

## MOSES AND THE PROPHETIC VOCATION

### A REFLECTION ON THE CALL OF MOSES IN EX. 3-4:17

The third chapter of Exodus is, perhaps, best known for its revelation of the divine name, and biblical scholars usually concentrate on the derivation and meaning of the sacred word Yahweh.<sup>1</sup> Valuable as are these speculations and investigations into the metaphysical content of the Tetragrammaton, the real emphasis of the Exodus narrative is on the promise of liberation and God's activity on behalf of His people.<sup>2</sup> Further, the men of Israel came to know the nature of Yahweh as He revealed Himself through their history. It is not philosophical reflection or scientific curiosity, but rather the experience of His activity in their lives, the progressive unfolding of their destiny which reveals to the Israelites the true character of Yahweh.<sup>3</sup> It is this unique trait of the chosen people's knowledge of their God which underscores the vital role of the prophet.

For it is a fundamental function of the prophet to interpret the moral and religious significance of the current experiences of the people, thus revealing the nature of God to them and bringing the impact of divine reality directly to bear on human conduct.<sup>4</sup> It is through the divinely inspired prophetic commentary on the people's experiences, and his uncompromising demand for a total commitment of the nation to the absolute will of Yahweh that the majesty and holiness of God is made manifest. 'At all events no age in the history of early Israelite faith can be understood historically, without considering as active therein this species of man with his mission and function, his declaration and mediation.'<sup>5</sup>

Since he plays such an essential role in the development of Old Testament theology, it is important to understand the prophet's vocation, its origin in the life of the individual,<sup>6</sup> its nature and the

<sup>1</sup> For a representative discussion of the meaning of Yahweh one might profitably consult the following: W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, pp. 257-72; Martin Buber, *Moses, the Revelation and the Covenant*, pp. 46-55; Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, I, pp. 187-205; Gerhard Von Rad, *Moses*, pp. 18-28. Albright's interpretation is accepted by most American scholars and differs sharply from the explanation offered by the other authors mentioned.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Eichrodt, op. cit., p. 187

<sup>3</sup> Albright, op. cit., p. 328

<sup>4</sup> cf. Eichrodt, op. cit., pp. 320, 328ff., 362

<sup>5</sup> Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, p. 57

<sup>6</sup> We are not concerned here with the origin of the class of prophets and the prophetic movement in general from group ecstaticism. For a discussion of this phenomenon one can consult Albright, op. cit., pp. 301-5, or Eichrodt, op. cit., pp. 309-12. Our effort here is rather to describe the profound personal experience which the prophet has of God which leads the individual man to embrace the role of prophet.

reaction of the man to the task set him by God. Why does the prophet again and again inject himself into the history of Israel and whence arises his power to shape its course and interpret its meaning? The individual prophet's spiritual and psychological experience climaxed by the acceptance of his call concerns us here. For it was not as the member of a professional group, but as an individual driven by the force of his vocation that the prophet delivered his oracles, moulded the character of his people and proclaimed divine revelation.<sup>1</sup>

Ex. 3:1-4:17 is a classical description of the basic experience of the prophetic vocation.<sup>2</sup> Here we read of the transforming confrontation by the transcendent God Who makes known His inexorable demands to man. We see the drama of decision forced upon the man in his response to the claim of that 'Other One' who is so utterly a Person, Yahweh. For this reason we will concentrate on this part of Exodus in our exposition of the prophetic vocation. This narrative describes all the elements of the prophet's call: the initial revelation of God, the prophet's reaction to intimacy with Yahweh, his feeling of inadequacy to the task, his recognition of the unpopularity of his message. It recounts the reluctance of the prophet to commit himself to Yahweh, as well as the means God takes to overcome this opposition.

