

# Prophecy

Prophecy is forth-telling, not foretelling. Prophets tell forth a God's-eye-view on events in their own day.

In 1928 (*The Word of God and the Word of Man*), Karl Barth said that God says 'No' to us before God says 'Yes' to us. Barth must have had the prophets in mind.

Prophets are protesters. Protest is against not just social and political structures but against the fundamental alienation we might feel: the alienation, or separation, from any order which might be capable of affirming our being. Expulsion from the Garden of Eden and expulsion from the womb have much in common. Prophets register this alienation with regret – the same regret that poets often feel – which is why prophets cannot resist poetic language that is sometimes at war with itself. (See the writings and interviews of Jacques Derrida for what might be thought of as prophecy produced in the post-Holocaust age.) Prophecy is meant to be difficult, because it is difficult being a prophet. Prophecy expresses what it is like to be a prophet, just as scholarship expresses what it is like to be a scholar.

There is something called the *trimunus complex* – the collection of three roles or offices that characterise Jesus: prophet, priest and king. It is right that 'prophet' is listed first because a prophet knows failure, which shapes what sort of priest and what sort of king Jesus is, namely a priest who fails in the eyes of the world and a king who fails in the eyes of the world. By the time of Jesus, the failure of prophets is proverbial. What is it he says? 'No prophet is accepted in his hometown' (Lk 4:24).

Even if they never changed anything, the prophets impressed enough people for their words to be copied down. Prophets also impressed other prophets including Jesus, who was especially fond of the Isaiah scroll. Prophecies were added to. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah were added to.

Prophecies were not usually deleted, which was why Jesus was almost murdered for not reading the whole sentence from Isaiah in Luke 4.

In Luke 4:16-21, Jesus stands up in his home synagogue in Nazareth and reads from Isaiah 61:1f:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour...

Jesus applies this prophecy to himself and his ministry by saying, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing', and thereby daring to identify himself as the

long-awaited christ (king). Even more scandalous was his decision not to read the words that follow 'to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour', namely, 'and the day of vengeance of our God'. This explains why 'the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him', when Jesus sits down without finishing this sentence. By not stoking political agitation in the customary fashion (readings in the synagogue were much longer than this), Jesus puts himself in danger. He makes clear that people outside Judaism are not targets of God's vengeance but beloved children as much as Jews are. In this environment of hostility which culminates in the congregation trying to murder Jesus, it is odd for verse 22 to be translated as: 'All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth' (NRSV). Instead, Joachim Jeremias offers this amplified translation: 'They protested with one voice and were furious, because he only spoke about [God's year of] mercy [and omitted the words about vengeance].' This is cited in David Bosch's *Transforming Mission*.

If prophecy is not about predicting the future but picturing current events as God sees them, what is meant by saying that a prophecy is 'fulfilled'? It is to put words into action, to live the message, and to adapt the idea, just as Jesus applied a prophecy in a way that made sense to him.

The Isaiah scroll is a collection of collections – First Isaiah (Proto-Isaiah) chs 1-39; Second Isaiah (Deutero-Isaiah) chs 40-55; and Third Isaiah (Trito-Isaiah) chs 56-66. Even First Isaiah contains later elements, e.g. 10:10-12, chs 24-27, and possibly 2:2-5 and 11:1-9. The events covered by First Isaiah happened between 767 and 698 BCE. His prophetic calling occurred in 740 BCE, according to 6:1. Second Isaiah is situated in exile in Babylon and written about 553-539 BCE. Third Isaiah appears to be post-exilic (after 539 BCE), but could have been well before the exile (before 586 BCE) because these final 11 chapters contain no reference to Babylon and refer to faithless Israelites – a situation that always marked Israel's existence in Palestine before and after the exile.

First Isaiah places distance between his experiences and his poetry. Unlike Jeremiah, he does not allow his experience, however emotional, to break out like a scream, but consciously transforms it into poems. Isaiah's prophetic oracles may be brief but they are far from ecstatic, spontaneous outbursts.

