

The Prophet as Intercessor.

ONE aspect of the prophetic ministry that is often overlooked is that of intercession. For it is a remarkable fact that in the Old Testament it is the prophet and not the priest who makes intercession for the people. What is the relation between this prophetic ministry of intercession and that of declaring the Word of the Lord?

"The mission of the prophet was to be an extension of the divine personality, and the utterer of a word which was not his, but God's."¹ This description draws attention to an essential feature of Hebrew prophecy: it is the medium which God has chosen, to communicate directly to His people His judgment and His purpose of Salvation with special reference to the historical situations in which they find themselves. Thus the prophet condemns all forms of social injustice, political expediency, and religious practice which is not associated with true penitence and loyalty to God's holy will, not primarily because he has a developed social conscience, but because God has given him this word to speak. So he foretells the future; not to satisfy human curiosity, but because the future is unified with the present in the mind of God, and there are certain consequences of defying, neglecting, or loyally committing oneself to the way of the Lord. So too, he interprets the history of his people, not because he has quietly reflected on the traditions of Israel's past, but because God has opened his eyes to see His activity in those events, so that he may declare them to His people. Thus the books of *Joshua*, *Judges*, *Samuel* and *Kings* (called in the Hebrew Bible, *The Former Prophets*) came to be written. As foreteller, spokesman of Judgment and Salvation, and interpreter of history, we see that "the primary function of the prophet is to awaken the consciousness of Israel to the presence and power of God, and to evoke that inner spirit of obedience which alone gives reality to the ritual of worship"² He is a "man under authority", and that "authority" was recognised by himself and at least some of his hearers. Sometimes we find the prophets speaking of this inner compulsion as something before which their desires,

¹ H. H. Rowley, *The Rediscovery of the Old Testament*, p. 99.

² H. Wheeler Robinson: *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament*, p. 162.

inclinations and purposes must submit at whatever cost to themselves (cp. especially *Jeremiah* i. 4-10; xx. 7-12). The word spoken by the prophet is not his own, but God's; it is the word of the Lord. The book of *Amos* is described as "The words of Amos . . ." (*Amos* i. 1.) but when Amos speaks, it is "Thus hath the Lord said", and the Word goes forth with power to effect the will of the Lord (1 Sam. iii. 19f; Is. lv. 11)³ In all this we see the prophet as the man of God. God's man sent to those who have defied, forgotten or misunderstood their rightful King.

We shall, however, misunderstand the prophet (and Him Whose will he declares), if we think of him as standing apart from his people, as one who would isolate himself from "an evil and adulterous generation". This is clearly borne out by the intercessory prayers and acts of the prophets. We may begin with Amos where the contrast between the prevailing message of doom and the prophet's intercessions is most striking. The oracles of the prophet declare the divine Judgment on a people who have forsaken the covenant relationship with God. Their leaders have dethroned justice, oppressed the defenceless poor, and abandoned themselves to the luxurious enjoyment of the results of their rapacity and commercial dishonesty. The Day of the Lord, for which they are so confidently hoping, will be for them darkness and not light. All the more remarkable are the words of chapt. vii verses 1-3 and 4-6. Here the prophet pleads for his people as the land is threatened with destruction first from a plague of locusts, and again with a forest fire that spread with terrifying speed along the valleys and fertile slopes dry in the heat of summer. On both occasions, "The LORD repented", and disaster was averted. It is true that neither the threat of disaster nor the intercession of the prophet had any lasting effect; "yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD". Amos must therefore pronounce the doom of Israel. In these two brief glimpses into the inner life of the prophet, we see something more than the stern prophet of judgment. He is aware of the real nature of his people's pitiful condition, as Israel ought to be but is not. There is an emotional quality in his prayer "O Lord GOD forgive!" which can hardly be reproduced in the printed translation. He prays, not only for Israel, but as Israel. It is the prayer that Israel should utter, but because of its moral and spiritual condition cannot.

Now Amos, as he intercedes for Israel, is in the true succession of the prophets who went before him. Elijah and Elisha are both represented as interceding for the nation and for individuals.

³ For a most illuminating discussion of the Authority of the prophet, see an article by Dr. Rowley in *Harvard Theological Review*, 1945.

Similar accounts are preserved of un-named "men-of-God". (c.p. 1 *Kings* xiii. 6.) Centuries after their death, the names of Moses and Samuel were remembered for their ministry of intercession (*Jer.* xv. 1.), and a number of such occasions will be remembered. Not only was Israel encouraged by Samuel to resist their Philistine over-lords; they said to Samuel, "Cry unto the LORD our God, that He may save us out of the hand of the Philistines". (1 *Sam.* vii. 5-12), and his prayers were effective. Chapter xii, although it seems to preserve the point of view of a later age, none-the-less emphasises Samuel's intercession for Israel, by contrast with their disloyalty to God and His servant: "God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you." (vv. 19, 23). It would appear that Samuel's "mourning for Saul" (1 *Sam.* xv. 35; xvi. 1) was of the nature of intercession, for "the LORD said unto Samuel, How long wilt thou mourn for Saul, when I have rejected him from being king over Israel?" Moses, who is recognised as being the spiritual ancestor of the prophets in *Deut.* xviii. 15 and referred to as a prophet by *Hosea* xii. 13, is frequently shown as interceding for the covenant people, cp. *Exod.* xxxii. 11-13, xvii. 8f (by symbolic action) *Deut.* ix. 26, and the Pharaoh bespeaks his prayers on behalf of Egypt, *Exod.* viii. 8f, 28f, etc. An incident in the story of Abraham is of particular interest in this respect. Abimelek, king of Gerar is instructed by God to seek the help of Abraham so that the threatened disaster might be averted: "for he is a prophet and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live." *Gen.* xx. 7. (cp. also *Gen.* xviii. 16-33): so that it is precisely in connection with his intercession that Abraham is explicitly called a prophet.