Fundamental to the prophetic experience is a new insight into the nature of God. This realisation comes to him not as the result of cosmic speculation or philosophical reflection but rather the prophetic understanding of God arises from an event, perhaps mystical, but nevertheless having all the characteristics of an historical occurrence in which God makes known His demands on the prophet. Radically, this knowledge consists in a new comprehension of the holiness of God. Holiness is the first element mentioned in the call of Moses. 'God said: "Come no nearer, for the place where you stand is holy ground."'<sup>3</sup> The ground is holy because it is the *locus* of God's own divine activity.<sup>4</sup> Realising this, 'Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.'<sup>5</sup> He reacts in typical fashion to that which is holy. But the holiness of God is further revealed in the next verse: 'But the Lord said, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt

<sup>1</sup> cf. Bruce Vawter, *The Conscience of Israel*, p. 20

<sup>2</sup> That Moses was a prophet and his vocation essentially prophetic is the constant tradition of the Bible, cf. Deut. 18:15, Hos. 12:14. Buber's comment on Moses is most appropriate: 'Whatever else Moses is and does, his prophecy, his ministry of the word, is the center of his nature and work. It is true he does not "prophesy," the prophetic mission in the strict sense belonging to a later and different situation between God and people, but he does everything a prophet should in this early situation: he represents the Lord, he enunciates the message, and commands in His name.' (Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, p. 58.)

<sup>3</sup> Ex. 3:5

<sup>4</sup> cf. Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, p. 272

<sup>5</sup> Ex. 3:6

and I have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

The Holy One here stands revealed to Moses not as some thing which is holy but as someone, a person, who is holy. And thus the notion of holiness is raised out of the sphere of merely naturalistic power to a higher, spiritual level, establishing a personal relationship between man and the holy one. It is this appreciation of God as a transcendent person which elevates Hebrew theology and religion above that of its pagan neighbours.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, God will make known His holiness to His people by liberating them from their slavery in Egypt. By this historical event God will manifest His personality, for He will show the Hebrews His fidelity to the promise made to Abraham, He will make known His salvific will, and He will prove His power by overwhelming the Pharaoh and his army. Thus the power of the God of Moses is not limited to rainfall or the fertility of field and flock but extends over the affairs of men and nations.

Because of His own Being, God requires holiness and great moral perfection from those who serve Him. Moses, in the name and power of God, will make great moral demands upon the people who through their human acts enter into a personal relationship with God. Moses tells the people at Sinai that they are challenged by the personal will of God seeking to enlist the nation into His service. ‘Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine. You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.’<sup>3</sup> The greatness of the Hebrew concept of holiness does not consist so much in its high moral standard as it does in the personal quality of the God to which it refers.<sup>4</sup> The law of Israel derives its force and authority from the transcendent personality of the God who promulgates the Law as His personal will, and the ultimate motive for obedience is the holiness of God Himself. ‘The Lord said to Moses : ‘Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them : Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.’<sup>5</sup>

The dynamism of the idea of God’s holiness and the consequent demand for the moral perfection of Israel compels the prophet to carry out his mission, and in his mind and mouth this double concept develops. While this is true of all the prophets, it is perhaps most striking in the call of Isaias. In the famous vision during which he

<sup>1</sup> Ex. 4:7-8

<sup>4</sup> Eichrodt, p. 276f.

<sup>2</sup> Eichrodt, loc. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Lev. 19:2

<sup>3</sup> Ex. 19:5-6

receives his vocation, the prophet beholds the ineffable holiness of Yahweh as the angels call out to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, all the earth is filled with His glory!' Aware of his sins, Isaias moans: 'Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'<sup>1</sup> Isaias expresses his profound awareness of the moral majesty of God and the inability of man to live in His presence,<sup>2</sup> and this permeates his entire message to Israel, influencing the ethical content of such later prophets as Ezechiel and Habakkuk.<sup>3</sup> The prophetic concept of God's holiness is neither speculative nor static, but is based on the experience Israel has of Yahweh as she meets Him in her history. The prophet interprets this experience and develops a progressively more sophisticated knowledge of God along with a more exacting code of morality.<sup>4</sup>

This, then, is the basic revelation made to the prophet: the supreme holiness of a personal God acting in and through history on behalf first of Israel and then of all mankind; and in return requiring men to conform to His will in every phase of their activity. Thus the vocation of the prophet is more clearly discerned. He must impress the holiness of God upon the consciousness of the people, make known His will and exhort them to observe it, reprehend them when they fail and warn them of God's punishment, encourage them to trust and, above all, to love God. The responsibility of the prophet is not light: through him Israel gradually comes to know of the holiness of God and of His absolute demand for man's moral perfection.

