

of the gods, the mother goddess and the dying god. It could not be thought playful to say that this scene anticipates the mystery of a Nuptial Mass.



GOD SPOKE THROUGH THE PROPHETS

BY ROLAND POTTER, O.P.

AT every creed in the Mass we profess belief in God who spoke through the prophets. This in itself should spur us to reflection on the totality of the prophets' teachings, reflection too, in a spirit of great faith—*fides quaerens intellectum*—on the phenomenon of prophecy in general, and the mysterious facts relating to God's action in the world, the penetration of the divine and eternal into the world of sense and time. But our theology of prophecy must not be arbitrarily *a priori*; nor need we be tempted to think that it is so in St Thomas's systematic treatises *De Prophetia (de Veritate, 12; II-II, 171-174; Qdlt 7, 14 ad 5, and 16)*. St Thomas was profoundly grounded in the Scriptures and more especially in the one thing necessary in Scriptural investigation, that grasp of the doctrinal content of every book as of every word. We should strive to grasp a living, objective, reality: the utterance of God through the prophets, at a point in the history of the world, in and through contingent realities of flesh and blood. A sound theology of prophecy supposes a thorough grasp of the various prophet's teachings, thoughts, background, circumstances. They were all manner of men, crude and cultured: they had a common experience, they heard God and felt the imperious need to utter God's message: 'Thus says Jahweh. . . .'

Israel's religion was not as others, and so her 'men of God' had religious ideas and principles not as others. The 'men of God' were playthings in the hands of God, favoured by a blinding gift of faith into whose light they penetrated more and more. We have, happily, some narratives of what they experienced, individual, concrete, experiences, each serving to shed a little light on the Truth which is God. The prophets had a standpoint which is not ours; their was a Messianism to come, ours is accomplished, though not wholly. In this too they are distinct, and our task is the more difficult. A straightforward history of Israel is more easily written.

The Old Testament is not a didactic treatise, but it conveys a Revelation concerned with the needs of men in time. The agents of Revelation are great men. In this, too, the religion of Israel is not as others. There is nothing corresponding to these great religious leaders in Egypt or Babylon. The Israelites had to struggle to raise themselves over pagan surroundings. This factor of ceaseless struggle favoured the development of personalities, the great strong figures of the Old Testament.

Chief of them is Moses, who is in no category, neither a military leader, nor a king, nor a priest, nor a doctor—yet at once something of all these, and the Hebrews called him *nabhi* or *prophet*. St Thomas seems to have been fascinated by this personality, and considers 'whether Moses was more excellent than the other prophets' (*de Veritate* 12, 14). The answer is an emphatic 'yes': Moses towers over all other prophets because of the greatness of what was revealed unto him; he, like St Paul, saw in some way into the very essence of God, and 'not by riddles and figures does he see the Lord' (Numbers 12, 8). And then because of his familiarity and intimacy with God, of a kind that is perhaps only known to a few saintly mystics in the history of the Church: 'the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man is wont to speak to his friend' (Exodus, 33, 11). Nor must we forget the miracles that he wrought: 'there arose no more a prophet in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, in all the signs and wonders, which he sent by him to do in all the land of Egypt to Pharaoh. . . . ' (Deut. 34, 10, 11).

Moses marks a distinct stage in the growth of Revelation, a great turning point in the history of the world as seen by those who have the blessing of seeing the things that we see. There are moments when St Thomas steps back and looks at the whole canvas of God's action. Thus he discerns the great epochs of Creation, of Re-creation in the Incarnation, of Consummation yet to come; so too, he discerns, historically, three periods: (a) before the Law, the age of Abraham and the Patriarchs, (b) under the Law, Moses, and (c) under grace, the Law of the New Testament. In each, men looked back over the centuries to their founders or spiritual initiators. Thus Israel's prophets looked back to the Law once given to Moses, strove to inculcate its inner spirit: so nowadays the faith of the Church rests on the Revelation of Unity and Trinity once made to the Church.

Israel's religion is distinguished not only by outstanding personalities but also by charisms or the gratuitous touch, the intervention of God in the run of human experiences, and with all this a strongly historical orientation. God is a God of Hosts, Lord of all history, who has brought his chosen ones out of Egypt. God is so inaccessible in himself that men *need* a mediator and the instrument of prophecy. Moses taught of a very personal God who spoke to persons in the language of persons: 'though shalt not kill . . .', whereas in the Code of Hammurabi we read 'if a man kill . . .'. Further, Hammurabi's code is in terms of what Hammurabi says. The Mosaic code is in terms of what *God* says. . . . The very being of the Hebrew people was subordinate to a religious end which utterly surpassed its ordinary capacities, and Moses sensed this.

The personal aspect is further brought out by the prophetic consciousness. There was no capacity for abstract thought, but rather a profound pre-disposition for living knowledge of the living God. Note that God's message was addressed directly to the prophet; he is commissioned to hear God's voice (Isaias 5, 9, 22, 14; Jerem. 1, 9). He is constrained, first to receive, then to communicate the Word of Jahweh. There is no place for reflection, for slow pondering, but the sudden driving impulse of God obtains instead. Hence the very concrete character of prophetic knowledge and the prophet's vivid grasp of religious realities. The radical otherness and All-Purity which is God remains ever in the foreground of their consciousness; the classic example is in the vocation-vision of Isaias 6 (*cf.* Job, 38). The prophets appealed to no intermediaries, angels or spirits; their contact was with God directly; God as attained by faith, hope and charity.

