

Jesus : The Christ of Mystical Union or the Prophetic Christ?

(*A paper written from the theological angle, with
emphasis on the Prophetic Christ*)

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When speaking about the prophetic Christ we deal with one of the biblical titles attributed to Jesus' person. None of the titles given to him or claimed by him exhausts the richness of the Christ event. Yet these titles stand for more than mere functions or attributes belonging to Jesus, rather each of the great titles is an attempt to express the totality of Jesus' person and mission from a definite angle. Thus our problem consists in inquiring in what way the title 'prophet' could be the crystallizing centre of an integrated Christology. We proceed in two steps, first outlining the meaning and unfolding of Old Testament prophetism, secondly sketching its application to Jesus' life and work. We conclude with a note about the significance of such a Christology in general, and particularly for the modern situation.

I. The Idea of Prophetism in the Old Testament and in Judaism

In the comprehensive presentation of the Christ even in *Mysterium Salutis*, N. Fuglister describes prophetism as the specific, primary, and constituent element of the Old Testament¹. It is specific because, notwithstanding single analogous phenomena in other oriental religions, it is peculiar and characteristic of Israel's religion; it is primary because in historical development it is earlier than organized priesthood and kingship; it is constituent because the very essence of the people, its being and mission, depends on it. It expresses the charismatic character of Israel's guidance, Yahweh's immediate impact on the history and life of his people. In the mature theological reflection of Deuteronomy Moses is presented as the model of prophetism which, after him, runs through Israel's history: 'I will raise up for them a prophet like you (Moses) from among their brethren and I will put my word in his mouth and he will speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it from him' (Dt. 18:17 f). In the context prophetism is put in contrast to the divination of the soothsayers, augurs, and sorcerers of the surrounding nations (Dt. 18:10). The text expresses the immediacy of God's guidance for his

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¹ N. Fuglister, in *Mysterium Salutis*, III/1, (1970) *Das Christusereignis*, p. 147.

people because the prophet speaks not about God but God speaks through him; his office is based on God's sovereign choice whereas, according to the context, the levitical priesthood is entrusted to Aaron's family (Dt. 18:5) and the kingship is established in accordance with the government of the neighbouring nations (Dt. 17:14).

The charismatic character of prophetism becomes more pronounced in the course of Jewish history: In Moses both the political power and the priestly office had still been included in the one prophetic person. Both are split off in the course of history, and prophetism is expressed only in the charismatic word which, however, remains the decisive power in the life of the nation as can be seen in the great figures as in Jeremiah: 'I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant' (Jer 1:10).

The prophetic office is realized in various patterns, in individual prophets or in schools of prophets. Still, prophetism as a whole remains the distinctive medium of the divine presence, and guidance and is considered one coherent manifestation of Yahweh's guidance. According to Deuteronomy 18:16f the same prophetic office, of which Moses is the *typos*, is to be realized again. In later Judaism this identity of mission is interpreted as the return of the old prophets through the ages, beginning from Adam and Henoch, to Moses and through the centuries after him. Moses himself and mainly Elijah are expected to return. All of them are the varied embodiment of the one prophetic voice that guides the people.

The prophetic office is future-oriented; it points towards final salvation and fulfilment. The eschatological orientation, along with the oneness of the prophetic office, crystallized in the idea of the final prophet, 'the prophet' simply, in whom the entire message of the prophets of the past is summed up. This idea takes root during the vacuum of prophetism in the centuries before Christ. Already Malachy speaks of the return of Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, 'and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers lest I come and smite the land with a curse' (Mal 4:5f). The figure of the eschatological prophet becomes prominent in the apocalyptic literature. Cullmann sums up his function: 'He preaches, reveals the final mysteries and above all restores revelation as God had given it in the law of Moses. But he does not simply preach as did the earlier prophets; his proclamation pronounces the end of this age. His call to repentance is God's very last offer. Thus his coming and his preaching as such constitute an eschatological act which is part of the drama of the end'.¹ The New Testament reflects the expectation of the final prophet and attributes this role either to the Baptist or to Jesus.

The most significant enrichment of prophetism in the Old Testament takes place in the figure of the Servant of Yahweh. It was to become the decisive link of Old Testament prophetism with Jesus Christ. Prophets in general are called servants of Yahweh (Jer 7:25; Amos 3:7 etc.); but as the title is applied to Moses in a unique

¹ O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (1963), p. 22.

manner (Ex 14:31; Num 12:7 etc.), so the prophetic figure of the four songs of Deutero-Isaiah is singled out in a particular way as Yahweh's servant: 'Behold my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights' (Isa 42:1). The features of his person and mission broaden and deepen the meaning of prophetism to such an extent that prophetism could become the focus of a comprehensive Christology.

