

The Origins of Prophecy.

"HEBREW prophecy," says Skinner (*Prophecy and Religion*), "has roots and antecedents in widely diffused primitive ideas and customs which are found everywhere among peoples in the early stages of civilization." Although the great "writing prophets" of Israel seem far removed from primitive ideas and superstitious customs, yet there can be no doubt that, high and noble as the words of Amos and Isaiah are, they nevertheless stand in a very real sense in direct succession to primitive ideas. The unique thing about Hebrew prophecy is not the root from which it sprang, but rather in the way in which it developed. Generally speaking, the desire to find out and to foretell the future grows less respectable as civilization advances and knowledge increases. All the world knows the story of the two Roman augurs who met one another in the Forum and greeted one another with a sly wink! Their contemporaries knew what value was to be placed upon their "revelations." Among the Hebrews, however, prophecy remained a living force; this is ascribed by Skinner to its "close and permanent association with religion." In its development Hebrew prophecy was unique, but in its origins it is linked with many primitive ideas and conceptions.

The ancient world had its methods of ascertaining knowledge of future events, and these methods were practised by specialists.

Firstly, there was the magician. His task was to discover knowledge about the future by determining the course that future events would take. Working very largely on the principle that future events were undetermined, he set out, by means of his art, both black and white, to determine them. As a rule he worked on the imitative plan; *i.e.* he mimicked that which he desired to come to pass, in the sure and certain faith that his miming would actually produce the desired result. The most notable example of "white magic" is the existence in many parts of the world, of a class of rain-makers, who, by simulating the falling of rain, caused rain to fall. Examples of "black magic" abound. The "guy" was pierced with knives, in the faith that the original would feel the pain and die. The magician attempted to get a knowledge of the future by determining it.

Secondly, there was the diviner. He apparently worked on the principle that the future was determined, and he set out to read

the signs and interpret them correctly. Among the Babylonians, the diviner read the marks on the liver of the sacred animal, and by means of a system of "clues" was able to foretell the future. Among the Arabs, there were people who were able to foretell the future from almost any object upon which the eye might rest. Divination does not seem to be totally inconsistent with theism. Trial by ordeal is really a form of divination in which it would be possible for the participants to believe that God would see that the innocent escaped. In exactly the same way the early Hebrew was convinced that Yahweh controlled the sacred lot. This persists even into the New Testament. The account of the appointment of Matthias as one of the Twelve in Acts. i. 15-26 is instructive on the point. The diviner, in short, proceeded from the known to the unknown; in the known he read the signs that pointed him to the unknown, and there seems to be no reason to regard this method as incompatible with theism.

Thirdly, there was the ecstatic. He was a man who saw visions and dreamed dreams. He gave himself up to his god, and in a passive state of god-possession, the deity spoke through him. He was characterised by wild dances and frenzies, by fits of stupor, by trances, and often by periods when his speech forsook him. Being literally "inspired" by his god, his god could give knowledge of the future through his passivity. This type of prophecy is certainly not incompatible with a theistic faith. We find many instances of it in the OT, *e.g.*, "The spirit of Yahweh rushed upon Saul . . ." (I. Sam. x. 10.)

From these observations on the nature of prophecy generally, can we learn anything of the origins of Hebrew prophecy?

Without discussing for the moment the question of method, it seems clear enough that the Old Testament prophets had this in common with these three groups, that they claimed to be able to foretell the future. While it is perfectly true that the word "prophet" will bear the meaning "forth-teller" as well as "fore-teller," it is also true that the Old Testament prophets were more than mere preachers. Most certainly this is true of the prophets of the early kingdom, and it is also true of the later "writing prophets." Jeremiah, who in many ways stands at the summit of Hebrew prophecy, is prepared to accept the test of his time—that a true prophet can be discerned by whether or not his predictions of the future come to pass.

