them to Himself.

At Sinai God says, "Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine." (Ex. 19:5) God's loving initiative established the Covenant. Faithfulness, obedience to the covenant terms and absolute confidence in God were demanded of the people in response. Israel is told of God's jealousy which will bear no rivals (Ex. 20:3-4). Laws are given to her to observe, and she is told of the stupidity of placing her trust in frail men or in other nations. The fact that the prophet was aware of and formed in a proper attitude towards the Covenant is of great importance, for it helps to explain their message and the way in which it was expressed.

Doom is the predominant message of these prophets. Con-

demnation of a present evil is their task. They are not visionaries looking into a crystal ball provided by God; but men sent on God's mission *today*, sent to meet the needs of the people. God told Ezechiel that his task as a prophet was to be a watchman for Israel to warn the people after receiving the word from God (Ez. 33:6-7).

The Prophet's Surroundings

What was the evil situation which the prophet's of the eighth century confronted? Division of the monarchy (cir. 922 B.C.) led to the creation of new sanctuaries in the Northern Kingdom. Taking advantage of the popular reaction against centralization of government and of religion, Jeroboam I set up places of worship at Bethel and Dan to lessen the appeal of the Temple of Jerusalem. In the Temple God was enthroned above the two cherubim; in his sanctuaries Jeroboam represented God as an invisible figure standing on a young bull of gold. The latter form was common to the Canaanites, Aramaeans and Hittites. Unfortunately it was associated with the worship of the Canaanite god Baal through pagan fertility rites.

Baal was one of the Canaanite pantheon of gods. He was involved in an epic myth in which he died and was resurrected, symbolizing the conflict of seasons in nature. His resurrection symbolized the powers of fertilizing spring. Here was a practical farmer's religion, a way to control and insure the soil's fruitfulness. All that was required of man was to reenact this drama and magical power would be released. Disclosure of the divine powers occurred in the mystery of fertility. They conceived their gods as sexual in nature. Hence it was an easy step to organize worship in sexual rites. Sacred prostitution was the path of communication with the divine. The struggling Hebrew farmer, influenced by these rites, adopted them to insure a successful crop. There is evidence that God and Baal were worshipped side by side. Many names of children are found containing the name Baal. (Saul called two of his children Mephibaal and Isbaal.)

Turning to the eighth century, the period of the preaching of the pre-exilic prophets, one finds Baalism deeply rooted as a

religious practice and custom. Periods of syncretism resulted in adopting Baalistic practices to the local cult of God in shrines and at altars throughout the country of Israel. In passing it can be noted that other pagan practices, of which there is very limited knowledge, were also adopted.

A similar standard of living was enjoyed by all the people of Israel in its early centuries of settlement. Land was the source of wealth and it was shared among the different families. Commerce and the buying and selling of land for profit were unimportant factors in economic life. There were some wealthy persons, but they were the exception. An excavation at Tirsah, the modern Tel el Farah, shows tenth century dwellers living in houses of the same size and arrangement. Such was not the case with the eighth century occupants of the same site. Like the modern city, the rich houses were bigger and better built and at a distance removed from the section where the poorer houses were huddled together.

In just two centuries a social revolution had taken place. Prosperity and cultural advancement were the order of the day. The chief sources of this prosperity were the officials created and subsidized by the monarchy, profits from the lands and commercial exchanges with the Phoenicians, who were at the peak of their commercial power.¹

Confronted with this scene, the prophets were inspired to proclaim their message of doom and of divine judgment. Burning zeal for the Holy One of Israel prompted them to condemn the practical belief in God as the master in the sphere of history and Baal as master over the fertilization of the soil. The God of Israel is a jealous God who will tolerate no rivals. Social injustices, manifesting this basic unfaithfulness to God, are decried.

This approach to the prophets is based on viewing them as men imbued with the spirit of the Covenant. It could be and has been objected that this is not possible for they use this term very rarely. This reasoning cannot stand. Although there is a scarcity of

¹ de Vaux, Ronald, O.P., *Ancient Israel*. McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., New York, 1961. p. 72 ff.

references to the Covenant in these books, the prophets do use the word election, which is in any case the primary aspect of the covenant relationship. To avoid the national aspirations and glorious promises bound up with the election of the patriarchs, these prophets speak of the election founded on the Exodus. This event manifested the free and personal love of God apart from any merit of the people. Presumably the reason the covenant term is so



seldom used lies in the fact that its formulation is similar to a contract or a treaty. This led the people to make claims on God and to cherish false dreams of a glorious future. By using the term election the prophets insisted on God's claim on the people of Israel.