The mission of the Servant is for the weary (50:2), the blind, the prisoners (42:7), for many (53:11). It is addressed in the first place to Israel but widens to include the coastlands, the peoples from afar (49:1). He must speak the prophetic word: 'He made my mouth like a sharp sword' (49:2). The content of his message is justice (*mishpat*) (42:1, 3, 4) in a general, open sense, the order to be established by God, no longer merely a particular message related to specific circumstances. Thus the tradition of relating the prophetic message to the political and social sphere is at once maintained and transcended, it becomes the universal message of a new era.

Even more than other prophets, as Elijah or Jeremiah, the Servant is personally involved with his mission: it becomes his own fate, it leads to tension, resistance, rejection; he suffers the crushing feeling of failure: 'I have laboured in vain' (49:4). His suffering leads to persecution as a criminal (3rd and 4th song) and to violent death, 'cut off out of the land of the living' (53:8); he is buried among the malefactors (53:9). In the person of the Servant, suffering and persecution receive a new significance unknown to the earlier prophets. The Servant not only accepts his suffering in freedom: 'I turned not backward, I gave my cheek to the smiters' (50:6), but his passion becomes the decisive part of his mission: God himself inflicts the suffering on his Servant: 'It was the will of the Lord to bruise him' (53:10; cf. 53:6); the suffering is inflicted on him not on account of his own sin but of the sin of others (53:5); it is a sin offering (53:10). Thus his death turns out to be the source of fulfilment for himself: 'He shall see the fruit of his travail' (53:11): and for the people: 'With his stripes we are healed' (53:5).

With the salvific significance of suffering and death a new perspective of the prophetic mission opens, beyond the tomb, in a mysterious rehabilitation: 'He shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days, the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand' (53:10).

These sketchy extracts are meant not as a full picture but only as an indication of the dimensions of the unique figure of the Servant. Without entering into the controversy about the identity of the Servant figure we may observe with Zimmerli in the four songs a 'striking objectivity and yet also anonymous concealment' which 'may indicate that the servant does not wish to be misunderstood simply in subjective-biographical terms', but 'transcends the individual reality of his life and dares in faith to lay hold of ultimate insights'. With McKenzie we say conclude that the Servant 'is the figure who recapitulates in himself all the religious gifts of the mission of Israel ...

* Zimmerli, in *ThDNT.*, V, 668.

He is the fulness of Israel; in him the history of Israel reaches its achievement⁴.

Thus the idea of prophetism in the Old Testament is completed and transcended by the figure of the Suffering Servant in three ways: First, the function of mediator comes to completion in him as he includes the actual realisation of justice (*mishpat*) in his prophetic mission. His word is also deed, not merely proclamation, and so comprises the basic oneness of word and action as expressed in the Hebrew word *dabar*. Secondly the Servant is mediator *kat' exochen*, i.e. in a startling identity of person, office, and mission. According to Fuglister 'the decisive elements of the office of mediation, precontained already in the earlier prophetic office, blossom to full maturity in the songs of 'ebed Yahweh: in the positive character of the prophetic mission aiming at salvation, in the universality of salvation reaching beyond Israel to all nations, in the fact that the office of mediation not only engages the entire person but really consists in the person of the prophet and is identical with him'⁵. Thirdly by making the Servant's passion fruitful his work extends beyond the earthly life and death; the Servant proclaims and carries out God's plan beyond his tomb. How this takes place remains hidden; here the prophetism of the Old Testament has reached its climax and its limits.

II. The Christological Possibilities of the Prophetic Title of Jesus

Classical Christology as it was discussed in the great Christological controversies and formulated in the early Councils, and so came to us through the centuries, is based on the thought-patterns borrowed and developed from Greek philosophy. There was, however, the earlier attempt of the Judeo-Christian community which expressed the Christ event in terms of his prophetic office. It must be admitted that this attempt was stunted and thus remained inconclusive for various reasons, first because the entire Judeo-Christian theology was short-lived and hardly was given time to unfold its theme sufficiently, secondly because it remained too closely linked to narrow Jewish perspectives. Cullmann believes that the concept of prophetism itself was too narrow to allow a Christology to develop in all its dimensions. If this were true we must beware of giving the title prophet a central importance in Christian theology as it would lead to a diminished and onesided idea of Jesus Christ. If the opposite view is possible, it may help us to open relevant perspectives for Christology.

It would seem that the biblical idea of prophetism has an immanent dynamism of widening and deepening its meaning. We have seen this dynamism at work in the figure of the Servant. It is completed in Jesus Christ himself who in Peter's address to the Sanhedrin is simply 'the Prophet', the one who is promised in Deuteronomy (Deut. 18:15; Acts 3:23; cf. 7:37).

