

THE RÔLE OF THE EARLY HEBREW PROPHET ¹

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IT is desirable, I think, to preface this lecture with a preamble in order to remind us of the situation, both political and religious, in which the early Hebrew prophets performed their tasks—and by the early Hebrew prophets I have in mind particularly those of the eighth century. It is important then to call to mind certain main facts and factors in early Hebrew history. The following thumb-nail sketch may suffice.

Scholars seem to be agreed that whilst the Israelite tribes entered Canaan by a circuitous route from the eastern side, Judah moved in from the south. There was continual dissension between the two groups. Their earliest religious centre, as is made clear by their traditions, was Shechem (the modern Nablus) with Mount Gerizim as their holy mountain and to them also God's dwelling place on earth still known to Samaritans as Beth-El (house of God). There the priesthood established itself, and there, as the Samaritan priesthood, it has continued uninterruptedly to this day.

The first event of major religious significance was a breakaway movement within the Shechem priesthood which led to the establishment of a rival sanctuary and a rival priesthood at Shiloh. This is made clear to us from Samaritan records. Shiloh produced Samuel, recognized by all conflicting parties as prophet and legislator, who united the tribes in an all-Israel confederation, created a monarchy, revised the Mosaic legislation to provide a constitution (in my belief substantially the existing Torah or Pentateuch) and prepared the way for the Jerusalem Temple. This was Yahweh's new residence on earth, and in fact a religious Canberra.

With the death of Solomon the new Kingdom of all-Israel was

¹ A lecture delivered in the Library series of public lectures.

disrupted through the ambition of Jeroboam with the backing of the Shilonite priesthood, and the perversity of Rehoboam. Not only was the political structure disrupted, but the religious structure was also violently torn apart. The abode of Yahweh was left as the shrine for only a section of his people, since Jeroboam set up a rival sanctuary, and a priesthood and ritual of his own choosing. Could anything be more grievous? The urgent, the indispensable thing, was the restoration of political and religious unity. The kingdom of all-Israel must be brought back in its fullness. How to effect this was the great problem. Attempts made to solve it come up for consideration in the course of the lecture.

An investigation of the phenomena of prophecy, so widely acclaimed as peculiar to the Israelite nation, ought to begin with the story of the Garden of Eden. In this beautiful parable we have the Hebrew view of the relationship between God and man. Man, although made in God's image, when first placed in the Divine Garden was a mere automaton. In the garden were two trees which supplied God with the food appropriate to Deity—*Reason* in the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and *Immortality* in the Tree of Life. Man in his primary state, void of reason, almost as we have said, a senseless automaton, would not of his own accord have touched the fruit of either tree when forbidden to do so. He was of clay and it was not intended that he should partake of reason and immortality, which are of the stuff peculiar to Deity. But through the Serpent and the Woman he ate of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, thus, clearly contrary to God's intention, acquiring the divine attribute of Reason, and the power of choosing either right or wrong. His eyes were opened and he became as a god. Had he now managed to eat the fruit of the Tree of Life he would have acquired Immortality. Then he would have become in very truth a god, and hence a rival to God himself. This was prevented by his hasty extrusion from the Garden. But God was seemingly powerless to take from man the divine attribute thus filched. Man in respect of intellect shares divinity with God and is thus, so to speak, on the same footing. God cannot

control the free exercise of man's reason. Man is free to decide whether he will worship God, or whether he will reject him and worship some other deity. God finds it necessary to enter into bargains or covenants with man. God can, however, reward or punish him according to his behaviour. Man may reject God but he does so at his peril, and whilst fruitful seasons and happiness and prosperity reward a faithful body of worshippers, the faithless and apostate are subject to a wide range of afflictions.

In early Hebrew belief God dwelt in the heavens making contact with the earth on hilltops¹ on which at times he descended. God, of course, can make contact with man, since God and man have reason in common. It was not given to any and every man to hear the voice of God, only the select few whom God will choose to listen to his words and hear his message, and perform such service as he may require.

Just as gesture language preceded articulate speech, so the idea that a God could make his will known to mankind by signs was a belief widely current in the early world. We are familiar with the omens to which the Greeks and Romans had recourse in their anxiety to read the divine mind. The religious practices of the Babylonians and Assyrians took significant account of signs and developed a whole science of liver-reading and of the spread of oil on water. Joseph's cup, which found a lodging in Benjamin's sack, is thought to have been used for the latter form of divination. "When the King of Babylon stood at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination, he shook up the arrows, he consulted the teraphim, he looked in the liver. In his right hand was the divination for Jerusalem."² Although the Hebrews made use of omens and signs and the casting of lots—as witness the ephod, the Urim and Thummim, and the teraphim to all of which there are repeated references—they did not find them sufficient for their needs, however satisfactory they might prove for Gentile nations. It was Israel's claim, made from the first and continued down the ages, that the nation stood

¹ Exod. xviii. 5; xxiv. 13, 15, 16, 18; Deut. ix. 15; xxxiii. 2; 1 Kings xix. 8; Ps. ii. 6; iii. 4; xv. 1; xxiv. 3; xliii. 3; lxviii. 15, 16; civ. 32; cxxi. 1; Heb. iii. 3, etc.

