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## THE NATURE OF PROPHECY<sup>1</sup>

THE voice of prophecy fills the ages, so I think that forty minutes is rather a short time in which to speak upon the nature of it. But I will do my best.

We may begin with a few limitations. I wish to speak to you about the nature of *Old Testament* prophecy. So I will pass over New Testament prophecy, because it is rather different from that of the Old Testament, and *a fortiori* I will not treat of those phenomena in the world of nations outside Israel, to which, with more or less right, the name of prophecy had been given too. We shall not concern ourselves with these phenomena, because—whatever they may have been—they were no *true* prophecy. This implies that in speaking of Old Testament prophecy I shall not treat of *all* those men that the Old Testament itself calls prophets. The Old Testament speaks of prophets of Baal in the story of Carmel, and it mentions other men who spoke in the name of the Lord, but had not been sent by Him. All these are no *true* prophets; we call them *false* prophets, and this implies that they are no real prophets, no more than false gold is real gold.

It is true that the Old Testament calls all these men prophets but this is only a matter of terminology. The Hebrew word "prophet" (*nabi*) has an external meaning, it simply indicates a class of men who had in common some external things, the principal of which was their pretension to be the mouth of God.

But—and this is most important—the Old Testament by no means puts all these men on a level. It makes a sharp distinction between those to whom the Lord really had spoken and others who prophesied from their own heart. And that is really the same as what we, following the New Testament, express by the distinction between true and false prophets.

So I will speak of *the nature of true prophecy*, in the Old Testament.

<sup>1</sup> Paper read by Professor Ridderbos at an I.V.F. conference.

## I

By limiting my subject in this manner, I have already said a good deal about it; perhaps the main thing which may be said.

This distinction says that a prophet, a true prophet, is a man to whom God really spoke, and a man who speaks in the name of God and as His mouth. Prophecy is supernatural.

This is indeed the clear testimony of the prophets themselves. They begin their harangues with the words: "*ko amar Jahwe*", "thus saith the Lord". Amos expresses the nature of prophecy in these few words (Am. iii. 7f.): "Surely the LORD God will do nothing, but He revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets. The lion has roared, who will not fear? the LORD God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?"

"Who can but prophesy?" this is the holy necessity, perhaps you may say the holy constraint that weighs heavy upon the prophets' minds. It is particularly Jeremiah who speaks on this subject in a most remarkable and penetrating manner. Right at the beginning, in his inaugural vision we hear him speak about God's subduing of man (i. 5ff.). When the LORD has called him to be a prophet unto the nations, Jeremiah answers: "Ah! Lord God! behold, I cannot speak; for I am a child." But that wonderful God who calls him, does not relent: "Say not, I am a child, for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I shall command thee thou shalt speak." And then the LORD puts forth his hand and touches his mouth, and says to him: "Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations, and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant."

That is the way in which Jeremiah becomes a prophet. Not by an impulse of his own, but by a transcendent divine act that overthrows human resistance.

And this duality and relative antithesis of God and man appears ever and anon. Jeremiah as a prophet had a bitter lot. Then the moment comes in which he quarrels with his God (xx. 7ff.): "O LORD, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived; thou art stronger than I, and hast prevailed." The prophet complains of his office, of the mockery and derision he is obliged to bear, of all the mental suffering that overwhelms him. And then anger fills his mind against God, who forced this office

upon him. He would not have accepted it; but the LORD made him a prophet. Partly by "deceiving" or "seducing" him, by a sweet moving, by rousing in his youthful mind enthusiasm for so beautiful a task: partly by overpowering him: God held him in His mighty hand so that he could not forbear.

In this manner the servant complains to his Master of His hard service. But God does not relent. Jeremiah must speak His word. The prophet relates this too (xx. 9): "Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay."

That is the nature of prophecy: God grasping man and holding man in His strong hand to be His instrument, His mouth that speaks His word to His people and to all mankind.

That is the nature of *true* prophecy in its contrast to false prophecy. On the false prophets of his day Jeremiah gives this verdict in the name of the LORD (xxiii. 21):

I have not sent these prophets,  
yet they ran:  
I have not spoken to them,  
yet they prophesied.

They "speak the deceit of their heart", xix. 14; "a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the LORD, xxiii. 16.