Of these fore-telling prophets we have two classes specifically mentioned in the Old Testament. (i) The *ro'eh* or Seer, such as Samuel is represented to be in I. Sam. ix. 1-x. 16. He seems to be very like the diviner whom we meet in primitive society, but with this important difference, that his predictions come direct from his association with Yahweh. He is spoken of as *'ish*

Yahwēh and is in direct contact with Him. All through the narrative we are conscious that Samuel is in a very real sense dependent upon Yahweh for his decisions. That there also existed the more "automatic" kind of diviner whose activities were scorned by later editors of the Old Testament, appears from the way in which glossators have confused the references to the Urim and Thummim. But even in this connection, the LXX text of I. Sam. xiv. 41¹ is interesting as showing that the person in control of the sacred lot was also conscious that the lot was under control of Yahweh. (ii) The *n^obhî'im* usually rendered "prophets" in the English A. V. These were the ecstasies, but again, their ecstasies were directly inspired by Yahweh; they were possessed by Him. Sometimes, as in the case of Elisha before Jehoshaphat (ii. Ki. iii. 15), the ecstasy was artificially produced, here by music, but usually no such means are recorded. The characteristics of the true ecstatic are to be seen however, in the wild dances and a-rational actions of many of these prophets.

In I. Sam. ix. 9 we have an important note about these two classes of prophet, which was apparently inserted from the margin: "He that is now called a prophet (*nabhî*) was beforetime called a Seer (*rō'ēh*)." This must mean that at the time of this marginal comment, the seer properly so called, had ceased to function, and that the fore-telling of the future which had been his proper duty was now performed by the ecstatic. It is of interest to note that where the ecstasies are spoken of in the early kingdom when the seer was also operating, there seems to be no reference to the *nabhî* as foretelling the future; that comes later, only when the Seer has disappeared.

We may now pass on to examine whether we may find any clue to the origins of Hebrew prophecy in magic, divination and ecstasy.

As far as the magician is concerned, there seem to be none of his characteristics left in the great Hebrew prophets. What we understand, indeed, as the rise of prophecy was coincidental with a revolt against witchcraft and necromancy. The superstitions which alone can give magic power were to the eyes, even of the people of the early kingdom, both futile and in opposition to the will of Yahweh. Yahweh could not be controlled by such rites which were therefore futile, and to attempt to practise them was a form of idolatry.

Among the later prophets there appear traces of what has been called mimetic magic, as for instance, when Jeremiah sank

¹ "And Saul said, O Yahweh, God of Israel, why hast thou not answered thy servant this day? If the iniquity be in me or in my son Jonathan Yahweh, God of Israel, give Urim; but if thou sayest thus: the iniquity is in thy people Israel, give Thummim."

a curse against Babylon in the river Euphrates. There are many similar actions recorded of the great prophets. The explanation of these actions, however, does not lie in the magical. These prophets had a great sense of the power of Yahweh, and the actions which they performed were performed at His express will. They had a profound sense of the Word of Yahweh and believed that His word was creative. Thus their actions were, in a sense, symbolical of that which was to come to pass. The distinction from magic may be seen here: whilst the magician believed that his action would cause the effect, the prophet believed that his action was an illustration of what Yahweh would bring to pass. His actions reinforced the spoken word.

The question of the diviner is not so simple. Professor A. Guillaume in his *Prophecy and Divination* contends that the activity of the prophets of Israel is in many respects of the same order and character of that of many of the Beduin diviners. That there were great differences between the Israelite prophets and the Beduin diviners is not in question. Some of those differences have already been mentioned above, but the point of contact lies in the attempt which was common to both of them to divine the unseen from the seen and the unknown from the known. Dr. Guillaume has described the Beduin technique in great detail, and has shown the similarities between the methods of the two. Many illustrations of similar technique could be given from the Old Testament, but two will suffice.

The first is the story of Baalam (Numbers xxiii.) Here we have a man who, although not an Israelite, is prepared to submit his judgements to the will of Yahweh, and whose predictions came, in the manner of the diviners, from the things which he saw. From the summit of the mountain he was to curse Israel, and in his third oracle we read how he saw spread out before him the tents of Israel. The sight of the tents suggested to him the idea of lign-aloes (RV). The text is important—Num. xxiv. 5-6:

How goodly are thy tents (*oh^alim*), O Jacob,

Like lign-aloes (*^ah^alim*) which Yahweh hath planted.