The prophets must not be imagined as having introduced a *new* religion or doctrine of God. They were men rich in their experience of the *same* God of the Fathers, Abram, Isaac and Jacob. Their experiences varied and multiple, were all homogeneous of the One Same God who objectively manifested himself gradually more and more to those who knew and loved him.

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Let us now consider the gift of prophecy a little more closely. Prophets were supernaturally enlightened to make their utterances; God places his words in their mouths (Jerem. 1, 9): for

prophecy came not by the will of man at any time; but the holy men of God spoke, inspired by the Holy Ghost (2 Peter, 1, 21). Theologians explain that the prophet *qua* prophet acts as a rational instrument wholly dependent on God as principal Cause. Prophecy is a supernatural gift, raising and impelling man's powers to produce the God-willed effect. St Thomas carefully explains that prophecy is not habitual, but a transient impulse from God. Prophets in fact are not always endowed with the gift of prophecy; they may on occasion pray for it (Jerem. 32, 16), and they may even err if they give an answer *before* 'consulting the Lord' (2 Samuel, 7, 3). We are far from the merely natural shrewdness or uncommon capacity: 'I will put my words in his mouth and he shall speak to them all that I command him' (Deut. 18, 18).

The prophet is clearly *called by God*; there are well-known vocation narratives (Isaias 6, 1-10; Jeremias 1, 5-19; Ezechiel 2, 1-3). There may be long antecedents, as with Jeremias and St John Baptist, sanctified from their mother's womb, or there may be none at all: the call is on a sudden as with Amos (7, 14). Generally speaking, natural dispositions and qualities are hardly considered. 'Power is made perfect in infirmity' (2 Cor. 12, 9) would seem to be the rule. We remember the shrinking and hesitation of a Jeremias, Ezechiel, Jonas. And divine condescension is manifest in that prophets are chosen from every walk of life and every possible condition.

The prophet is moved by divine inspiration or communication. His mind is enlightened in two ways: first to pass judgment on truths which it has come by in any way whatever; secondly the prophet may grasp in what is communicated that there is matter to be communicated to others. If the matter presented to the prophet's mind is wholly unknown to him, we have revelation in the strict sense; if the truths are naturally knowable, revelation in a looser sense. Certain it is that the holy men of God were 'borne along' by the Holy Ghost (2 Peter, 1, 20); whereas false prophets churn out their own lucubrations (Jerem. 14, 14; Micheas 3, 5-8, etc.).

Prophecy is a favour granted for the good of the Church. It reaches its proper term when the prophet announces or conveys to others what has been manifested to him. (The parallel is in biblical inspiration which terminates in the writing of a book or part of a book.)

Much of the theology of prophecy is concerned with the mode of divine communication. The more we chasten our ideas of God, the more difficult will it be to see how the human mind grasps revealed truth at all. The Scriptures would suggest that first there is vision or external speech—something goes from the external senses to the prophet's mind—thus Moses, Samuel, Elias *heard* God, and Daniel *saw* writing on the wall. More common was the internal or imagination vision (called by St Augustine the 'Spiritual Vision'). This seems to have been the character of Isaias' vision (6, 1-11) or Jeremias's view of a boiling cauldron (1, 11-13). Of this type are dreams, explicitly called a means of divine revelation: 'if there be among you a prophet of the Lord, I will appear to him in a vision, or I will speak to him in a dream' (Numbers 12, 6; and cf. the nocturnal visions of Zacharias 1, 7-6, 8). Finally there is the immediate conveyance of divine truth by an impression on the mind of the prophet. This mode appeals most to St Thomas.¹

God conveys truths to the prophets, and they must convey these to their fellows and spiritual children. First of all *orally*. They are the mouthpieces of God. By far the greater part of the prophetic writings which we have are summaries of speeches uttered orally (when this is not so, a difference is at once manifest as e.g. the second part of Isaias). The oracles, more often than not, are in poetic form. This is consonant with Israel's genius and the dignity of God's word. Language, style, literary genres, etc., all manifest the individual character of each prophet.

Now and again we are told of symbolic actions attendant on or following oral precisions. Vivid imagery and symbolic actions are all of a piece with semitic tastes and emotions.

Lastly we have the writings of the prophets. That much was written wonderfully increased their influence over generations to come. With a purpose indeed, God commanded them to write (Isaias 8, 1; Jerem. 30, 2; Dan. 12, 4).

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In the new Israel of God the prophecies live on, in part fulfilled, in part yet to be realised. We are the fortunate ones still able to hear God 'who spoke through the prophets'.

¹ Manifestatio divinae veritatis quae fit per contemplationem ipsius veritatis potior est illa quae fit sub similitudine corporalium rerum. . . (II-II, 174, 2.)