But the prophet also brings to the people God's message of hope and salvation. The presence of the prophet symbolises the presence of God among His people in mercy and in judgement, and if the people will only heed his voice the power of God will accomplish their salvation. Further, by his own submission to the will of the Holy One, the prophet leads his people into a more intimate personal relationship with God.

What is the instinctive reaction of Moses and the other prophets to this tremendous revelation? It is fear. Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.<sup>5</sup> God has revealed Himself to him and Moses is frightened. Later the people will beg Moses to act as their mediator with Yahweh, saying: 'You speak to us and we will listen; but let not God speak to us or we shall die.'<sup>6</sup> Israel knows full well the

<sup>1</sup> Is. ch. 6

<sup>2</sup> cf. Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, p. 130

<sup>3</sup> Eichrodt, pp. 279-80

<sup>4</sup> cf. Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, pp. 128ff.

<sup>5</sup> Ex. 3:6; cf. Is. 6:5; Am. 3:8

<sup>6</sup> Ex. 20:19

chasm separating man from God and she realises that any attempt to plumb the depths of God's mystery would destroy man.<sup>1</sup> And Yahweh will later tell Moses: 'But My face you cannot see, for no man sees Me and still lives.'<sup>2</sup> In the presence of God man must tremble for his life. Yet for the prophet, speaking with God and hearing the word of God is a frequent happening; by his vocation he is intimate with the dreadful holiness of Yahweh. Did the prophet, more fully conscious of the divine majesty and holiness, ever fear that because of his own failings God might be angry with him and the spirit of God would rush upon him to destroy him? Given the mentality of his times, it does not seem unlikely that the prophet might think so. Certainly the prophet, more profoundly than any of his contemporaries, was aware of his limitations in the sight of Yahweh.

The revelation of God's holiness obliges the prophet to perform some task. How does he react to this new responsibility? Is he exalted at the prospect of rendering an unique service to the Lord of creation? Should it surprise us to find his response less than enthusiastic? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob proposes to Moses that he return to Egypt and rescue His people from slavery and lead them into a good and spacious land.<sup>3</sup> Surely this is a project to fire the imagination of any Hebrew, but Moses answers: 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and lead the Israelites out of Egypt?'<sup>4</sup> Hardly the response of a fanatic or revolutionary! Three times Moses proposes difficulties until finally he refuses.<sup>5</sup> Moses is at first overwhelmed by the apparent impossibility of the task. At this time the Pharaoh was the richest and most powerful ruler in the Ancient Middle East. His armies controlled Palestine and were contesting for control of central Syria.<sup>6</sup> Moses, therefore, was frightened by the prospect of challenging the might of the Pharaoh. Where could a simple shepherd recruit a force strong enough to challenge the armies of Egypt? How would Moses ever force the Pharaoh to release the Hebrew slaves upon whom the country's economy partly depended? Is it any wonder then that he is diffident, even reluctant, to go down to Egypt to do God's bidding? With no military support and the co-operation of his own people still uncertain, Moses expresses his feeling of inadequacy. Would it not be rash to require the Pharaoh to free his people when he cannot back up the demand with force? Would it not be foolish to exact the liberation of the slaves when he has no guarantee they want to be freed? Who is Moses but a fugitive from Egypt, a simple shepherd adopted by the

<sup>1</sup> cf. Von Rad, *Moses*, pp. 25-6

<sup>3</sup> Ex. 3:6-8

<sup>4</sup> Ex. 3:11

<sup>2</sup> Ex. 33:21

<sup>5</sup> Ex. 3:13; 4:1; 10:13

<sup>6</sup> cf. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, pp. 103-4

family of Jethro? How could he compel this autocratic ruler, the most dominant figure in his world, to hear his plea and let the people go?

