

Trinity College Cambridge
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God and Israel: The Pre-Exilic Prophets

1 Kings 22: 6–23

Mark 8: 27–33

The Revd Dr Andrew Macintosh

The quirky story of Micaiah ben Imlah which we heard as tonight's first lesson marks a very important development in the institution of early Israelite prophecy. The prophets were, from the 8th century BC onwards, and over three hundred years, to create Judaism from the smouldering ruins of the united kingdom and substantial empire founded by David, the king from Bethlehem. It was, of course, Judaism that became the vehicle by which monotheism was disseminated throughout the world, as well as its subsequent manifestations in Christianity and Islam. Beyond religion, the consequences of this development for philosophy and even for the growth of modern science were to be phenomenal.

Micaiah ben Imlah was one of the early prophets of the sort better known from the stories of Elijah and Elisha. The function of these early prophets was very frequently closely associated with warfare. If their weapons were words, we may reflect that propaganda remains a heavy weapon of war in our own times. In pre-exilic Israel prophets constituted an essential element in the prosecution of successful military endeavour. Thus, in the story of Micaiah, a leading prophet of the court made horns of iron and pronounced that, with them, the two kings of Israel and Judah would trounce their Syrian foes. Here we have a phenomenon, akin to sympathetic magic, often and long associated with prophetic pronouncements. In this, an action of symbolic representation is believed to effect, to bring about the result required in the real world. (Here I might add that I have personally witnessed members of the LMBC perform such rituals in association with the bumping races. And we all know what New Zealand rugby players do before their matches.) So it was that some 400 prophets declared by word and symbolic action their particular *HAKA*, promising their clients a great victory. The latter, however, were still wise enough to have some reservations about excited sycophants and they enquired if all the prophets had been consulted. So it was that Micaiah was summoned, even though the king of Israel said of him 'I hate him for he doth not prophecy good concerning me but only evil'. Initially Micaiah, too, urged on the kings to a great victory but then, when he was pressed, he stated that he would now report only what God had revealed; and the revelation was: 'Israel scattered like sheep without a shepherd'. Here, then, a prophet mediates objectively the will of God and does not seek, with the majority, to manipulate God into doing the will of his employers. This marks a very radical change of perception and the mediation of the will of God now has absolute precedence; and the sovereignty of God's will is perceived specifically by reference to the criteria of justice and goodness. The kings had been guilty, *inter alia*, of judicial murder and other high-handed abominations. Micaiah goes on to attribute the pronouncement of the majority

400 prophets also to God himself but this pronouncement was prompted by the agency of a lying spirit purposely sent into their midst. If that explanation is hard for us, in that we are reluctant to think much of a God who resorts to the use of entrapment by lying, we should recall that our categories are not those of the 8th century BC. Be that as it may, the decisively important meaning of this episode is quite clear: prophecy is no longer a tool by which human kings may manipulate the national God to intervene on their behalf; now, rather, it is the means by which God achieves his purposes and even his miracles. And this he does, as he always has, and always does, through the agency of human minds.

And what are the purposes of this God which his prophets were to effect and fulfil? The short answer is the creation of a society of human brotherhood characterized by justice, humanity and fair dealing. It was this God who had contrived to rescue a group of abject slaves from a mighty Egyptian Pharaoh. These freed slaves were led into the desert of Sinai, spatially and temporally, on the way from captivity to a promised land. And there in the desert was consummated a marriage between God and his people or his consort as she was perceived to be. The bride-price was justice and goodness, and the nation was to know her God/husband intimately rather as Abraham knew his wife Sarah and exactly as the 8th Century prophet Hosea was intimately one with his wife. More prosaically, people who had been slaves and then rescued were prompted to understand their axiomatic responsibility to those in their midst whom they might otherwise oppress.

The material with which such 8th century prophets worked was not impressive. The northern kingdom of Israel was a mess comparable with the Bosnia or Syria of our own times. In Judah things were more stable and the southern prophet Amos thundered his censure of the corrupt northerners who lived in ivory palaces but sold the poor and needy for the price of a pair of shoes. 'Let justice', he thundered, 'run down as waters and righteousness as a mighty stream'. In Judah, too, the great prophet of the state, Isaiah, faced with the towering threat of the oppressive Mesopotamian empires, propounded his dialectic, that such empires were mere tools in the hands of the God of justice, used temporarily to punish his nation for their injustices but destined ultimately to be discarded when their limited function was complete. For him it was axiomatic that God's goodness would always triumph. And even if the successes and atrocities of the wicked were enormous, Auschwitz-like, on the scale of evil, goodness would always triumph in the end. The large book which bears his name consists of three centuries worth of comment on this his central understanding. Yet, yet in 587 BC the Babylonian armies sacked Jerusalem and Israel as a notion and a nation was obliterated.

There were two factors which served, even in these circumstances, to validate Isaiah's thesis: first, the dispersal of the conquered Jews throughout the world facilitated the international spread of their ideas - they were now potentially the 'light to lighten the gentiles'; secondly the vindication of the early prophets and the consequent preservation of their words in writing, caused the scattered survivors in proto-synagogues to review their words in the context of the national disaster. Reviewing them, these Jews were moved formally and collectively to repent for all their large mistakes and failures.

Most, if not all monumental survivals from the ancient world consist of the arrogant boastings of kings and emperors. Their defeats and failures are passed over in silence. The one significant exception are the Jews, the only ancient people whose literary testimony recounts failure, defeat, disaster and then their consequent repentance. And they, the Jews, are the only ancient people to survive into the 21st century. It was the prophets whom so often they had hated 'for they do not prophesy good concerning me, but only evil' – it was the prophets who brought about this amazing and miraculous phenomenon.

And then another prophet, much later, also prophesied evil - but this time personally of himself. It happened on the road to Caesaria Philippi in upper Galilee. Rebuked for doing so by a loyal and impetuous follower, he insisted that it was the will of God that he, the long-expected Messiah, should suffer. His execution by crucifixion in a travesty of justice paralleled in some ways the earlier destruction of his nation. But as then, now supremely, the longer perspective enabled the initial reaction to be corrected: forgiveness, reconciliation and goodness triumphed and the wrath of man, the terrible mess he so often made, was turned to the praise of a holy and consistent God. The words of the goodly fellowship of the prophets triumphed as, inevitably, they always do.