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BOOK SECTION

Prophecy in Recent Study

R. E. CLEMENTS

DURING the past 20 years Old Testament prophecy has been the subject of some interesting and significant changes of scholarly emphasis. It can well be argued that at the present time many viewpoints that at one time appeared to be unassailably established have been seriously questioned. Furthermore new avenues of research have suggested that in the coming years we shall see some quite dramatically new works appearing on the subject. It is an opportune time therefore to take stock, and to attempt some reappraisal of the most important books that have appeared on the subject in English in recent years.

Undoubtedly the volume which must be acclaimed as providing the basic starting point is that by the distinguished Swedish scholar Johannes Lindblom entitled *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (B. H. Blackwell, Oxford, 1962). This was in fact a revised and much expanded edition of a book which originally appeared in 1934. Its major interests and concerns can be traced even further back to the great interest in the psychology of religion which marked the turn of the century, and which affected Old Testament scholarship through the work of W. Wundt and G. Hölscher. In Scandinavia a quite special impact was made by the researches in Comparative Religion of N. Söderblom. There is to be seen in Lindblom's work therefore a broad interest in religion generally, and in the common features which are to be found stretching across differing religious traditions. A lengthy introduction in the book concerns itself with the phenomena of prophecy which are to be found in several cultures, in modern as well as ancient times. Lindblom's definition of prophetic experience well exemplifies his whole outlook and approach: 'The special gift of a prophet is his ability to experience the divine in an original way and to receive revelations from the divine world. The prophet belongs entirely to his God; his paramount task is to listen to and obey his God' (p.1). With such a starting-point it is clear that Lindblom interprets prophecy from the way in which it opens up to us a knowledge of the prophet's own personal experience. There is a heavy emphasis upon psychological experience, with an interest in visions and auditions as evidence of the prophet's encounter with the divine world. In this respect Lindblom sees a surprising basis of common religious experience which permeates all the Old Testament prophets. Their ideas, and the specific situations to which they addressed their prophecies, are secondary to the level of experience through which they have become aware of the divine world. Lindblom was particularly conscious of the problems created by an adequate understanding of prophetic eschatology, which he explores in some detail. Through the individuality of

each prophet there is revealed the divine judgement upon human society, and yet the word of hope which makes such a knowledge of judgement bearable, and which can look beyond it. In a sense each prophet is viewed as a personal witness to the presence and activity of God in human affairs. The specific historical experience of Israel becomes quite secondary to this, and in a very real sense is reduced to the level of being a specific, although unique and therefore revelatory, expression of the way in which God intrudes himself into human life and society.

It is not unfair to suggest that, although it represents the *magnum opus* of a distinguished scholar, Lindblom's book on prophecy was markedly dated even on the day when it was first published. It sums up, expertly and comprehensively, the findings of a whole generation of scholarship which took its cue from the desire to unearth the mysteries of 'the prophetic consciousness'. Ultimately it was the prophet himself, rather than his prophetic revelations or messages, which testified to the reality of God. It is not surprising therefore that we do not find much in Lindblom that deals with the unique religious ideas in the Old Testament, such as covenant and election, which isolate the Old Testament from the surrounding world of the ancient Near East. Similarly the chapter on the prophetic literature, which is in any case highly compressed and difficult to read, must be adjudged one of the weaker aspects of the book. In Lindblom's quest, the complex forms of the prophetic literature tend to get between the original prophet and the modern reader. It is the scholar's task to help to remove this covering. Having said all this, it is well worth the student's while to be patient with Lindblom and to read it seriously, for there can be no better way of establishing the starting point from which modern research has developed.

It is very practical to move immediately from Lindblom to a consideration of a very different work, and one which is much less well-known in Great Britain. This is the volume by N. K. Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth. Israelite Prophecy and International Relations in the Ancient Near East* (Harper and Row, New York, Evanston, London, 1964). The treatment here is so startlingly different from that offered by Lindblom, that the untutored reader might think he was reading about a different set of prophets altogether. Gottwald's own words sum up his main thesis: 'Hebrew prophecy arose as a political as well as social phenomenon. The prophet advised rulers in decision-making in all matters of state. Prophetic counsel was explicit, but it rested in turn upon certain broad considerations of policy' (p.45). We can see from this the essential features of Gottwald's basic assumptions. The study of prophecy must first and foremost be concerned with what the prophet said, rather than what he had experienced, about which we can know very little anyway. Furthermore, in his own understanding of his task and responsibilities, the prophet saw his claim to a divine calling to rest on the authority and validity of his prophetic counsel. His claim to have experienced God was solely maintained in order to affirm the divine authority of his messages.