## II

You know there is another conception of prophecy; the conception of the modernists, and of the half-modernists too. It is the natural, the human, the immanent conception of prophecy. It maintains that what the prophets preach is the contents of their own soul. The prophets—so it is said—were great religious-ethical personalities, the worth of their words depends on the fact that they had in their hearts a higher knowledge of God and a deeper insight into His moral claims than their contemporaries and than other men. They were the conscience of the people.

In later years, modernist writers have laid more stress on the extraordinary impulses of the prophets. But for all that, to the mind of these scholars prophecy is always utterance of

humanity, however extraordinary that humanity may have been in a religious-ethical or in any other respect.

Now we found that this is not the opinion of the prophets themselves. A consistent modernist, however, has very little respect for this opinion. No doubt, you know the names of Gunkel, a famous and most able German scholar. From his modernist point of view he does not acknowledge an essential difference between true and false prophets. He only states a gradual difference; especially this, that there were prophets of evil (these are principally those whom we call the true prophets) and prophets of happiness and glory (whom we call false prophets): in other words, pessimists and optimists. Of course Gunkel knows quite well that the prophets themselves had another view; that Jeremiah reproached his adversaries that they spoke falsehood from their own hearts. But Gunkel says that this judgment is due to the emotional temperament of the prophets, which made them acknowledge only truth and falsehood and nothing between. But *we* should be more just and fair; we should realise that there is no essential difference between these two classes of prophets, that they represent only two parties or trends in prophecy, each of which had its relative right.

You see that the modernist view of prophecy greatly discredits the prophets themselves. And for that reason I think that this modernist conception is not very probable. To my mind it is not credible that these men, whom the modernists admit to have been eminent religious leaders and high ethical personalities, should have been fundamentally mistaken in their opinion about the truth and falsehood, and especially about the relation to God, of themselves and their adversaries.

You may mention more things by which this modernist conception is refuted and the really Divine origin of the words of the prophets is affirmed. The prophets were justified by the course of history. The ruin of their people came as they had foretold it, against the expectations of glory in which their antagonists indulged. More than this: the prophets have their place in a history of revelation, wherein you see not only a manifold gradation of higher and lower acts and views, but the struggle between light and darkness, between human sin and Divine mercy, a history wherein Christ is coming, He in whom all the promises which God gave by patriarchs and prophets are yea and Amen (2 Cor. i. 20).

These things are no mathematical proofs of the truth of prophecy. The realizing of this truth is a work of the Holy Ghost. But I want to say two things. First, that the modernist view of prophecy, far from being proved by the facts, involves us in difficulties not less perplexing to human reason than the mysteries of Christianity. And secondly, that we should by no means think that the modernist view of prophecy is a harmless way of thinking, in which you may indulge without losing your faith. The modernist view of prophecy is really anti-Christian. It is in conflict with the testimony of the prophets themselves, and with that of the apostle Peter, who says (2 Pet. i. 21): "Prophecy came not in old time by the will of men, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost"; it is in conflict with our Saviour Himself, who found in the writings of the prophets the programme of His life and death, of all the work which He had to do for the Father. The modernist view of prophecy is anti-Christian, because it is the consequence of a system that reduces the contrast of truth and falsehood, of sin and grace, into a gradation of more and less; it does so with true and false prophets, it does the same with Christianity and other religions. Therefore it is a denying of the only name under heaven which has been given unto men, whereby we must be saved (Acts iv. 12).

The great thing in prophecy is this: *God speaks through man*. To know this and to believe this is sufficient for a Christian. Nevertheless our human mind desires to know something concerning the manner in which this word of God was brought about. And the mind of a student, of one who seeks scientific knowledge, desires and asks so with double force. We *may* ask so, and receive some answer. We cannot go to the bottom, we cannot understand perfectly; but we may know something about it.

Prophets are not very communicative about the manner in which they received the word of God. They were neither theologians nor psychologists, they were simply prophets; they had to speak God's word, not to tell us how they received it; I suppose they were not even *able* to tell it in detail. What we may know about their manner of receiving it, we have to infer from the character of their utterances and from some indications which these contain.

Luke wrote at the beginning of his gospel: "It seemed good

to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus" (Luke i. 3). "Having had perfect understanding": the original Greek word implies investigation. The holy evangelists, and likewise the apostles, were in their writing inspired by the Holy Ghost; but this does not exclude the activity of their human minds: the historical writers had to investigate with the utmost possible care; and in this case the inspiration was limited to the guidance (a quite special guidance) of the Holy Ghost that guarded them from failure in their investigation and in their writing.