Amos

The writings found in the book of Amos portray first the denunciations of the nations by a prophet convinced that He is speaking God's message. The judgments are opened by the phrase, "Thus says the Lord . . ." One can almost see the obvious delight Amos' listeners must have taken in these judgments and their quick approval of them. Suddenly the delight disappears; the approval changes to resentment, for He begins the judgment of Israel (c.3). He opens this message by referring to their election; then he draws the unexpected conclusion. "You alone have I favored more than all

the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your crimes." (c.3:2) Reasoning from God's special calling Amos' audience felt sure they could say, "Therefore God will give us victory, prestige and prosperity among all nations of the earth." National revival and the economic success had created an insidious pride in their comfortable situation. Their hearts longed for the great "Day of Yahweh" in which God would vindicate His people and lead them to full glory. (c.5:18-29)

God's judgment through his prophet reversed the popular conviction. His censuring of Israel is stronger than those placed on the surrounding nations, precisely because of the intimate covenant relationship that God had freely entered with them. Even though she had received this light from God she preferred the darkness of her own ways. Consequently Amos thunders, "Woe to you who desire the day of Yahweh! Why would you have the day of Yahweh? It is darkness, and not light . . ." (c.5:18) Accents of doom punctuate Amos' words. In five prophetic visions he states the calamity approaching Israel. Finally in 9:6 he declares the utter doom of the nation, "I will destroy it from the surface of the ground." We know that Samaria to which Amos preached was destroyed in 722 by Assyria, which at the time of Amos' preaching was a very remote threat.

Worship at shrines and altars was mercilessly attacked because of its contamination from pagan practices. Destruction will be visited on these places since true worship of God was being neglected. The abuses which crept in from Canaanite fertility rites made them hateful to God.

Crimes of injustice are for Amos and the other prophets symptoms of this unfaithfulness to the one and only God. A serious mistake is made if one fails to note the dependence of these social imbalances, this flagrant corruption upon the present religious apostasy. If the people had been faithful to God, they would have fulfilled his ethical demands. But their unfaithfulness has led to deeply rooted moral sickness—an indifferent and even contemptuous attitude towards their needy neighbors. The powerful men say, "We will buy the lowly man for silver, and the poor man for a

pair of sandals. . . ." (8:6) Wealthy merchants, coveting economic gain, ruthlessly trample on the heads of the poor and the defenceless. Unjust and complacent leaders, lying on beds of ivory, have shirked their responsibility of protecting the needy and the poor. The women of Samaria, who urge their husbands on to greater and greater evil gain, are judged by the prophet and sarcastically called "cows of Basan."

The divine purpose in speaking through Amos is not to rain down destruction on the nation. Rather, it is a call to repentance, to turn from their evil ways and "return" to God. Repentance requires a redirection of will towards the jealous and righteous God who has a claim on their faithfulness. Imminent disaster is preached to the people to force them to realize the urgency of reforming their ways and giving themselves to the covenant relationship. The divine invitation is always *today—now*, as St. Paul says, "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation!" (II Cor. 6:2). God's generous invitation was refused. Israel would not listen. Therefore she must prepare to meet her God. (4:12)

Yet there is in Amos a ray of hope. It is not as strong as in the later prophets, for his place in the Divine Plan was to shock, to provoke fear, to arouse the lukewarm and complacent people. Only a proclamation of impending doom was sufficient for this, and even this proved ineffective. The prophet spoke of his hope in a remnant, but even this hope is characterized as a "maybe" at this stage of Revelation's progress. "Hate evil and love good, and let justice prevail at the gate; then it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will have pity on the remnant of Joseph." (5:15)

Osee

Speaking out of the experience of his wife, Gomer's, unfaithfulness, which represents symbolically the marriage of God and Israel, Osee also prophesies doom. However, restoration and renewal balance this divine judgment. This optimism is not due to any inner conversion of the people in the Northern Kingdom (for

their moral corruption was growing worse), but it is due only to God's love for His people.