Moses' bold ultimatum to the Pharaoh is typical of the prophet's vocation. Throughout the history of Israel the prophet will face its kings to remind them that their title of 'Son of God' is conferred not so much to honour them as to keep before them their obligation to obey the will of God.<sup>1</sup> Often enough the task of the prophet seemed rash or foolhardy and, like Moses, the prophet would hesitate. It is characteristic of his vocation that its fulfilment involves great personal sacrifice. Moses must not only oppose the Pharaoh but later on must have the patience to teach and lead a rebellious people. Amos will be forced to leave the cool shade of the vineyards to castigate the social injustices of Israel at the shrine of Bethel. Hosea will be commanded to marry a prostitute as an essential part of his mission, while Jeremias is forbidden to marry at all, and Ezechiel suffers the sudden loss of 'the delight of his eyes' without the comfort of mourning her.<sup>2</sup> The aristocratic and cultured Isaias walks naked in the streets of Jerusalem for three humiliating years in order to proclaim his message.<sup>3</sup> Jeremias must suffer the calumnies of persecution, the shame and torture of imprisonment and finally exile.<sup>4</sup> Possibly the prophet did not see in detail the burden which would be imposed upon him; but sometimes the deep human sufferings he experienced were the source of his call.<sup>5</sup> In any case, the prophet knew that his office would be fulfilled only in terms of self-sacrifice and unconditional surrender to the all-Holy One. Is it any wonder then that before setting out on his career the prophet pauses and asks: 'Who am I to do this great thing?'

Moses sees yet another problem: how would the Hebrew slaves react to his appeal? Bad enough to face the Pharaoh without an army, but his plea for freedom would be ludicrous if the slaves themselves failed to support him. Hence Moses asks for credentials. 'But,' said Moses, 'when I go to the Israelites and say to them, "the God of your fathers has sent me to you," if they ask me, "What is His name?" what am I to tell them?'

<sup>6</sup> This is a most crucial question; much more depends on it than the Hebrews' acceptance of Moses. The answer to this question establishes the foundation of all

<sup>1</sup> cf. Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, pp. 80-5

<sup>2</sup> Hos. 1:2; Jer. 16:1-3; Ez. 24:16-18

<sup>3</sup> Is. 20:1-6

<sup>4</sup> Jer. 20:1-2 and 38:1-28

<sup>5</sup> cf. Vawter's remark on the marriage of Hosea in *The Conscience of Israel*, p. 106

<sup>6</sup> Ex. 3:13

future relations between God and His Chosen People. Moses is interested in learning much more than a label for the deity: he is seeking the key to the nature of God.<sup>1</sup> Properly to understand the question and the reply one must consider it against the background of the magical cultic practices of ancient Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Man cannot revere and worship an unknown God: he can only pray to a god whom he knows, not merely by name but intimately in his character and nature. If the god wishes man to worship him in a manner fitting his dignity, man must first recognise his true being. Now the name contains the essence of the person so that he is present in it. One who knows how to pronounce this name correctly can gain control over the god and manipulate the deity's power for his own purposes. The god, in his own person, may be unapproachable and unwilling to aid man, but once his name is known and his true nature revealed in it, he becomes subject to the whims of the man who knows how to pronounce it.

Moses' apparently simple question, then, contains a double purpose: first, it expresses man's wish to give God the honour due to Him; but, at the same time, it evidences his desire to gain control of Him and put God to work for man's selfish purposes.<sup>3</sup> Knowing this to be the attitude of the Hebrews, Moses puts the question in the hope of gaining that vital knowledge which would make himself, his message and his God more acceptable. How does God answer? 'God replied: "I am who am."' Then He added: 'This is what you shall tell the Israelites: "I am sent me to you."' He then goes on to repeat that as the God of their Fathers, He is concerned about their harsh treatment in Egypt and He has decided to lead them out into a land flowing with milk and honey.<sup>4</sup> What kind of a response is this? What has God revealed of Himself? The first impression is that God is giving nothing away, that He is not submitting to man's wish. Certainly God is here asserting His absolute sovereignty and supreme liberty in dealing with men. He refuses to submit His Being and power to the finite and petty ambitions of men. God insists on His freedom and the mystery of His Being.<sup>5</sup> Moses' work is not made any easier. But God's answer is also a pledge. The Hebrew word which is translated as 'I am who am' signifies 'He is present.' Hence the reply is not an assertion of the Being of God in the metaphysical sense of aseity or His absolute existence. The insistence is not on an eternal and universal existence from all eternity and in all places, nor is it a passive form of being. Rather the emphasis here is upon the