The one word suggested the other. This kind of assonance was a common feature of Beduin divination. Further, each of Baalam's oracles is introduced by the word *mashal*, which here seems to bear the meaning of "similitude." Thus both sight and sound played their part in Baalam's prediction of Israel's future. It is important to notice, however, that Baalam also had some of the characteristics of the ecstatic. Of this very vision we have the words "and the spirit of God (*'elohim*) came upon him." In the person of Baalam we seem to have a combination of divination and ecstasy.

The second illustration is that of Amos in chapter viii. 1-2. Again it is a question of assonance; the sight of the basket of summer fruits (*qaiç*) suggested to him the idea of the end (*qéç*) which is to come upon Israel. Once again, and this time much later in the development of Hebrew prophecy, we have a relic of that method of foretelling the future which had its origin in divination—divining from sight and sound.

Thus it seems that the methods of Arab and Jew in this matter of prophecy were not wholly opposed, and that there may have been some element of a primitive divination, even in the noblest Hebrew prophecy.

The question of the ecstatic has received considerable attention in modern times. Some have maintained that the ecstasy of the prophets of Israel was due to contact with Canaanite religion. Whether this be true or not we cannot be sure. As Adam Welch has pointed out (*Religion under the Kingdom*) so little is known about Canaanite religion that we cannot usefully make comparisons. That bands of ecstasies existed in the time of the kingdom is clear, however, and they may have perpetuated Canaanite ideas. What we must say is that whatever the ecstasies may have been and done, their activity in the early days was not usually connected with prediction of the future; the ecstatic seems to have been rather the mystic of the ancient world whose aim was to apprehend his god and to know communion with him, and this was done through abnormal psychological states. It is worthy of note that the ecstatic was often despised by the ordinary man, and even Elijah on Carmel repudiates the ecstatic antics of the priests of Baal.

By the time we come to the "writing prophets" however, we find that some forms of ecstasy are accepted and used by them. They were careful to separate themselves from the bands of professional ecstatic prophets, while being subject to the same kind of abnormal states and were still accompanied by the same pneumatic phenomena. This is especially true of Ezekiel. Yet these prophets were saved from the extravagancies and crudities of their predecessors. This is because they are dominated by Yahweh, and for them all Yahweh was a moral Being, and in His revelations to them it was His moral commands to them and their nation that were always emphasised. It is perhaps worth noting too, that as the conception of the nature of Yahweh developed, so those who served Him gradually withdrew from these bands of ecstatic prophets whose actions were at least a moral. Beginning with Micaiah-ben-imelech we have a succession of men who, although subject to ecstasies were receiving individual rather than communal findings about the will of Yahweh, and about the events that were to come in the future.

It seems sufficiently clear that in the case of the great prophets, psychical experiences came to them which caused their more normal mental and physical states to be subordinated so that they could receive communications direct from Yahweh, who could mediate His word through them. So far we may say that prophecy in Israel owed something to the method of the ecstatic.

In conclusion one would emphasise again that the worth of Hebrew prophecy is not to be measured by the nature of its origin. Its value and its uniqueness lies in its development and in the ends which it subserved. That it sprang out of the universal desire to know the future may not be denied. As the idea of God developed, however, it became more than a desire to know the future. For the Hebrew, all events were at the command of Yahweh; He was in control. Consequently the attempt among the Hebrews became one to discover the will of God and then to announce that will to the people. In this way we get the combination of prophet and preacher that is so familiar to all readers of the Old Testament. The method perhaps does not matter very much. They, at all events, would have acknowledged only one method. "And the Lord God shewed me . . ." That was the source of their revelations. And such it was; but we may trace the "shewing" through the methods of foretelling the future which the Hebrews developed in their own way; through divination and ecstasy at least. That was the human element in their revelations.

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