This leads Gottwald to proceed along fresh lines, and to introduce into his study far more material of a directly historical and political character, thereby making issues of date and provenance more decisive and interesting. In order to understand prophecy we must first understand the politics and international relationships which existed in the world in which the prophets

were active. Hence Amos, Hosea and Isaiah must all be seen more directly against the backcloth of Assyrian imperialism. In particular the complex historical situations which arose for Judah during the last half of the eighth century require a careful examination, if we are to embark upon a proper study of Isaiah. So too do we need to know something of the given inheritance of political assumptions, concerning David and the Davidic empire, if we are to see the particular novelty of the prophet's words. Gottwald is thereby able to produce a singularly fresh and exciting interpretation of the prophet Isaiah. Neither the special ethical claims of the prophet, nor the unique quality of his religious experience, can be detached from his claim to present the counsel of God in the confused and confusing interplay of political forces. Even Hosea, whose own personal religious experience has so often been heavily overstressed in expositions of his prophecies, must be understood primarily in terms of a number of basic political realities.

In retrospect it appears that Gottwald's treatment of prophecy has stood the test of more than a decade of further scholarship remarkably well. That it was not published separately in Great Britain seems regrettable, in that it offers such a good corrective to the onesidedness of Lindblom's pre-occupation with religious experience. Yet there are some disconcerting features in Gottwald's work, not the least of which is a certain arbitrariness in the historical and critical analysis of the setting of particular prophecies. Gottwald has shown himself too ready to go against the mainstream of literary-critical opinion, for example in ascribing Mic.4-5 to the Assyrian period (p.210). The concluding section which concerns itself with the more enduring significance of what the prophet had to say about the word of God and politics appears more as a frustrating interim ending, rather than a fully rounded conclusion. This is because Gottwald ultimately resorts to a kind of abstraction regarding politics and religion, rather than linking the prophetic element of the Old Testament to larger issues concerning the nature of hope in the Old Testament, and to the concerns with prophetic eschatology. In a way this latter proves more of an embarrassment to Gottwald than a help, since the transition from prophecy to apocalyptic seems to mark a loss of political realism. In Gottwald's understanding it is precisely this political realism which makes the Old Testament prophets so modern and so relevant. All in all, however, Gottwald's book seems to me to have been a much neglected work, which amply rewards the reader still.

We might now consider the most influential of all the treatments of Old Testament prophecy which has undoubtedly called the tune for other scholars to dance to in the last two decades. This is the great work from G. von Rad, which first appeared in the original German in 1962, before the publication of Gottwald's work, but the English edition of which was published in 1965 (*Old Testament Theology*, Vol. II, Trans D. M. G. Stalker, Oliver & Boyd, London and Edinburgh, 1965. See also his *Message of the Prophets* (SCM) which covers the same ground more briefly). In many ways von Rad's treatment has become very well known, so that its startling originality on first appearance can sometimes be missed. It is important to bear in mind that this treatment of prophecy comes as Vol. II of an *Old Testament Theology*, the first volume of which was especially concerned with the kerygmatic nature of Israel's election traditions. To this extent von Rad

turns back several pages in scholarship, since he is anxious to disclaim for the prophets the kind of intellectual originality — the revelation of the truth of ethical monotheism — which had at one time been a kind of watchword in the study of prophecy.