² Ezek. xxi. 21.

on a special personal relationship with its God. This is important for in respect of no other nation of the early world was the personal element in divine intercourse with man so prominent. It is true that amongst other nations their kings were held to be in a specially privileged position and occupied the throne because of divine favour. There is even the implied suggestion that the king by virtue of his position has a claim to divine favour and protection. Otherwise in general the gap between the divine and human was a wide and deep one. The Hebrews had no such gulf between them and their God. Their dealings with him through individuals specially singled out for the purpose, were personal and intimate. So much is this the case that even when their early writings speak of Yahweh making contact with his people through the agency of an angel the reader is made to feel that the angel is merely Yahweh himself in disguise. It was only later that the increasing sense of the transcendence of God made the recognition of a separate and distinct intermediary inevitable. But at Peniel Jacob wrestled with an angel and his name was changed to Israel for he had striven with God and with man and had prevailed.¹ Also of the same character is Joshua's interview with the captain of Yahweh's host near Jericho. The angel here gives the same instruction to Joshua, that Yahweh himself gave to Moses. "Put off thy shoe from off thy foot, for the place whereon thou standest is holy."²

Nothing but a feeling of personal contact with the divine, of verbal instruction from on high, of voice answering voice, could possibly satisfy such religious conceptions and aspirations as stirred so profoundly the soul of the Hebrew. It is no doubt true that the God of a people must reflect their national characteristics. To early seafarers their God must be a God of the sea. Neptune would have been incomprehensible as the God of a tribe dwelling in the Russian steppes. Christianity with its appeal to love and forbearance, to weakness and long-suffering could hardly have taken its rise save amongst a people downtrodden and oppressed. The Hebrew God, then, had to be one who in their eyes answered their needs and responded to their

¹ Gen. xxxii. 24 ff.

² Joshua v. 13.

innate qualities. The God of the Hebrews must be one with whom his people could enter into negotiations and make bargains. Such an intimate association could never have developed from, or have remained for long satisfied with, the indefiniteness and obscurity of omen communication alone, for omen reading in substance amounts to the god either nodding his head in agreement to a proposition, or shaking it in disapproval—no more than that. Not only did the Israelites discover, or perhaps re-discover their God when in Egypt, or rather were found by him, but with their own expanding religious sensibilities they became conscious of attributes in him which increased and widened with the years, until they realized him as supreme in the universe and its creator. They also recognized in him the inspirer of their moral impulses and the regulator of their thoughts and actions.

The Hebrew thus turned away, readily and eagerly enough, from dumb manifestations of the divine interest in him to seek direct association with his God. But in the sphere of personal intercourse there are also forms of communication which do not involve speech. Man's mind is subject to experiences which come to him enveloped in an aura of mystery which suggests divine interposition. Thus the dream which transports man to other scenes and surroundings may seem to him to be given for his guidance if only he could interpret it aright. But it is not given to everyone to interpret dreams, and wide is the range of the dream literature in the Semitic world. On one of the flyleaves or a Samaritan manuscript in this Library there is a register of lucky and unlucky dreams; and in their modern literature the Samaritans claim to have been inspired to action on several occasions by dreams. I need not labour the point. We all know that dreambooks can be purchased in bookshops and at bookstalls round about us.

The vision is a stage beyond the dream in the direction of the divine. It may be said to begin where the dream ends. A dream may come to anyone, a vision comes only to minds specially attuned to receive it. And here we make contact with the prophet. We realize that in the case of a vision God selects the man. The vision appears to be an infusion of the divine mind which overawes and grips man's soul and cannot be gainsaid or

forgotten—as in the call of Isaiah,¹ or in Paul's vision on the Damascus road.² The intermingling of the divine and the human, which mankind recognized in the vision, was bound to have a disturbing effect on the mind subjected to it, and could be expected to produce strange psychic phenomena. The writer of the Book of Job has dealt with the dread effect on man of contact with the divine, toying with the subject in poetic fancy. Eliphaz the Temanite has come to the tortured and despairing Job, and hints that he has a message to him from the Almighty, who appeared to him in a vision of the night. The passage is one of the most uncanny in the Old Testament.