⁴ McKenzie, in *Anchor Bible*, Second Isaiah, p. LIII.

⁵ N. Fuglister, *loc. cit.*, p. 162 (translation mine).

In fact, both the Synoptic and the Johannine pictures of Jesus are that of the prophet. According to the Synoptics Jesus is considered a prophet by the people (Mk 6:14f, etc.). Occasionally Jesus refers to himself as prophet, e.g. in Nazareth when speaking of the rejection of a prophet in his own country (Mk 6:4 para.). Though the synoptic writers themselves do not give him the title of prophet, they describe his word and work in terms of prophetism, while indicating at the same time that through Jesus the prophets of old are eclipsed. Jesus is the prophet on whom the Spirit descends in baptism and the voice from heaven is an almost literal replica of the words of the first servant song of Is 42:1: 'Thou art my beloved Son with thee I am well pleased' (Mk 1:11). However, while the prophets introduce their words with a reference to Yahweh: 'Thus says the Lord', Jesus claims authority for himself: 'But I say to you' (Mt. 5:22, etc.). He speaks with power (Mk 1:22). Compared to the prophets, who are servants, he is Son (Mk 12:6). He concludes the prophetic mission not by destroying the law, but by bringing it to fulfilment (Mt 5:17). His message has the ring of urgency and finality: 'Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees' (Mt. 3:10).

Jesus' prophetic mission includes his entire person and life. Through his prophetic office Jesus is the final revealer in whom the divine plan for man and world is manifested. In the Epistle to the Hebrews Jesus is presented as the one in whom the sundry revelations through the prophets are brought to fulfilment, because he is 'Son' and 'appointed the heir of all things' (Hebr. 1:2).

John sees Jesus' entire mission in prophetic perspective. His 'work' (*ergon*) *kat-exochen* is to fulfil God's plan for his people: 'I glorified thee on earth having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do... I have manifested thy name' (Jn 17:4, 6).

This mission of Jesus on earth is the manifestation of his pre-existence with the Father. He is more than the return of Elijah, he is not only the eschatological prophet who sums up the prophetism of the past in a final appeal, he embodies God's word, he is the eternal Logos made flesh. (Jn. 1:1; 1 Jn 1:1-3). Hence his spoken word is not only prophetic message but the manifestation of God's life-giving presence, so that those who receive him and believe in him have everlasting life. The prophetic word includes and reveals God's own creative word bringing about the new creation.

The concrete form in which Jesus' prophetic mission is lived follows the pattern of the Servant of Yahweh. The title 'Servant' for Jesus is surprisingly rare in the New Testament (Mt 12:18=Is 42:1; Acts 3:13; 3:26; 4:27; 4:30). However the quotations from the songs, and mainly the passing allusions to them, are many. They are not later additions to the picture of Jesus but belong to the earliest layer of the apostolic preaching. Jeremias concludes his elaborate examination: 'The Christological interpretation of the Servant of the Lord of Deutero-Isaiah belongs to the most primitive age of the Christian community and very soon came to be fixed in form'⁶. From the beginning Jesus' passion and death are seen in soteriological perspective:

⁶ ThDNT., V. p. 709.

'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor 15:3). The interpretation of Jesus' death as ransom (1 Tim 2:6; Mk 10:45) and all the formulas with 'hyper' are taken from the Servant theme; the kenosis-theology of Paul takes up the fourth song of the Servant: 'He poured out his life for many' (Isa 53:12). Also the universality of Jesus' mission is the fulfilment of the extension of the Servant's mission to the nations.

As there are so many allusions to the Servant texts in the Gospel⁷ one may ask why the title itself remains so rare. The most plausible answer seems to be the transition from the servant-title to the conception of Jesus as Son. This transition is facilitated by the fact that the Greek word *pais*, the equivalent to the Hebrew '*ebed*', means also 'son'. However, more than by the double meaning of the Greek word, the transition is caused by the newness of the revelation in Jesus Christ. The Son has all the features of the Servant: he is sent, he is obedient, he lives only on God's word, he lays down his life: yet the entire image of the Servant is changed into that of the Son with his unique intimacy with Abba, his Father. The Servant-theology of the Old Testament opens into the revelation of the Son and thus to our participation in the divine life.