When we turn from Amos to the prophets who follow him, we find the same function appearing as part of their ministry. In the biography of Isaiah, we read that King Hezekiah sent to the prophet to "lift up thy prayer" for the people (*Is.* xxxvii. 4), at a time of acute national emergency. Is it fanciful to suppose that the prophecies of the Messianic Age are the answers to his unrecorded prayers for this people? The Prophecy of Habakkuk opens with an intercessory prayer, and he received his characteristic "Word" in answer to his prayer for the people of God (ii. 1-4). Jeremiah was venerated in Jewish tradition as the great intercessor; thus II *Macc.* xv. 14: "the lover of his brethren, he who prayeth much for the people and the holy city, Jeremiah, the prophet of God." Thus he tells us "how I stood before Thee to speak good for them, to turn away Thy fury from them" xviii. 20 (a somewhat similar meaning may be intended in the difficult verse xv. 11). So we read of king Zedekiah, who paid no heed to the prophet's word, yet sent to ask the prophet to

pray for the people xxxvii 1-3; and Johanan with his associates, having good reason to fear savage Babylonian reprisals for the murder of Gedaliah and some Babylonian officials, came to Jeremiah to ask him to pray for them xlii. 2. It is to be noted that though they did not accept the Word of the LORD which Jeremiah gave them in answer to their request, they took Jeremiah with them when they fled for refuge to Egypt. At one period of his ministry in Jerusalem, Jeremiah is forbidden to "pray for this people". vii. 16., xi. 14., xiv. 11. "It is as if the believing remnant which to Isaiah had represented the spiritual kernel of Israel and the hope of its future, had shrunk in Jeremiah's view to the limits of his own individual life."⁴ Historic Israel had, it seemed, utterly rejected God's purpose for His people. Like Samuel and Ezekiel, he must no longer mourn. He must no longer exercise a normal part of the prophetic ministry; and the reason is clear. It is that he must no longer be identified with a reprobate people who have rejected the LORD. "Pray not *thou* for this people . . . for I will not hear *them*." (xi. 14). This is not of course, the end of the story. They have broken the covenant and refused to be the people of God, Israel; but Israel continues in the person of Jeremiah. The holy purpose of God is not to be frustrated by the failure of man; Jeremiah fulfils that purpose and makes it available for such as receive the divine forgiveness, the new heart, and the true knowledge of God. Finally we may turn to the well-known passage *Isaiah* lii. 13—liii. 12 which represents the Servant as interceding by identifying himself with the sinful nations. Now, it is to be noticed that the terms used to describe the Servant's vocation, preparation, and mission in the passages xlii. 1-4, xlix. 1-6, 1 4-9, are strikingly reminiscent of those used of the prophets. If the Servant, in the mind of the prophet, is intended as a portrait of historic Israel, and a prophecy of its destiny in the divine purpose,⁵ it makes all other national aspirations seem trivial and worthless. The intercessory function of the prophet reaches here its noble fulfilment. It is not legal substitution, but willing self-identification with those "who are without God and without hope". Through his acceptance of the suffering they have deserved, he becomes the meeting place where the rebels may meet the LORD who is their true King, and offer to Him their loyalty, trust and obedience. It had to be left for the Prophet of Nazareth to actualise the Word of the LORD to this prophet.

Thus we may see that intercession is a normal and recognised part of the prophetic ministry. In what way is this related to the conception of a prophet as not only the spokesman for God,

⁴ Skinner: *Prophecy and Religion*, p. 219.

⁵ Cp. H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Cross of the Servant*.

but as the mouthpiece of God? We read of him uttering God's words to men, often in denunciation of moral conduct and religious practices, sometimes pleading for repentance, sometimes describing the conditions of a forgiven, renewed and restored Israel in the New Age. He is God's messenger, indeed God's message, to God's people. He speaks not his own words, but the words given to him in "the council of the Most High". By word and act he brings the Judgment of God to bear upon the life of the covenant community. He is God's representative, and identifies himself with the holy purpose of God. Yet he is also a member of the covenant community, and does not seek to isolate himself or separate himself from that community. He does not stand over against Israel as he utters the divine word, but within and as a member of Israel. Indeed this is perhaps an obvious necessity for the prophet if he is to be true to the Immanuel theme that is found in all parts of the Bible—I will be with you—God is with us. So, if the prophet must condemn and declare words of doom, he acknowledges that condemnation himself as a man of Israel. Isaiah confesses "A man of unclean lips am I, and in the midst of a people of unclean lips I dwell". (*Is.* vi 5.) Not only Israel as chosen and saved by God for the fulfilment of His holy purpose, but Israel in need of forgiveness and renewal, that is, historic Israel, comes as it were to a focus in the prophet as he stands in the presence of the Holy King. In him, Israel comes to self-consciousness; in a very real sense, he is the heart and soul of Israel. It is thus that he can, more adequately than any other, represent Israel to God, and intercede for his people. But this suggests a quality in the prophetic words which we are apt to lose sight of. It is in the prophet's own experience that the righteous, gracious and holy God meets unrighteous, churlish and unholy Israel. So the words that he speaks are words of Judgment, yet spoken with agony and great suffering. That was the prophet's vocation.

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