Now a word was secretly brought to me
 And mine ear received a whisper thereof.
 With disquietings from the visions of the night
 When a deep sleep falleth on man.
 Fear came upon me and shuddering,
 Which caused dread in all my bones,
 Then a Spirit passed swiftly before my face,
 The hair of my flesh bristled up,
 It stopped—but I could not discern the appearance thereof.
 An apparition was before mine eyes,
 There was silence, and I heard a voice saying
 Shall mortal man be more just than God?
 Shall a man be more pure than his Maker?³

Trance and ecstasy were the most widely recognized symptoms of divine possession. The classical example of this is Balaam's own account of himself "seeing the vision of the Almighty, falling down and having his eyes open",⁴ and Muhammad's ecstatic trances are well known. Ecstasy, with its accompaniments is consequent on divine possession of the individual, not *vice versa*. It is not because a man is so constituted by nature that the divine emanation is enabled to enter, that he becomes a prophet. Yet a curious development in mental outlook is the conception that the divine influx can be invited or induced, as if divine possession were dependent on, and must await, man's pleasure—at least after the initial experience, when it is allowed that God makes the choice. Thus Elisha calls for a minstrel to arouse the ecstatic state so that the hand of the Lord could

¹ Isa. vi. 1 ff.

² Acts ix. 3.

³ Job iv. 12 f.

⁴ Num. xxiv. 16.

come upon him,¹ and the prophets of Baal at Carmel cut themselves with knives with a similar object in mind.²

The Hebrew prophet was essentially a man chosen by God to act as his intermediary between him and man. As God's will and interest ranged widely over all the activities of his people, the task of the prophet was not confined to one particular channel. The idea of prediction as the main function of the prophet which lurks in our use of the word is founded on a misconception, fostered largely, no doubt, by the Greek word from which it is derived. It is true that at times, they uttered predictions, as when Isaiah rebuked Shebna and foretold his fate,³ as when Jeremiah prophesied Hananiah's death,⁴ as when Amos predicted the bitter future of Amaziah and his family,⁵ and many more. But in all cases in which this phenomenon occurs, they are the so-called signs or tokens to prove that the speaker is a true prophet. He who would speak in Yahweh's name must submit proof of the possession of divine power. He must be able in effect to say "Sun stand thou still upon Gibeon, and thou moon in the valley of Ajalon. And the sun stood still and the moon stayed."⁶ Prediction of coming events was an obvious sign, since it was beyond the power of the ordinary man to forecast the future, and time would bring verification, or otherwise.

Such proofs offered freely by the prophets are adduced to support a claim which in each case is being challenged, or even derided either openly or by implication. The essentials of a prophet demanded the most careful scrutiny for the consequences of accepting and following out the message and consequent instruction and guidance, could be, and often were, very grave. Even the coming to pass of signs was not to be accepted as a sure proof in itself. You may recall the words in Deuteronomy, "If there arise in the midst of thee a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and he give thee a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder come to pass whereof he speaks unto thee saying 'Let us go after other Gods which thou hast not known and let us serve them': thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet or unto that dreamer of dreams: for the Lord your God testeth you to know

¹ 2 Kings iii. 15.

⁴ Jer. xxviii. 16 f.

² 1 Kings xviii. 28.

⁵ Amos vii. 9.

³ Isa. xxii. 15 f.

⁶ Joshua x. 12 f.

whether ye love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”¹ An additional test is the nature of the message which the intelligence of the hearer should enable him either to accept or reject. But in general the false prophet could not offer to the incredulous signs and wonders which would be fulfilled. The true prophet had the advantage of Yahweh working in and through him to bring all things to pass. Moses and Aaron had to convince Pharaoh by a series of wonders that their requests were supported by a divine power such as no king could hope to withstand.² Samuel, to convince the people, calls on Yahweh to send a thunderstorm in the middle of the wheat harvest³—an unheard-of thing. “As snow in summer and as rain in harvest, so honour is not seemly for the fool” says the Book of Proverbs.⁴ You remember, too, when Isaiah was urging Ahaz to ignore the Syro-Ephraimite coalition, how he invites him to “ask a sign of the Lord thy God: ask it either in the depth or in the height above.”⁵ The prophets themselves usually determined the signs they offered. Here was, indeed, a challenge to Ahaz which none but a true prophet could have ventured to make. We are not surprised that Ahaz, fearful of being convinced against his will, declined.

The sign, then, is not of the essence of prophecy, but merely one of its externals, and prediction was not one of its necessary functions. Another widely spread view is that the prophet was a proclaimer, one who spoke before assemblies, maintaining that that is the proper meaning of *προφήτης*. It is in this sense it is urged that in Plato, *Phaedrus*, the poets are called the prophets of the Muses *Μουσῶν προφήται*.⁶ Here perhaps is the origin of the widespread conviction that true prophecy throughout the whole period of Israelite history had one common aim and purpose. This aim has been variously interpreted, but commonly it has been held to be to supply spiritual guidance to the people, and in general uphold the religion of the nation, evolving in the process the highest moral values. Their function has been summarized in the words “to act as the conscience of the nation” or “to preserve, extend, and spiritualize the Law”. This view has been

¹ Deut. xiii. 1 f.² Exod. vii. 1 ff.³ 1 Sam. xii. 16 f.⁴ Prov. xxvi. 1.⁵ Isa. vii. 10 f.⁶ *Phaed.* 262 D.

neatly epitomized in the saying that prophecy was the heart-throb of Hebrew religion.