To begin with von Rad examines the nature of the prophetic 'office', a term which would no doubt be more familiar to German readers than to English ones. This prophetic office certainly did not begin with Amos, and goes right back to more ancient times, and gave to such prophetic figures a particular attachment to the religious life and institutions of ancient Israel. Von Rad sees this attachment manifesting itself primarily in two directions: first there was a strong attachment to the sanctuaries which resulted in the work of cult-prophets. The scriptural (= canonical) prophets sharply dissociated themselves from these, since there was no room in the cult for the idea of the national judgement of all Israel. The second line of association was with the royal court, which meant that the royal Davidic court traditions came to play an important part in the prophetic thinking. Ultimately, when the transforming effect of the prophetic eschatology had taken full course, this was to lead to the expectation of the coming of a Messiah, and to provide, through the messianic hope, a central bond between the two Testaments. This sense that the Old Testament lies open to the future, and that it points towards a 'Fulfilment' as its proper goal, enables von Rad to draw back into the study of biblical prophecy some of the themes that the over-preoccupation with prophetic experience had tended to neglect. In a real sense von Rad shows himself able to relate his interpretation of the prophetic theology more closely to some of the traditional themes and concerns of Christian theology, and even to some of the fundamental features of Jewish interpretation, than the previous generation of critical scholarship on the prophets was able to achieve.

The link with wider hermeneutical aspects of the Old Testament comes very much to the fore in the way in which von Rad relates the prophets to the Law. As Volume 1 of the *Theology* had shown, the central part of the Pentateuch was built around the kerygma of Israel's election-traditions, to which Israel's obedience to the Law was related through the concept of 'Response'. Yet the tragic nature of Israel's history, especially at the hands of the Assyrian and Babylonian world-empires, manifested what amounted to a historical denial of this divine election. It was then the eighth-century prophets who provided the clue to understanding this seeming denial of Israel's election by their messages of total judgement upon Israel. To do this they extended the notion of Israel's judgement by the Law in a radical fashion, seeing the entire nation as disobedient and guilty. The divine election was thereby frustrated, and only by radical new vision, in which the idea of the renewal of Israel's election was projected into the future, could the old election-theology be sustained. Thereby eschatology was given birth, which has become the most central and distinctive characteristic of prophetic thought. As this took on different images and forms, it none-the-less retained a radical dimension of hope, or 'Promise', which renders the Old Testament a forward-looking literature.

In his exposition of individual prophets von Rad has attracted most interest by the extent to which he was allowed his 'traditio-historical' methodology to colour his results. In a sense the method becomes an over-riding exegetical

tool, since each prophet is to be understood in terms of the particular election-tradition which he inherited by dint of the location of his activity. Thus Amos, a Judean, is moulded by the Davidic tradition; Hosea by the exodus tradition, preserved in the North, whilst Isaiah is coloured through and through by his dependence upon the old 'Zion tradition' of the Jerusalem temple. To some extent this leads von Rad into a new concern with the differences between each prophet, and it can fairly be objected that it has **encouraged him into emphasizing a number of features in prophecy to an undue extent. Most striking in this regard is the heavy labouring of the impact of the 'Zion tradition' upon Isaiah to an extent that makes the prophet appear as a rather wooden dogmatist, insensitive to the changing moods and faces of historical experience.** When we compare von Rad's exposition to that of Gottwald, it is noticeable how much more intense and 'modern' the prophet appears in the latter's presentation.

To a real extent von Rad sees the unique significance of the Old Testament prophets to lie in their dialogue with the received election-traditions of ancient Israel. They conducted a kind of internal dialogue, which enabled the nation to rise above the exigencies of its own tragic history and to discern a new dimension to the purpose of God, which we may sum up in the word 'hope'.

One of the most attractive and exciting aspects of von Rad's work lies in its many-sided character. It is not difficult to find fault with some of his assertions, yet, even in doing so, the reader is led on to a considerable number of fresh avenues to explore. Certainly we can see how a whole new era of prophetic interpretation has been opened up by applying and developing his insights in fresh ways. The splendid commentaries on Amos and Hosea by H. W. Wolff are a case in point, where it is clear that von Rad's **traditio-historical methodology has proved applicable in very different ways, and with very different results, from those which were originally envisaged.** Not the least important feature in its favour has been the greater concern with the prophetic literature, and with its message content, and a sharp turning away from the prophet's own experience as the criterion by which he is to be measured. This leads us to consider another major contribution to the literature on Old Testament prophecy which, like Gottwald's work, has suffered an unwarranted neglect. This is the book by C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (English translation H. C. White, Lutterworth Press, London, 1967). From its title it might well seem to the casual reader that this is very much a book for the scholar and that it will contain little by way of interpretative insight into the message of prophecy. In part this may be true, yet it must be said that Westermann's book, which is all the more commendable because of the excellent survey it contains of the history of investigation into its subject, does begin at a proper beginning. Alluring as the temptation is to start with a consideration of the prophet's experience of God, as Lindblom does, this is not where the scholar can begin. What we have are books of prophecies, couched in a highly distinctive language and concerned with messages purporting to come directly from God, to whom the prophet has submitted himself and his voice. Careful investigation shows that the very forms of prophetic speech are distinctive, not the least being this use of the first-person formula — 'I' — in which God announces his future action. Various scholars of the earlier part of this