<sup>1</sup> cf. Buber, *The Prophetic Faith*, p. 27

<sup>2</sup> cf. Buber, *Moses, the Revelation and the Covenant*, pp. 51ff.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 20

<sup>4</sup> cf. Ex. 3:14-17

<sup>5</sup> Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 21

active presence of God in every here and now : He makes His Being known by the activity of His power in the present moment of man's history.<sup>1</sup> At this time God chooses to be present in order to help. The saving quality of His presence is further described : ' I am concerned about you and the way you are being treated in Egypt ; so I have decided to lead you up out of Egypt into . . . a land flowing with milk and honey.'<sup>2</sup> The name Yahweh is a revelation of the divine will, which God grants to Moses when He entrusts him with the good news, ' I am that I am '—that is to say, I am really and truly present, ready to act and to help, as I have always been.<sup>3</sup>

Thus in His answer to Moses, Yahweh preserves His freedom and rejects any attempt on man's part to control Him. He refuses to subject Himself to man but insists on His own transcendence. He will not curry favour or try to win acceptance by compromising His own Being. Nevertheless God makes known His intention of behaving as a propitious God, prepared to bless and to save His Chosen People. But would the people accept God under such terms? Would they submit to a God who promises to help them but at the same time insists on his absolute liberty? It might be too great a risk to submit themselves to such a God. And so Moses continues to resist. ' But,' objected Moses, ' suppose they will not believe me, nor listen to my plea? For they may say, " The Lord did not appear to you." ' <sup>4</sup> Moses voices his fear of failure : the people may not accept him and so he will expose himself to the ridicule of the mob on the one hand and the wrath of God on the other. The prophetic message is not always a welcome one and the prophet is not infrequently an unpopular figure. Moses foresees this and again expresses his reluctance to accept the burden of speaking on God's behalf. Events will show that Moses' anxiety was justified, for in spite of their deliverance from slavery the people still complain of Moses and God's treatment of them. In the desert of Sin the whole community grumbled against Moses and sighed for the fleshpots of Egypt,<sup>5</sup> and again at Raphidim they complained of a lack of water ; <sup>6</sup> nor can one ever forget their idolatry and rejection of the Mosaic law at the very foot of the holy mountain of Sinai.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout her history Israel would reject her prophets and declare their message unacceptable.<sup>8</sup> Amasia, the priest at Bethel, has

<sup>1</sup> cf. Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, p. 189. The justification for this translation and the subsequent interpretation can be found here and in the works to which Eichrodt refers.

<sup>2</sup> Ex. 3:16b-17

<sup>3</sup> cf. Eichrodt, p. 190

<sup>4</sup> Ex. 4:1

<sup>5</sup> Ex. 16:2-3

<sup>6</sup> Ex. 17:1-7

<sup>7</sup> Ex. ch. 32

<sup>8</sup> This does not, of course, mean that the rejection of the prophet and his message was unanimous. There was always in Israel at least the ' faithful remnant ' who welcomed his word and faithfully sought to know and do the will of God as revealed by His prophets.

Amos expelled from the sanctuary.<sup>1</sup> Isaias, when receiving his vocation in the Temple of Jerusalem, is warned that the people will neither accept nor understand him, but will harden their hearts to their own destruction.<sup>2</sup> Jeremias is persecuted by his own townspeople, who plot his assassination.<sup>3</sup> When God commissions Ezechiel, He advises him: ' . . . but the house of Israel will refuse to listen to you since they will not listen to me. For the whole house of Israel is stubborn of brow and obstinate in heart. But I will make your face as hard as theirs, and your brow as stubborn as theirs, like diamond, harder than flint. Fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, for they are a rebellious house. . . . Now go to the exiles, to your countrymen, and say to them: " Thus says the Lord God ! "—whether they heed or resist ! ' <sup>4</sup>