The aim of Hebrew prophecy as thus defined is admittedly a lofty one—one designed to promote the highest ideals of humanity. Yet to what extent is this view justified? Whilst raising the aim of prophecy to great ethical heights, it has also limited the scope of its function. There is no *a priori* reason why the servants whom Yahweh selected for divine possession should all be assigned the same common task. It would not be easy, e.g. to put Moses, Samuel, Elijah, Amos, and Deutero-Isaiah in the one category of spiritualizers of the Law without some ingenious dialectic and much juggling. We are apt to overlook the fact that when we look back up the path of history, as it leads down the ages, we find that the New Testament stands between us and the Old. The shadow of the New Testament falls on the earlier writings, and whilst we may permit that shadow to affect our outlook as far back as the time when the Hebrew nation became an ecclesia, we should not suffer it to affect our view of the years that lie beyond. It is our New Testament point of view which makes us restrict the *nebhī'im* (or prophets) to the narrow class of spiritualizers of the Law and guardians of the national conscience. Nor ought we to place them at the end of a process of evolution beginning with the lowest forms of divination—forms which the healthy body of Hebrew religion outgrew and rejected one after the other—until it rose to highest things. There is abundant evidence that prophecy and divination existed side by side and were in evidence in all ages.

Are there then any distinguishing features, any common elements in the prophecy of different periods, as we know it, in the deeds and writings of the prophets of which we have knowledge. There are at least two features which have either been overlooked or not sufficiently stressed, neither of which deals with the specific function or task of the prophet. Both deal with the *occasion* for his selection. Firstly, there is a specific task of danger and difficulty affecting the fate of the nation. Secondly, almost invariably there is a theophany at the time of the "call" of the prophet. The fact that there is a theophany at all shows the supreme importance of the task as well as its danger, and

magnitude. Obviously God does not manifest himself to man in a theophany unless for very special reasons. It is not a casual every day happening. We will take some instances. You will recall Yahweh's appearance to Moses out of the midst of a burning bush at Mount Horeb. To Moses was assigned the task from which he shrank, of facing Pharaoh and bringing forth the children of Israel out of Egypt.¹ Or again take the case of Elijah. In the midst of Elijah's ministry in the northern kingdom, when his life was sought by Jezebel he took refuge at Mount Horeb and there in the cave where he lodged he experienced a theophany.

"Behold Yahweh passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains and brake in pieces the rocks before Yahweh, but Yahweh was not in the wind : and after the wind a rumbling but Yahweh was not in the rumbling : ² and after the rumbling a fire : but Yahweh was not in the fire, and after the fire a still small voice and it was so when Elijah heard it that he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave." ³

This was no ordinary thunderstorm. Yahweh had come to hold converse with Elijah. The wind, the rumbling and the fire remind us of Ezekiel's vision by the Cheber when Yahweh's hand was upon him, "I looked and behold a stormy wind came out of the north, a great cloud with a fire unfolding itself".⁴ Similarly Daniel's vision bursts upon him with the noise of the four winds of heaven breaking forth upon the great Sea, and he was soon to behold the Ancient of Days, whose throne was fiery flames and the wheels thereof of burning fire.⁵ To Elijah the wind, thunder and lightning were not Yahweh, but his forerunners. He follows them, "and after the fire a still small voice". Yahweh had come to him in person, and Elijah must go forth to meet his God with his face hid in his mantle lest he gaze on him and perish. The significance of the theophany is that Elijah is to be sent on a dangerous mission which included the anointing of Hazael to be

¹ Exod. iii. 1 f.

² *ra'ash* rattling of war chariots in Jeremiah (xlvii. 3), the jumping wheels of chariots in Nahum (iii. 2) and the stamping of horses' feet in Job (xxx. 24).

³ 1 Kings xix. 10 f.

⁴ Ezek. i. 4.

⁵ Dan. vii. 2 f.

king over Syria,¹ and later, through Elisha, Jehu to be king over Israel.² Of the gravity and danger of this task there can be no two opinions. It involved the fomenting of rebellions in both these countries and the overthrow of their governments. Micaiah Ben Imlah, a prophet of less note, had a vision amounting to a theophany which he recounted to Ahab and Jehoshaphat as they sat on their thrones at the entrance of the gate of Samaria. He saw Yahweh as a king on his throne with his courtiers around him. To him was assigned the dangerous task of foretelling Ahab's death to his face.³ Similarly Isaiah's vision heralded a dangerous mission not to proclaim ethical monotheism at street corners, where the danger would have been practically non-existent, but on a dangerous mission to the Northern Kingdom where part of his prophetic activity appears to have been exercised.⁴