Was the inspiration of the prophets similar? I think that there is a difference. A difference between Jeremiah, who cries (xx. 9): "Then I said, I will not make mention of him . . . but his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones," and Luke, who says: "It seemed good to me also . . . to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus."

I think that a prophet is more passive, is more a driven man than an evangelist, and, I may add, more than any other of the holy men through whose means God gave us His Word. But there may be some resemblance between the prophet and Luke: a prophet was not *only* passive. In the first centuries of Christianity there was a conception of prophetic inspiration as if the prophets were *only* passive instruments, like flutes through which the Holy Ghost made audible His words. This conception of inspiration had been influenced by the Greeks, who indulged in fancies about their god speaking through the Delphic "Pythia".

But this is not the manner in which the Old Testament speaks of prophetic inspiration. In the third chapter of Isaiah judgment is announced against the daughters of Sion in this manner (vv. 18ff.): "In that day the LORD will take away the bravery of their tinkling ornaments about their feet, and their cauls, and their round tires like the moon, the chains, and the bracelets and the mufflers, the bonnets," etc.—quite a fashion-paper of the rich ladies of ancient Jerusalem. I do not think that it was the Holy Ghost who literally dictated these names to Isaiah, I rather suppose that the prophet's wife gave him information.

In this and in a great number of other cases Old Testament prophecy bears the marks of the prophet's human mind being in

action. They speak of their contemporaries' sins such as they had seen and heard them; they speak of Israel's old history such as they had studied it; they speak of Babel and Assur and Egypt and all the countries and towns in Israel's neighbourhood in accordance with what they had heard and investigated; their prophecies give evidence of many-sided activities of their own human mind, just as we heard Luke speak of it.

### III

But there are *many* ways in which the prophets received the Word of God.

The way we remember best is perhaps that of the vision.

I never had a vision, and even if I had, I suppose I could not exactly tell you what it is. It may be compared with the dream, though of course it is a different thing. As dreams pass through the mind during sleep, so the mind receives visions in an abnormal state; you may call it ecstasy, or—as the word ecstasy is used in different senses—you may perhaps better call it the visionary state. Augustine described this state well by the words: "The mind is detached from the senses of the body, with this purpose that to the mind be showed what should be showed to it."

Visions are not the most common way in which the prophets were enabled to speak God's word. But they are rather important, especially since divine calling often came to them in a vision: you remember Isaiah's, Jeremiah's, Ezekiel's inaugural visions.

A vision is something extraordinary. It may seem to us that in the vision the human factor of inspiration was totally effaced. But we must not be mistaken. The false prophets had their visions as well. Isaiah says of the priest and the prophet (that is the *false* prophet) of his days: "They err in vision"—that is the prophet—"they stumble in judgment"—that is the priest.

Now I do not say that the visionary state of the false prophets was equivalent to that of the true prophets. But I dare say that they had something in common; and this shows that the visionary state of the true prophets has a foundation in human nature. Revelation and the whole work of salvation may be called a new creation, but is not new in an absolute sense; it is renewing,

regeneration; and so revelation makes use of the potentialities which God had created in human nature.

## IV

God spoke to the prophets in many ways. I have now mentioned two. You may call them the two extremes: on one side human activity controlled by the Holy Ghost, on the other the visions in which the prophet is more passive and the supernatural, divine factor is more evident.

Between these two a whole series of different manners of inspiration may be supposed. Sometimes, I think, without being in a visionary state, the prophets nevertheless heard voices, heavenly or earthly voices. Jeremiah cries in bitter lamentation (iv. 19, 21): "O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. . . . How long shall I see the standard, and hear the sound of the trumpet?"

Jeremiah hears voices, and also—sees an image. The image of the standard, the voice of the trumpet of war does not cease from his eye and his ear: it is the coming of the catastrophe which the prophet passes through beforehand.

These voices are earthly. There are *heavenly* voices too. You know the beginning of the fortieth chapter of Isaiah. It is a new beginning, and so there is something like an inaugural vision. But it is not a vision; it is only a hearing of heavenly voices. "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God"—that's one voice. "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness: prepare ye the way of the Lord"—that is another voice. "The voice said: Cry. And he said: What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field—that is a third voice.