century had concerned themselves with a study of these speech-forms, none more productively so than Hermann Gunkel. In Westermann's excellent book we discover a great deal of how the prophet conceived his task, of the importance of the 'messenger formula', and of the distinctive categories of speech which the prophet employed, all of which must have been minted before the era of the great 'classical' prophets of the Old Testament. Westermann shows the rarity of anything approaching a biographical narrative about the prophets, fully bearing out the lack of interest which the Old Testament displays in the prophet's own experience. Fundamentally the main bulk of the sayings of the prophets can be categorized either as pronouncements, declaring what God is about to do, or reasons, showing why this is his necessary intention. So we have a frequently occurring pattern of threats, backed up by curses, or of promises, substantiated by specific assertions about the nature of God and his relationship to Israel. We may sum up in Westermann's own words: 'Further effort at gaining an understanding of the prophetic speech forms must, in my opinion, begin with this new definition of the prophetic judgement-speech as a messenger's speech consisting of two parts, the reason and the announcement' (pp. 36-7).

Westermann's book is the kind of work that is well worth looking at before embarking upon some more obviously attractive concern with the 'message' of this, or that, prophet. It begins with the prophetic literature itself, and not the least of its merits lies in its bringing into a more central place in scholarly discussion a concern with the prophet's role as foreteller. All too often this has been played down in the interests of highlighting the prophet's 'forthtelling' of Israel's sins, with at times a near exclusive preoccupation with the ethical and spiritual ideas employed by the prophets. The exposure of sin has appeared more central and exciting than an interest in the people whose sins were exposed, and in the times and circumstances which led to such disclosures. In this way the prophets have been made to appear as the conscience of the human race, rather than as men caught up in the history, life and culture of ancient Israel. Unwittingly this has led to a detaching of the prophets from the remainder of the Old Testament and to an exaggerated claim for the novelty of their moral insights. To this extent Westermann's book does force the reader to question his presuppositions carefully, and to begin asking the most basic questions about the nature of prophecy. It makes us realize that we are first and foremost concerned with prophecy, and that we can only begin to enquire about the prophet and his experiences once we have understood the forms in which prophecy is presented to us. Perhaps it is not unlike some Christians who become more interested in the preacher than in the Gospel that he preaches!

We can move on to look at a more recent book, which is attractive on account of its felicitous style and willingness to look afresh at matters which have appeared too easily settled. This is the volume by J. Bright entitled *Covenant and Promise. The Future in the Preaching of the Pre-exilic Prophets* (SCM Press, London, 1977). Bright had earlier included a not insubstantial chapter on the prophets in his book on the history of Israel, so that his contribution here is rather in the nature of an exercise in 'second thoughts'. In this case it is not too precocious to suggest that they live up to their proverbial reputation of being best. Two features of scholarship have