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel experienced theophanies. Jeremiah sees Yahweh putting forth his hand and touching his mouth to consecrate him for the dangerous task of being Yahweh's mouthpiece in denouncing the nations for their wickedness, shown in their neglect of him.⁵ Similarly Yahweh speaks to Ezekiel, who is overcome by the vision of his God in awful splendour,⁶ and Ezekiel, too, is fortified for the dangerous task assigned to him from which he shrinks back dismayed. We can now appreciate the significance of Amos's retort to Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, "I was no prophet, nor prophet's son, but an herdman and a dresser of sycomore trees, and Yahweh *took me from following the flock*, and Yahweh said unto me, 'Go, prophesy unto my people Israel'".⁷ There must have been here a theophany, the scene the lonely hillside: the Hebrew shepherd alone with his God. Micah too, must have had some experience of the divine which left a deep impress upon him. "But I truly am filled with power by the spirit of Yahweh and of might to declare unto Jacob his transgression and unto Israel his sin."⁸

It has been said that although prophecy began with Moses, with Samuel it appears in all its splendour. Samuel you will

¹ 1 Kings xix. 15.

³ 1 Kings xxii. 19.

⁶ Ezek. ii. 3.

² 1 Kings xix. 16; 2 Kings ix. 1 ff.

⁴ Isa. vi. 9 f.

⁷ Amos vii. 14.

⁵ Jer. i. 9 f.

⁸ Mic. iii. 8.

remember was visited by Yahweh when but a youth in the temple at Shiloh. He was called thus early to a great task the importance of which it is difficult to overestimate. The advent of Samuel found the Hebrew tribes from Dan to Beersheba and beyond, occupying the hill-country with the Canaanites subdued, but suffering from the incursions of that well-equipped and remorseless foe, the Philistines. The tribes formed two factions, the South or Judahite group and the North or Israelite. That these two groups had separate individualities and variant forms of worship seems to be well established. Before Samuel's day in the period of the Judges the first stirrings towards union of the tribes as a whole were manifest when expeditions against them by Canaanites and Midianites especially led to joint action for the time being. There can be no doubt that the bond which united them was their worship of the same God and the root cause of the disagreement between the two groups, the diversity in the forms of worship employed. Samuel appeared at a time when union was in the air and when the relentless pressure of the Philistines forced it to the front. We are told he was recognized throughout the length and breadth of the land as a prophet. "And all Israel from Dan even to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord."¹ Although himself an Ephraimite, and thus originating from the Israelite group of tribes, he exercised leadership and consequently judicial functions in the southern group as well. He went from year to year "in circuit to Bethel and Gilgal and Mizpah, and his return was to Ramah".² His sons, Joel and Abijah, were judges in Beersheba.³ We see the political union of the tribes being forged before our eyes, and when it came to the setting up of a monarchy, Samuel not only anointed the king, but framed the constitution for the united kingdom, thus we are told: "Then Samuel told the people the *mishpat* of the kingdom and wrote it in a book, and laid it up before the Lord."⁴ *Mishpat* here is better translated legal code or "constitution". On the political side he thus achieved a great work and on the religious side he was no less successful. In the days when Samuel

¹ 1 Sam. iii. 20.

³ 1 Sam. viii. 1 f.

² 1 Sam. vii. 15 f.

⁴ 1 Sam. x. 25.

was a child, we learn that the word of Yahweh was scarce, and there was no "open vision".¹ But whatever this meant it fell to Samuel to publish Yahweh's name abroad. He it was who prepared the way for the Jerusalem temple. It is foreshadowed where we are told, in the second chapter of the first book of Samuel, that a man of God came to Shiloh to Eli and gave him this message from Yahweh. "I will raise me up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind: and I will build him a sure house: and he shall walk before mine anointed for ever. And it shall come to pass that every one that is left in thine house shall come and bow down to him for a piece of silver and a loaf of bread and shall say, Put me, I pray thee, into one of the priest's offices that I may eat a morsel of bread."² This is intended to be a foreshadowing of the centring of worship in the temple at Jerusalem involving the abandonment of Yahweh's former shrine at Shiloh when the priests of other shrines will have to make their way to the new temple at Jerusalem to get a post and earn their living. Whilst the *political* unification of the tribes was rendered not merely desirable but imperative, because of the Philistine threat, the religious unification must have been a task of enormous difficulty and great delicacy. There are no scruples so difficult to overcome as religious scruples, and although the "word" of Yahweh Sebaoth was precious in those days, there were in existence presumably other "words". Yet we have some inkling of how Samuel faced the difficult situation. He gathered round him men inspired by the same ideals and with the same attachment to the religion of Yahweh Sebaoth. They were the "sons of the prophets". They shared in some mysterious way in the prophetic spirit which possessed Samuel. It was a recognized phenomenon in that age—as can be gathered from the Book of Numbers.