As with many biblical prophets, First Isaiah has a vision of the world as it might become and transforms the vision into a coherent poetic universe. Although there is no evidence to help us reconstruct how these poems were assembled, the following theme is noteworthy. The poet contemplates an actual pilgrimage of the Israelite tribes to a liturgical festival in Jerusalem (possibly Passover or Pentecost). A variety of tribes, perhaps with a range of different accents and clothes, converge and ascend the mountain in response to the allure of the sanctuary where the Law is read and the Word of God proclaimed. Crucially, peace and harmony mingle within this diversity.

The visionary nature of this view comes to the fore as the mountain grows and stands out in a landscape of mountains. Nations converge and flow together like streams. The children of the house of Jacob ascend the mountain. Peace reigns, not imposed by arms but purely by attraction to the Law and to the Word. (This idea of peace is found in a similar vision in Micah 4:1-4.)

By distinguishing between the Word of God and the Law of God, First Isaiah adds status to his writing (which was designed to be read out). The Law was intended to be taught at the heart of community life rather than collect dust as an abstract legal code, but it was fixed as the contents of the first five books of Scripture. The problem was how to bring authoritative (divine) speech to bear on the changing needs of the times. The Word of God was seen as a way of providing instruction that was more directly relevant than the writings associated with Moses but with a comparable authority. A similar process is found in synagogues, churches and mosques, in which reading from Scriptures is felt to be insufficient to meet the needs of communities. The idea of the Word of God allows a bridge to be formed between what God said in the past and what God is saying through people today. This concept is shared by prophets and preachers. Prophecy and preaching are equally 'forth-telling', not fore-telling. They give a God's-eye-view of current events rather than predicting the future. Attempts to describe visions of the future are meant to draw out the consequences of faith (or lack of faith) in God in the present.

Second Isaiah is perhaps the greatest poet of the Hebrew Bible. This is achieved through technique – making the most of the Hebrew language – and through a universal message. This universalism is the belief that Israel's role in God's mission to save the world from itself is to demonstrate God's attractive holiness through how Israel arranges its religious, political and social life. This 'ethical monotheism' originated with Judaism.

The 'Deuteronomistic History' (Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings) was written around the same time as Second Isaiah (in exile in Babylon) to answer two questions: how was Israel destroyed by Babylon, and what does this say about Israel's relationship with God? It relied on the idea in Deuteronomy that God rewards the faithful and punishes the unfaithful. As an instance of this unfaithfulness, all kings were shown to be flawed, and the very idea of kingship was presented as something grudgingly permitted by God in allowing Samuel to anoint Saul as Israel's first king. The preferred idea had been that a loose confederation of tribes, not a nation, should demonstrate their unity through ethical behaviour and monotheistic worship, both based on the Law of Moses.

Christians have traditionally interpreted the Servant of Yahweh, a favourite theme of Second Isaiah, as anticipating Jesus. An alternative interpretation that avoids anachronism is to regard the Servant as God choosing to do the job that God had given Israel to do (exemplifying ethical monotheism, which is what we later find Jesus doing in his behaviour and teaching).

In another example where interpretation needs to be done very carefully, Matthew regards Isaiah 7:14 as anticipating the mother of Jesus. In fact, in prophesying against King Ahaz, Isaiah is referring to the mother of the next King of Judah, Hezekiah. Hezekiah would remove idolatrous elements that had entered the nation's worship through his father's decision to rely on support from another nation (Assyria) instead of relying on God. After the return from exile, the Israelites felt that, spiritually and materially, they were still in exile. Now Chronicles was written with a rose-tinted view of the kings of the past and a yearning for greater action from God to restore the nation to its supposed glory days under David and Solomon. By the time the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, Jews believed that Isaiah was referring to a mother in the future who would give birth to a king (a christ) who would bring about this restoration. The Greek word for 'virgin' was used to translate the Hebrew word for 'girl' in Isaiah 7:14. This editorial decision was intended to suggest that only God could bring about the arrival of this christ. Along with most of the New Testament writers, Matthew was dependent on this Greek translation (the Septuagint).