evidently weighed most heavily with Bright in producing this volume. The first of these is clearly the impact of von Rad's traditio-historical method, and the way in which it has been able to relate the prophets more closely to the older traditions of Israel than the conventional claims to prophetic originality had achieved. The second factor is more distinctively American in its origin, although its subsequent development in the hands of German scholars has been important to Bright. This is the concern with 'covenant' as a central and constitutive concept of the Old Testament, which has left its legacy upon a wide area of its literature. Thus the interest in covenant-forms, sparked off by G. E. Mendenhall's researches has affected a good deal of study with biblical laws and legal-forms. More than this, however, the origin, meaning and use of the term 'covenant' has been subjected to detailed study in the works of L. Peritt and E. Kutsch, showing that 'covenant' does not come to us as a finished concept, closely defined as to its significance. Rather there was a developing theology of 'covenant' in old Testament times, and the prophets certainly bore a close connection with this theological development. Bright's analysis leads him to posit two traditions of covenant theology, the first focusing on Sinai, the Decalogue, and the idea of a conditioned relationship between God and Israel in which the Law is viewed as a necessary response on Israel's part. Against this there grew up also the Abrahamic, and more important Davidic, covenant traditions, with an emphasis upon the unconditioned grace of God. It was a covenant of gift, or in more human terms, a covenant in which the note of man's assurance based upon the divine mercy was to the fore. Bright is then able to trace the interplay of these two traditions, each with a valid theological foundation, in the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The exposition is therefore concerned almost exclusively with these two prophets. Isaiah asserts man's assurance, built upon the rock of God's promise, whereas Jeremiah viewed the calamities of his days in terms of the radical nature of man's disobedience to God's laws. Each captured something essential about the way in which God encounters his people, and each has left a lasting theological contribution to the concept of hope in the Old Testament.

It is not difficult to see that what Bright has achieved is primarily a weaving together of insights and conclusions advanced initially by other scholars. What he produces consequently is something of a synthesis which is vulnerable at more than one point, since not all of the constituent hypotheses command wide assent. In particular, it seems to me, he has rested more firmly on von Rad's exegesis of Isaiah as the prophet of Zion than the evidence truly warrants. Nevertheless this is a good book, interesting to the preacher and theologian as well as to the scholar, and undoubtedly a fine introduction to several of the issues that have risen to the top of the agenda in recent research on the Old Testament.

The last book that should be mentioned is the most recent to appear, and for this reason requires the most cautious evaluation. It is so often after a book has established itself, and its major claims have been tested through a number of essays and criticisms, that its longer term value can be seen. The latest book is by Professor R. R. Wilson of Yale, entitled *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1980). It is a substantial work and, as its title implies, is primarily concerned with the role played by the prophets in ancient Israelite society. Two areas of influence can

readily be detected, the first stemming originally from Max Weber and concerned especially with the function exercised by prophets in society. There is a long, and extremely informative, introduction bringing together a number of socio-anthropological insights concerning the role of prophets in societies outside Israel, both ancient and modern. They appear as 'marginal' figures, feared yet respected, admired yet rejected. This peculiar 'fringe' function of the prophet is most marked since, in one sense, he can, like Mohammed, claim to represent the 'authentic' religious tradition of his people. At the same time he is an innovator, the inspired individual who can speak directly in the name of God and so introduce quite new ideas and institutions. The prophet therefore appears to fight and preach against the tide of events and human attitudes, yet he can do so convincingly only because he stands within a tradition and can claim to present a more authentic interpretation of the human situation than these events and attitudes can lay claim to.

On this basis Wilson proceeds to analyse and evaluate Israelite prophecy in two separate categories: the Ephraimite prophetic tradition and the tradition of the prophets of Judah. The legacy here of von Rad's traditio-historical methodology is evident, and Wilson proceeds to trace some marked divergencies between the two traditions. Following upon a thesis advanced by H. W. Wolff, he sees the Ephraimite tradition as standing close to the Levites and the cultic-priestly orders of Northern Israel's life. The Judean prophets, however, stood closer to the royal court, and hence they embraced more directly the pro-monarchic positions of the Davidic covenant tradition.

In terms of broad sociological observation there is much that is helpful in Wilson's work, and the range of comparative material that he adduces is impressive and full of interest for the reader. Yet when it comes to the point of identifying the distinctive characteristics of Israelite prophecy he is unable to move much beyond positions already well publicised by von Rad and Wolff. One reason for this must again lie in the concern to stress so emphatically the role of the prophet, rather than to note the function of prophecy, and to explore the processes which have led to the collection, and subsequent canonization, of a striking variety of prophetic sayings and speeches. Just as a redaction-critical approach to the Gospels of the New Testament has led to a radically different perspective, so we may look forward to a more thoroughgoing application of redaction-critical techniques to the prophetic literature to produce a number of fresh and interesting insights. We may hope that the next decade of scholarship will produce more than one work of this nature, which will make prophecy, rather than the prophets, the centre of critical examination.