¹ 1 Sam. iii. 1. The Hebrew translated "open vision" is *hāzôn nīphrās* which really means "widespread vision" or may possibly but doubtfully be "mass vision". If the former it might imply that the revelation of him had not been sufficiently known. Yahweh's writ so to speak, did not run through the length and breadth of the land. If the latter it might imply a form of "mass vision" such as was found amongst the prophetic bands, "the sons of the prophets".

² 1 Sam. ii. 35 f.

There we are told of the seventy elders with whom the Lord *shared* the prophetic spirit of Moses, and who for the time being prophesied.¹ These “sons of the prophets” were presumably men who, so to speak, caught the infection since in Samuel there was a superabundant amount, as evidenced also in the case of Moses. In the case of Elijah, who likewise had attached to him bands of “sons of prophets”, the divine emanation even affected his garment. It was sufficiently strong in his mantle to part the waters of the Jordan.² Mass psychism or hysteria is as inexplicable as it is real. That the mass prophecy of the “sons of the prophets” was also infectious or contagious, was evidenced in the case of Saul who when he mingled with them exhibited the same symptoms as they did.³ They formed in effect a *béth dīn* or law court. It may be that the prophet who was at their head, and who shared with them his prophetic spirit, was known as their “father” or Ab, which might explain the cryptic, “And who is their father?” It was perhaps in this assembly that the Torah, as we have it, was shaped, but a consideration of that question would lead us away from our subject. It appears to be within the bounds of possibility also that Samuel may have employed the “sons of the prophets” to spread the knowledge of Yahweh Sebaoth of Shiloh throughout the tribes of Israel. They may have performed wonders in the name of Yahweh, as did the disciples of Jesus after they had received an infusion of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The necessity for proclaiming the word of Yahweh abroad in the land at this time possibly accounts also for the change of the name from *rō’eh* (seer) to *nābhī’* (prophet). Slowly no doubt, but none the less surely, Samuel with the aid of the “sons of the prophets” carried through his plans for making the worship of Yahweh Sebaoth, with which from his apprenticeship at the Shiloh temple he was thoroughly conversant, the state-worship. His plans evidently included the new Temple. The prophet Nathan gave to David a message urging David to build a house for Yahweh.⁴ Solomon carried it out.⁵ It was not given to Samuel to see the full fruits of his labours in his lifetime, but he had the knowledge that he

¹ Num. xi. 24 f.

² 2 Kings ii. 8.

³ 1 Sam. x. 10 ff.

⁴ 2 Sam. vii. 4 ff.

⁵ 1 Kings v. 5 ff.

had planted and watered well. Samuel was a great and determined national leader who took hold of the reins of government at a grave crisis in the history of the Hebrew tribes. He was essentially a man of action fulfilling a specific task set him by his God. It was a task of an entirely different character from that assigned to Moses, but Samuel was as successful in his allotted task as Moses was in his. Samuel was truly a prince of prophets, but his "prophecy" lay in action. With the hand of his God upon him he could judge the tribes of Israel, re-edit the Mosaic teaching, found a kingdom, prepare the way for a national temple, hack Agag to pieces with his own hands. What had he in common with Deutero-Isaiah save the divine inspiration? Their tasks, their methods, their results are poles apart.

I have dwelt on Samuel's task more fully hoping to make you realize that when Yahweh chose his prophets it was not to invite them to preach good sermons to backsliding Israelites, but rather for leadership in national emergencies. The task was appropriate to the age and the conditions. Let us travel the path of history a short way downwards from Samuel. The culmination of Samuel's work was seen in the union of all-Israel under one king with Jerusalem as capital. The orthodox worship of the land was that of Yahweh Sebaoth, formerly of Shiloh, now installed in a great temple in Jerusalem, his dwelling place on earth. Yahweh had entered into a fresh agreement with the whole people. But not for long could the conflicting interests of north and south be reconciled. At the death of Solomon, north and south fell apart. Samuel's work was undone. Yahweh Sebaoth abandoned his earthly home and the statutes, commandments, judgements, and testimonies according to that which is written in the Law of Moses¹—which David charged Solomon his son to keep—ceased to have the same binding force and the same interpretation in the north. The ten Israelite tribes and their new ruler reverted to the pre-Samuel worship of Yahweh, not necessarily that of Shiloh. Here there was, indeed, a national crisis, the gravity of which it would be difficult to overestimate. If Yahweh had need of prophets—it was never more so than now. Judah remained outwardly faithful, and both the national capital

¹ 1 Kings ii. 3.

and the national shrine were in her territory—or at least that of allied Benjamin. It is doubtful whether any Samuel could now have gathered up the broken threads. But in a supreme effort to restore union, political and religious, prophet after prophet arose in Judah. The greatest stumbling block to re-union was the separate kingdom in the north, and the prophets directed their energies to the task of overthrowing the political power in the north and setting on the throne an adherent of Yahweh Sebaoth who would lead the north back to Jerusalem.