Thus also the efficacy of Jesus' mission beyond death comes into full relief; it is merely indicated in the Servant but fulfilled in the Son. It is only after death and glorification that Jesus will draw all men to himself (cf. Jn 12:32); only through dying the grain of wheat can bear much fruit (Jn 12:24); only after the glorification he can send the Spirit (Jn 7:39). This Spirit continued Jesus' prophetic mission in the community of believers. Through him the divine presence in the Church will last for ever (Jn 14:16); Jesus' teaching and message will be for ever engraved in the hearts of his followers and interpreted according to changing situations (Jn 14:26); the Spirit will also continue the prophetic witness in the assembly of the faithful and will make the Apostles themselves his prophetic witnesses (Jn 15:26); this witness of the Spirit will consist in convincing the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgement (Jn 16:8 ff.). He will also continue the mission of Jesus in revealing the divine mystery (1 Cor 2:14). This revealing power will at the same time be creative, awakening in the hearts of the believers the realisation of the new life that is ours in the love of God, because with Jesus and in the Holy Spirit we are allowed to call God our Father, Abba. (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:4).

In this way the prophetic office of Jesus unfolds according to the patterns precontained in the Old Testament. All the constituent elements of an integrated Christology are implied in it or unfold from it in the process of the growing revelation. The human and social reality of Jesus' earthly life and work and his concrete place in the nation and history of Israel; his divine origin, and God's presence in and through his word and work and ultimately his person; the proclamation no longer of a particular message but of God's final and universal reign, a proclamation which consists not of words only but is creative and brings about a new world; the persecution and finally the death of

⁷ Jeremias enumerates 42 references, *ThDNT.*, V. 710, n. 435.

Jesus, yet a death which is not extinction but, according to the Servant-pattern, the mysterious way which leads towards fulfilment, the birth of a new humanity; finally the continuation of his mission in the Spirit and in the prophetic role of the Church in the eschatological community, towards the day of fulfilment.

Conclusion

A Christology centred round prophetism has not been unfolded systematically, yet it would have its decisive advantages over the traditional systems. Classical Christology based on Greek patterns is too static, too unrelated to history and society, has no explicit soteriological dimension, does in its structure not take into account the two decisive stages of the Christ event: the work and mission on earth and the fulfilment in his glory. Its great advantage of easily explaining the pre-existence and unique significance of the Word Incarnate is at the same time a liability as it tends to present the pre-existing logos in his timelessness apart from the divine plan of salvation (whereas in fact the 'Wisdom' of the sapiential books is always related to the work of creation and to God's design for his chosen people). Also the other obvious advantage of clearly presenting the full divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ again tends to lead to a conceptual, static parallel of two natures without expressing the mission and message of Jesus Christ.

On the other hand a Christology based on prophetism would be in keeping with the actual Christ event as it took place: and Christology has only one purpose, to unfold and interpret the Christ event. Whatever we know about Jesus' actual life and work is all centred round his prophetic mission as it unfolds in his life and death and continues in the early Christian community. Such a theology would therefore remain within the thought-patterns in which it was presented and understood in the apostolic preaching, and still would have the dynamism to break through its limitations as can be seen in the unfolding of the idea of prophetism in Old and New Testament.

It may well be that a Christology with a stronger prophetic orientation would become more relevant for our world. It would give the key to a renewed understanding of the mission of the Church. Jesus himself had to steer a middle course between a timeless spiritualism and political involvement. He never allowed himself to be dragged into the political arena, and yet his message had actual relevance for the events of his time, of all times. His proclamation of God's reign was not supported by physical power, nor had he any weapon to defend himself. His only power was the prophetic word. This is the situation of the Church also today; it is weakness within the competitive struggle of human society; it is power of the Spirit. The Church surely has to be more prophetic, related to actual issues, committed to the cause of truth; she cannot limit herself to the sphere of the inner man but is essentially related to society. Yet she has to work without political power, with the strength of the word, relying on the power of the Spirit. This is the continuation of Jesus' mission; it is bound to lead her also to the participation in his struggle and passion. But a Church which conceives herself again as the embodi-

ment of the prophetic Christ—the Church *is* Christ's body—would find her place again in the centre of the world.

The turn to a Prophetism-oriented Christology might open also possibilities of a better understanding of Islam with its central figure Mohammed, its strongly prophetic orientation, with its prophetic thought-patterns and its dislike of metaphysics. It seems futile to bring Muslims to an understanding of the Nicene Creed, not on account of the lack of good will but because such categories as 'one in being' are too distant from this mode of thinking. It may be good to remember that one of the factors that contributed to the swift and spectacular success of early Islam in the Middle East was its prophetic simplicity as compared to the metaphysical sophistication of the Christological controversies that divided the Christian Churches. It might be appropriate to help Muslims to deepen and widen the idea of prophetism on the lines which were developed in the Old Testament itself, in the figure of the Servant of Yahweh, and so to bring them closer to the understanding of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is one, but the event of his coming has many facets; Christology has to unfold them in relation to changing times and varied situations. It may well be that for our world, and particularly for the Indian situation, a prophetic image of Jesus Christ has new significance.