Another manner was probably the speaking of God *within* the prophets; you may compare it to our saying: "It was as if someone said to me." Jeremiah says (xv. 16): "Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart." "Thy words were found": this suggests that Jeremiah found them ready in his heart. I think this was the ordinary way when the prophets say: "The LORD said unto me."

I suppose it also happened that without such a keen feeling of one who spoke unto them in definite words God sug-

gested to them ideas which they themselves had to formulate, always guided by the Holy Ghost, and in such a manner that they were quite sure that what they spoke were God's words.

I hope it will be quite clear to us all that there was in prophecy a most important human factor. What the Rabbins fabled about one of them (Malachi), that he was an angel in human form speaking to men, is by no means applicable either to this last of the prophets or to any of his predecessors. They all were men and they spoke as men, each of them in his own style, Amos as a man from the country, Isaiah as a man of high culture and as a great poet too, Ezekiel as the son of a priest. And what is more: in many of their utterances you may feel their whole personality backing their words. Most of all in a prophet like Jeremiah you feel the deep sorrow which fills his soul when he laments for his people which is condemned to ruin. "O that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people" (ix. 1).

All this detracts nothing from the Divine character of their message. We should not forget that it was God Himself who created them with all the surroundings of their existence; He created the people from whom they proceeded, He created the prophets themselves, their bodies and their souls; and He says to Jeremiah: "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee" (i. 5). He created all the potentialities of their nature and characters, as He would use them for His service.

Thus the human factor, too, was from the hand of God. But that human factor was not all, and was not the essential thing. The essential thing was the working of God in the prophet. Although human personality might be an excellent thing for God to make use of, it was not indispensable: Balaam was a true prophet, but he was an unwilling instrument. And even in those who were prophets with their hearts too, human personality was not an adequate instrument. Their task was such that human personality by itself could not bear it. More than that, the task was such that in many respects human personality had to be effaced before the mighty Master who compelled the prophets to speak His word and not their own. We heard Jeremiah complaining that notwithstanding his own will he could not forbear speaking the word of God. It is true, Jeremiah was a prophet as well when he poured out his bitter

grief for his people's ruin. But when you look closer, you will see that it was God's feelings, not his own, that dominated him. He says it himself (vi. 11): "Therefore I am full of the fury of the LORD; I am weary with holding in; I will pour it out upon the children abroad and upon the assembly of young men together." These men loved their people with all their heart; but that did not alter the fact that, if need were, they took God's side. Possessed by God, by His condemning anger, by His fury, they condemned the people they loved; their personality could be an instrument for only a time; when it ran high, their personality was effaced, that the prophet might be what he should be: the mouth of God.

## V

I think that I have now said the main thing which needs to be said about the nature of prophecy. But perhaps you would like to ask me one thing: how did the prophets know that the word they received in sundry manners, was really God's word, that they did not deceive themselves in the false prophet's way? If I had more time left, I might give more than one answer. I might remind you of what Jeremiah says about the word of God forcing itself upon him; I might mention, what is a very important thing, that the word they received had to be in accordance with the revelation that had already been given to Israel, that it had to recall Israel to the Lord and to rebuke the sins of the people, as Jeremiah says about the false prophets (xxiii. 22):

"If they had stood in my counsel,  
they would cause my people to hear my words,  
and they would have turned them from their evil way  
and from the evil of their doings."

But I may do something else: I may ask you, how do *you* know that the words of the prophets are the word of God? You, too, may mention several things, but the end is what our Dutch Confession says: "Because the Holy Ghost witnesseth in our hearts that they (the books of the Bible) are from God."

And now I will state the nature of prophecy in one word. Prophecy (no less than our own belief in prophecy and in the Holy Scripture) is mystery. Of course it is mystery; for prophecy is God grasping man to be His instrument, His mouth. Prophecy

is Immanuel, God with man; and therefore prophecy is a type of the great mystery (1 Tim. iii. 16), the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh. Prophecy is the type of Him whom we confess with the Heidelberg Catechism "that He is our highest Prophet and Teacher, who has revealed to us perfectly the hidden counsel and will of God concerning our salvation".

J. RIDDERBOS.

*Theological College, Kampen, Holland.*