As our conception of the task of the prophet is bound up with our reading of what happened at this time, let us examine the situation a little more closely. The attempt to restore political and religious union between north and south was a task entered upon from the time of the disruption and it was fraught with serious consequences for the Northern Kingdom. Its government became the prey of intrigues and revolutions involving assassinations and continual changes of dynasty. There is no secret made of the instigator of this state of unrest. Judah was the culprit. There was, of course, open war between Rehoboam and Jeroboam as long as Rehoboam lived. That was to be expected. Judah could hardly have looked upon the Northern Kingdom at this time as other than a defection of tribes from constituted authority—a revolt which had to be quelled. Rehoboam's grandson Asa even went to the extreme of enlisting the support of Damascus to foil the new kingdom.¹ See how active Judah was! How long was the family of Jeroboam permitted to exercise power? His son Nadab had barely time to seat himself on the throne (he reigned less than two years) before he was overthrown by an upstart named Baasha. Whence came the stimulus and backing of Baasha's revolt? Listen to the words of Yahweh to him, sent by the hand of the prophet Jehu the son of Hanani. "For as much as I exalted thee out of the dust and made thee leader (*nagīd*) over my people Israel, and thou hast walked in the way of Jeroboam", etc.,² concluding with the same curse on him as had been fastened on Jeroboam. The plain interpretation of these words is that Yahweh through emissaries (of whom the prophet Jehu was seemingly one) had fomented the rebellion of

¹ 1 Kings xv. 18 ff.

² 1 Kings xvi. 7.

this Baasha, a mere commoner, and crowned it with success. Yahweh had raised him from the dust and made him a leader (not a king). Baasha had no qualifications for kingship beyond his success as the leader of a successful revolt. It was evidently expected of him that he would lead back Israel, i.e. the Northern Kingdom, to Jerusalem. But Baasha, having tasted power, was evidently not disposed to relinquish it and preferred to be ruler in the north rather than be demoted to become a subject of Judah's king in a re-united land. The wine of success had gone to his head and it entailed the grievous curse laid upon him. Baasha's house did not long endure. His son, Elah, had but two years of reign when he was assassinated by his servant Zimri, when drinking himself drunk in the house of his chamberlain.¹ Intrigue followed intrigue. Two rivals to Zimri arose in Tibni and Omri and the people who followed Omri prevailed. Tibni was probably the man Judah's emissaries were backing. Had it been Omri he would no doubt have been cursed with the curse of Jeroboam for disappointing Judah's hopes just as Baasha was cursed. Omri founded Samaria and the strength of the fortress no doubt gave security to the new dynasty.² Even with the house of Omri in a more stable state, the insidious attacks of Judah on the Israelite monarchy were continued through the intrigues of Elijah and Elisha. We have already seen how Elijah was called to his task of overthrowing the government of Israel (wherever Israel is spoken of at this time it means the Northern Kingdom as distinct from Judah). It was desperate work. He was driven from pillar to post, hiding by the brook Cherith, or taking secret refuge with the widow of Sarepta. Ahab had sought him far and wide (to ensure the withdrawal of the curse of no rain on the land). Ahab was so hotfoot against him that he sought him even in other kingdoms, making them testify on oath that he was not within their borders, thus making it clear that he would have demanded Elijah's extradition if he had been found harbouring amongst them.³ Ahab's first words on meeting Elijah are significant of his attitude. "Is it thou, thou troubler of Israel?" Elijah in reply makes it clear that it was Ahab's departure from the commandments of Yahweh which was

¹ 1 Kings xvi. 9 f.

² 1 Kings xvi. 9.

³ 1 Kings xviii. 10.

responsible for the national misfortunes.¹ And Elijah's instruction from Yahweh, following the theophany at Horeb, was to strike again at political authority by fostering rebellion, not only in Israel, but also in Damascus. It was a twofold revolution with Syria included—no doubt to prevent Ben Hadad, who had signed an agreement with Ahab after their indecisive struggle, from coming to his assistance when the revolt in Israel broke out.² Ahab was given by Elijah abundant proof of the power of Yahweh of Jerusalem, without avail, and on him too was fastened by Elijah the curse of Jeroboam.³ Read a little farther on.

When Jehoram, Ahab's son and Jehoshaphat of Judah were joined with Edom in an expedition against Mesha' of Moab and the expedition was faring badly in the Edomite desert, the need for divine aid was felt. Jehoram expresses the belief that Yahweh is at the back of their misfortunes and has enticed the three kings in order to deliver them into the hands of Moab. He recognizes, of course, that he does not stand well with Yahweh. Jehoshaphat is loyal to Yahweh and repudiates the suggestion, asking if there is not a prophet of Yahweh available whom he can consult. He is reminded of the existence of Elisha and the three kings "go down to him". Elisha's reception of them is what might be expected of a fanatical opponent of the Northern Kingdom. He turns to Jehoram. "What have I to do with thee? Get thee to the prophets of thy father and the prophets of thy mother." But Jehoram reiterates this accusation of Yahweh, and implies it is Yahweh's prophet who must be called in question. Elisha is filled with scorn. "As Yahweh Sebaoth liveth, before whom I stand, surely were it not that I respect the presence of Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, I would not look toward thee nor see thee."⁴ Then later we have the command to Elisha to pour the vial of oil on the head of Jehu thus starting the rebellion which led to the downfall of Jehoram and the extermination of Ahab's house.⁵ For a time it looked as if in his zeal for Yahweh of which he boasted, Jehu was presented with a great opportunity of achieving that re-union on which Yahweh's emissaries had set their hearts, for in addition to slaying Joram of Israel, he slew also Ahaziah of

¹ 1 Kings xviii. 17 f.