## Second Isaiah

When it comes to poetic achievement in the Hebrew Bible, Second Isaiah is second only to Job. Christopher Hitchens liked to say, 'always pay attention to the style used'. What makes poetry great is when style matches themes, when form supports content. (The same could be said of Rembrandt's paintings.)

In Second Isaiah and Job we find universal themes of suffering, hope, and a God who is interested in not just Israel but the universe. In both books we find open-ended discussions, including in the heavenly court, and a concern with the oldest-known structures: mountains. These writers want their work to last as long as mountains by appealing to universal themes that never go out of fashion. They do it in a style that is suitably open-ended and ambiguous.

William Empson wrote *Seven Types of Ambiguity* when he was only 21 and it has haunted literary studies since it was published in 1930. Given that ambiguity cannot be pinned down it floats freely and influences successive generations of readers. Interpretations of ambiguity tend towards the infinite and, because God is infinite, the Bible would not be fit for purpose if it did not include poetry.

Leo Perdue thinks that Job was written at the same time as Second Isaiah during the exile, but we cannot be sure since Job tries to erase signs of its provenance, its origin, and it includes fictional details that throw us off the scent, such as Job sacrificing instead of having a priest offer sacrifices. Here is a portrayal of the ancestral age but the vocabulary is more recent than that. Israel is not mentioned because of the writer's desire to make this a universal story.

In Second Isaiah there are two main ambiguities. One is seen in the juxtaposition of 43:18 'Do not remember the former things', and 46:9 'Remember the former things'. There is a question mark over how Israelites are to think about their past. At the very least, the writer wants his compatriots to think about this question instead of rushing to make Babylonian customs their own and losing their God-given identity. The second ambiguity is around the servant of Yahweh. Is he the Israelite nation personified? Or is he Jesus? Or, since he is an agent of the divine, is he himself divine? The most we can say is that this is the creation of a job description that Jesus will view as his own.

Harold Bloom goes as far as to say that the history of poetry consists of poets writing for the purpose of correcting what they mistakenly thought earlier poets meant. This purpose in writing is an attempt by poets to justify their activity because their knowledge of others' poetry causes them to worry that they are not being original. Hence the title of Bloom's seminal work is *The Anxiety of Influence*. It is an open question how much the biblical historians, prophets and psalmists felt this anxiety. One way of applying Bloom's thesis across the testaments would be to say that Jesus behaved in a way that did not entirely match Second Isaiah's writings (he was not strictly silent) and that each evangelist sought in his own way to reconcile Jesus' life with material in the Septuagint.

A note on Jeremiah:

Problems with Hebrew manuscripts are often acute in the prophetic texts. This is especially noticeable in the Hebrew of Jeremiah. The Septuagint Greek version of Jeremiah is considerably shorter and arranged differently from our (medieval) Masoretic Hebrew text. This Greek version is a translation of a lost Hebrew version earlier than our own. It alerts us to the padding added to the Hebrew in the Masoretic version, which most bibles adopt. In chapter 27 Jeremiah speaks about the vessels of the temple and rebukes those prophets who say the vessels will return after their looting in 597. The Greek text stops after this realistic assessment but the later Hebrew text uses hindsight to describe the vessels' future movement from Babylon back to Jerusalem.

Prophetic books present us with words out of context. That these words seem to be a long-range forecast is a function of language itself and not the intent of the authors. Hebrew is less precise than European languages, especially in having no distinction between present and future tenses. Editors, then and now, have considerable power in creating meaning as they play with texts. In Babylon the Deuteronomistic editors may have changed (through addition rather than subtraction) the texts of Amos, Hosea and other eighth-century prophets who addressed the northern Kingdom of Israel. The texts in their current condition appear to address the southern Kingdom of Judah, because these exiled editors were hoping for a restoration of Judah. The northern kingdom had been destroyed for over a century, destroyed through inter-marriage as much as through violence. The seeds of Jewish exclusivism were sown

in exile, paradoxically alongside the universalism of Second Isaiah and Job. We can conclude that trauma affects people in different ways and shapes what they say and how they say it.

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