Moses now raises one last objection: ' If you please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past, nor recently, nor now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and tongue. ' <sup>5</sup> The message entrusted to Moses is most precious: it promises liberation from slavery, the possession of a fertile and spacious land, and God pledges Himself to accomplish this. Surely such a communication can be delivered only by the most eloquent speaker, especially so when it must be spoken to a hostile Pharaoh and an apathetic people? Centuries later, when God calls him, Jeremias will pose the same problem: ' Ah, Lord God, I know not how to speak; I am too young. ' <sup>6</sup> The word of God is a vital thing, the powerful instrument of salvation, and so it must be presented to the people without dilution or distortion. The prophet, the one who speaks on behalf of the Other, is weighed down with the responsibility of delivering this word. Is it any wonder then that the prophet quails before the responsibility? Moses flatly refuses. ' If you please, Lord, send someone else ! ' <sup>7</sup> At this God becomes angry with Moses and brusquely commands him to go down to Egypt and collaborate with his brother Aaron. From this time on Moses appears as the fearless spokesman, the prophet of Yahweh, who overwhelms the Pharaoh and mediates the life-giving Law of God to the Israelites.

How explain the sudden transformation of this timid shepherd into a courageous leader of men? Whence came his zeal, his energy, his

<sup>1</sup> Am. 7:10-13

<sup>2</sup> Is. 6:9-10. For the application of this passage to our Lord's experience of rejection by the Jews, cf. Edward F. Siegman, C.P.P.S., ' Teaching in Parables, ' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, xxii, pt 2 (April 1961), pp. 161-81.

<sup>3</sup> Jer. 11:18-12:6

<sup>4</sup> Ez. 3:7-11

<sup>6</sup> Jer. 1:6

<sup>5</sup> Ex. 4:10

<sup>7</sup> Ex. 4:14

bravery and complete devotion? The secret of Moses' and the prophets' vitality lay not in himself but solely in the God who called him and chose him for His service. To understand this transformation is to understand the vocation of the prophet. Fundamentally, the prophet is a man of faith. All the great qualities for which he is known in history—courage, zeal and integrity—are based upon the sure knowledge of, and utter confidence in, God. This faith results from the personal experience of a new reality, hitherto unknown to him and his people. With an overriding power that leaves no room for theoretical controversy but compels him to speak out, the prophet gives testimony to the holiness of God. Overcome by the realisation of this holiness and the transcendental personality of God, the prophet has an unique insight into the majesty and authority of God, an authority unlimited and independent.<sup>1</sup>

The prophet does not teach a new code of morality or construct a theological treatise. He has experienced God as a Person, overpowering, and compelling men to decision. It is in the name of this God that they lay their moral demands upon the people, because only in the moral will does the whole man commit himself. Thus the prophet seeks to make real in every man that majesty and power of God which he has already experienced.<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, the revelation of a personal God which originally struck fear into the heart of the prophet becomes the source of his zeal and courage when he faces the people.

Further, the man who objected to his vocation because of his inability to speak and present God's message properly and persuasively suddenly becomes fearless and eloquent. This flow of words springs from the prophet's conviction that it is not he who speaks but God who speaks through him. God tells Moses: 'I will assist both you and Aaron in speaking and will teach the two of you what you are to do. He shall speak to the people for you: he shall be your spokesman and you shall be as God to him.'<sup>3</sup> God reassures Jeremias: 'See, I place my words in your mouth.'<sup>4</sup> And he commands Ezechiel to eat the scroll and then go and speak to the house of Israel.<sup>5</sup>

But even more reassuring is Yahweh's pledge: 'I will be with you,' repeated throughout Israel's history not only to the prophets but to all who play a significant role in the history of salvation. The significance of this formula seems to be that God has chosen the person to whom these words are addressed to carry out a great and important work in the divine plan of salvation. Even though the

<sup>1</sup> cf. Eichrodt, pp. 344ff.

<sup>3</sup> Ex. 4:15-16

<sup>4</sup> Jer. 1:9

<sup>2</sup> cf. Eichrodt, pp. 363ff.