² 1 Kings xix. 15 ff.

³ 1 Kings xxi. 21 ff.

⁴ 1 Kings iii. 4 ff.

⁵ 2 Kings ix. 1 ff.

Judah leaving both thrones vacant. Athaliah, mother of Ahaziah and daughter of Omri, evidently looked upon it as a heaven-sent opportunity to annex Judah to the Northern Kingdom for she promptly destroyed the Judan seedroyal—with the single exception of Joash, her grandson. He slipped through her fingers to become the centre of Jehoiada, the High Priest's, party, and eventual king. To celebrate the escape of Judah from the fate that threatened her, the first thing Jehoiada did after he achieved success was to make a covenant between Yahweh and the king and people that they should be Yahweh's people.¹

And so the tale goes on. Move and counter-move between Judah and Israel and not always to the advantage of Judah. Prophets continued to labour to effect a re-union on which the whole life-blood of the Hebrew nation depended. Of many of these prophets we know nothing, but of the eighth-century prophets Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah of Jerusalem we have, although probably not in original form, records of some utterances and some indication of activities.

Amaziah, the High Priest of Bethel in the Northern Kingdom, accused, not without very good reason, Amos of conspiracy against the House of Israel. He seeks to have him expelled from the country and warns him "O thou seer, go flee thee away into the land of Judah and there eat bread and prophesy there". Amos reminds him that Yahweh had taken him from the flock to prophesy to his people Israel (the Northern Kingdom).² Amos in some of his recorded prophecies appeals to the Northern Kingdom to return to the worship of Yahweh of Jerusalem, Yahweh Sebaoth, "For thus saith Yahweh to the house of Israel, seek ye me and ye shall live, seek not Bethel, enter not into Gilgal, and pass not to Beersheba. Seek Yahweh and ye shall live lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph".³ The golden calf worship which professed to be a worship of Yahweh he would not accept. "Though ye offer me your burnt offerings and meal offerings I will not accept them",⁴ and so on. So it is with Hosea. There is sorrow not unmingled with bitterness in Hosea's appeal to the Northern Kingdom. "Israel hath behaved

¹ 2 Kings xi. 1 ff.

³ Amos v. 4 f.

² Amos vii. 10 f.

⁴ Amos v. 22.

himself stubbornly, as a stubborn heifer.”¹ “Ephraim is the cake not turned.”² He is the silly dove without intelligence.³ He is joined to idols, let him alone,⁴ and so forth. But he crowns all with a wonderful passage of tender pleading for Israel’s return to reunion with Judah.

“O Israel return unto Yahweh, thy God, for thou hast fallen by thy iniquity. Take with you words and return unto Yahweh. Say unto him, take away all iniquity and accept that which is good. So will we render as bullocks the offerings of our lips. Ashur will no more save us : neither will we say any more to the works of our hands. ‘Ye are our Gods’ for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy.”⁵

Utterances revealing their efforts to restore the state of things before the disruption can similarly be gathered from Micah and Isaiah of Jerusalem, and we need not enlarge on them here.

The task of the Hebrew prophets from the time of the disruption to the fall of the Northern Kingdom and the passing into exile of its tribes, was to act the part of spies, intriguers, subversive agents, revolutionaries in the Northern Kingdom on behalf of Judah, or rather on behalf of Yahweh Sebaoth of Jerusalem. They took their lives in their hands. They ran the risks that are inseparable from such dangerous tasks. As the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us, the prophets “had trial of mockings and scourgings of bonds and imprisonment. They were stoned. They were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute afflicted, tormented . . . they wandered in deserts and in mountains and in dens and caves of the earth.”⁶ Such was their fortune or rather their fate—a fate that might be deemed not inappropriate even in modern times for subversive agents and all enemies to the safety of a state. Many were the tasks to which God called his prophets. It was only when the Jewish nation passed into exile, and the nation became an ecclesia that the moral aspect of worship became prominent. His prophets had then a different task. But with that we have at the moment no concern. Our interest and our task close with the early Hebrew prophet.

¹ Hos. iv. 16.

² Hos. vii. 9.

³ Hos. vii. 11.

⁴ Hos. iv. 17.

⁵ Hos. xiv. 1 f.

⁶ Heb. xi. 36 ff.