Covenant remembrances, especially of the Exodus, find a dominant position in his preaching. "I am the Lord, your God, since the land of Egypt." (12:9) This decisive event in Israel's history is the manifestation of God's love. (11:1)

Gomer had become a harlot forsaking her spouse, Osee; Israel had become a harlot forsaking her spouse, God. Instead of faithfully worshipping God, the people eagerly frequented the fertility rites, seeking a good crop and attempting to manipulate God for their own benefit. Osee, however, insists that the people do not "know" God. (4:1) ("Know" does not refer to intellectual ideas, e.g. in Gen. 4:1 it is used to describe the marital act of Adam and Eve.) The prophet was saying that Israel's heart was not in God, that she was not responding with her whole person to God's love.

Faced with this situation the prophet is prompted to threaten destruction at the hands of Assyria. This judgment is manifested in chapter 1 by names given to his children. The name given the youngest child, "Lo-ammi, for you are not my people, and I will not be your God." (1:9) signifies the rejection and abandonment of Israel. Later (c. 13) God says that He will destroy His people.

A spirit of permissiveness is still prevalent in many schools of thought in modern society. Punishment and correction are viewed as evil and not as healing instruments when lovingly administered. This makes it difficult for people to see that God's punishment is not simply vindictive, but also redemptive. The redemptive nature of God's punishments is a constant theme of the Old Testament, e.g. the books of Deuteronomy and Judges. Osee represents God as chastizing Israel in order to convert her, to prepare her return to Himself. Like a parent who disciplines a child, God is moved to act in judgment from love. This Divine chastisement is not final. "My heart is overwhelmed, my pity is stirred. I will not give bent to my blazing anger, I will not destroy Ephraim again; for I am God and not man, the Holy One present among you; I will not let the flames consume you." (11:8-9)

Michea and Isaia

Some modern scholars consider that the word spoken by the prophet Michea is contained in the first three chapters of the book. Here he proclaims the word of judgment which God made known to him. The claim of safety that is made because of the Lord's presence among them will be of no avail. Both Israel and Juda have committed iniquity; both have been judged and will be punished for their crimes. Even the Holy City of Jerusalem will not be spared. Nothing can prevent the conquering armies of Assyria from being the instruments exercising the Lord's judgment.

A complete exposition of the prophet Isaia requires a volume. It suffices here to make a few remarks about his early ministry in the time of King Achaz. In chapter 6 we learn that from his call he is appointed to be a prophet of doom. This is the predominant content of his early message. Juda is judged for unfaithfulness to the Covenant, for social injustices and for defiling herself by adopting pagan practices in worship.

Prosperity existed in Juda at this time. Assyria, the chief military power of the Near East, was bent upon extending her domains at the expense of Juda's neighbors. To protect themselves they formed a league, the Syro-Ephraimite league, and sought the aid of prosperous Juda. Juda refused, and the league descended in force upon her to force her into becoming an ally. This is the setting for chapter 7. Isaia boldly tells King Achaz not to fear the alliance for it shall soon be destroyed. Confidence in God, he tells the king, is his best protection. Do not abandon this confidence in God (a covenant attitude) by seeking the intervention of Assyria. "He underscores his message of faith with a characteristic play on words (7:9b), which may be paraphrased: "If your faith is not sure. . . , your throne will not be secure . . ." The weak Achaz fails to give himself confidently to God and the Sign of Emmanuel is revealed by the prophet. Before the child whose coming is announced by the prophet reaches the age of choosing between

² Anderson, Bernhard W., *Understanding the Old Testament*. Prentice-Hall Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1957. p. 266.

good and evil, the Syro-Ephraimite alliance will be broken up and the king of Assyria will have destroyed Juda. Immediate relief is promised Juda, but a greater disaster is to come.

Unlike the earlier prophets, Isaia's message is predominantly hopeful. The Messianic hope and the theme of the separated remnant, confidently awaiting the fulfillment of God's purpose in history, permeate his work. It seems that these have a relationship to the Covenant as a fulfillment of it.

Conclusion

By setting the prophets within their proper background and by seeing them as men aware of and caught up in the covenant relationship with God, it is hoped that the message of the prophets is more meaningful to the reader. As a Christian he is living in the New Covenant, in the relationship which Christ established through His saving acts. Jesus freely chose to do this out of the great Love with which He first loves us. Our response must be one of faith, obedience and absolute confidence in God. Jeremias tells us how this is accomplished: "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will place my law within them, and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (31:33)