<sup>5</sup> Ez. 2:9; 3:7

man will be crushed by obstacles, both internal and external, divine assistance will enable him to accomplish his mission successfully.<sup>1</sup> This reassurance of divine aid in the face of all difficulties is given to Moses, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, and most importantly, the prophet remains steadfast in his vocation because he is convinced of the divine compulsion which spurs him on. This certainty is essential to the prophet's psychology and without it he would never have the courage or the determination to proclaim the word of God. 'Without such a sense of being held and of being carried, indeed of being driven and impelled by a higher power, they could never have begun to take their stand on the perilous frontier between the rejected and the newly created People of God, between the foundering world of the present and the emerging world of the future, between this age and the age to come.'<sup>3</sup>

One of the most striking elements in the history of the prophets is their complete subordination to the Spirit of Yahweh. Not only does this atmosphere of divine power working on and through the prophets pervade the story of Moses, but we find other prophets giving testimony to its force. Amos, for example, says: 'The lion roars, who will not be afraid! The Lord God speaks, who will not prophesy!'; and later on he answers Amasia, the priest: 'I was no prophet, nor have I belonged to a company of prophets; I was a shepherd and a dresser of sycamores. The Lord God took me from following a flock, and said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people, Israel."' <sup>4</sup> And who can read Jeremiah's confessions without being sensitive to the dreadful power of Yahweh driving the prophet to speak out? 'You duped me, O Lord, and I let myself be duped; you were too strong for me and you triumphed. All the day I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I must cry out, violence and outrage is my message; the word of the Lord has brought me derision and reproach all the day. I say to myself, I will not mention Him, I will speak in His name no more. But then it comes like fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones; I grow weary holding it in, I cannot endure it.'<sup>5</sup> Here is the heart of the prophetic vocation. Here is the glory and the strength, the secret of the prophet. God has taken possession of him and uses him for His own divine and loving purpose. The heroism of the prophet is derived from the fact that he is driven on by the power of God. The conscious submission of the prophet to

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the phrase, 'The Lord is with thee,' and a catalogue of the *loci* in the Old Testament where this phrase occurs, cf. U. Holzmeister, 'Dominus Tecum,' *Verbum Domini* xxiii (1943), pp. 232-7

<sup>2</sup> Ex. 3:12; Jer. 1:8, 20:11; Ez. 34:30

<sup>3</sup> Eichrodt, p. 390

<sup>4</sup> Am. 3:8; 7:14-16

<sup>5</sup> Jer. 20:7-9

the will of God in everything gives him freedom of action, the courage to reprehend kings, the sense to ignore popular opinion, the eloquence to convert people to the service of God. God becomes present to Israel through the prophet's compliance with His spirit. The faith of the prophet, built on a profound experience of God, is the core of his religious character, supporting and sustaining his zeal. It leads him to perfect surrender to God and complete trust that the power of God working through him can accomplish all things.

WILLIAM J. O'ROURKE, S.J.

*Canisius College,  
Buffalo, New York*

### BOOK REVIEWS

Frederick Moriarty, *Introducing the Old Testament*. Burns & Oates, 1962. pp. 242. 30s

C. S. Lewis in a recent work of literary criticism describes a good book as one which 'permits, invites or compels' good reading. I venture to suggest that Fr Moriarty's present work fulfils this definition. It is indeed a good book, to be well read.

His purpose is to present to his readers the pageant of nearly two thousand years of Israel's history through the lives and words of some of her main figures, heroes and writers. Through fifteen fine chapters he leads us from Abraham in the Patriarchal Age, through the Golden Age of David and the tragic times of the Exile, up to the threshold of 'the fullness of time' with the written work of Daniel in 168 B.C. In this passage the author continually points out how each of these men played their role in God's Divine Counsel for His people and the gradual revelation of Himself to them.

Each character and work, whether it be Moses, Saul, Elijah or the book of Job, is first fitted neatly and clearly into the times and circumstances of their age and origin. The author then treats of various themes which were outstanding in the lives and writing of each: the Covenant of Sinai through Moses, the conflict of Saul and David with its tragic climax at Endor and on the heights of Gilboa, the problem of the sufferings of the Just Man. His finest chapters are those upon the prophets: the men chosen, willingly or otherwise, to bear the burden of Yahweh's word to His sinful people. We see each one fulfilling his task as interpreter of the present conditions of either Israel or Judah in the light of their eternal Covenant with the One True God. Through