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CHRIST THE PROPHET

"Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet," said a Samaritan woman to Jesus of Nazareth during her conversation with him at Jacob's well in Samaria (Jn 4:19). Hearing the words of Jesus, gave her a glimpse into his personality. She understood him first as a prophet. But, in fact, she did not know that the mystery of his personality was so unfathomable that he could not be adequately defined by any of the titles of charismatic figures or leaders of Israel. He was more than a rabbi. He was not their priest. He was also more than their prophets. However, as the ordinary Samaritan woman perceived, the title of the prophet befits him better than all others. In this article, we shall now try, with the help of the word of God in the Bible, to have a deeper understanding of the prophetic dimension of the mystery of Jesus' personality.

JESUS IN THE EYES OF HIS CONTEMPORARIES

When Jesus began to teach publicly his sublime doctrine of salvation and to work wonders, some of his contemporaries said: "John the Baptizer has been raised from the dead; that is why these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And still others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old" (Mk 6:14-15).

The emergence of a prophet was for the people of Jesus' time a very rare thing. For the Pharisaic Judaism, the spirit of prophecy had vanished from the time of Ezra (Cf. R. Meyer, TDNT VI, 816-819). The Essenes of Qumran were familiar with prophetic inspiration, but they knew it only as a charism in their expected Teacher of Righteousness, the Prophet of the end-time. Hence, prophecy at the time of Jesus was not a common feature, but something special, restricted to John the Baptist and to certain individual enthusiasts among the Zealots (Cf. Josephus, Ant., 20.5.1; 8.6; War 2.13.5).

However, the memories of great prophets like Elijah were very vivid in the minds of the contemporaries of Jesus. At the time of king Ahab, Elijah had worked miracles, proclaimed God's word boldly,

and lived so deeply in communion with God that he is believed to have been taken up into heaven at the end of his terrestrial life (1K 17ff, esp. 2K 2:11). The Jews of Jesus' time were also believed that he would return in an eschatological setting, as a precursor of the Messiah, based on the prophecy of Malachy (Mal 3:1, 23). It is with this belief in mind that the contemporaries of Jesus concluded that most probably Jesus was the manifestation of the great prophet Elijah who returned.

But the early Christian community were of the opinion that this manifestation of Elijah the precursor had to be seen not in Jesus, but in John the Baptist. This is reflected in the discourse of Jesus, in which, praising John, Jesus added: "and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come" (Mt 11:14). The contemporaries of Jesus had already experienced John the Baptist as a great prophet, who, like the early prophets of Israel, rebuked the people for their sins, and invited them for interior conversion (Mk 1:2-8).

So at Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus asked for the opinion of the people about himself, the disciples rightly reported: "John the Baptist; and others say Elijah; and others one of the prophets" (Mk 8:28).

At Naim, when Jesus raised to life the son of a widow, the crowd that was in the funeral procession was caught up with a reverential fear and said: "A great prophet has arisen among us!" (Lk 7:16). After witnessing the miracle of multiplication of the loaves, the people in Galilee said: "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world" (Jn 6:14). The people of Jesus' time were actually expecting the coming of the prophet Messiah foretold by Moses, who had said: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren - him you shall heed - just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' And the Lord said to me, 'They have rightly said all they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him'" (Dt 18:15-18).

At the Feast of the Tabernacle in Jerusalem, when Jesus revealed himself as the fountain of living water, some said: "This is really the prophet" (Jn 7:40). The blind man who received sight miraculously

said of Jesus: "He is a prophet" (Jn 9:17). During Jesus' solemn entry into Jerusalem, mounted on an ass and hailed by the crowd with the 'Hosanna'—shouts, "all the city was stirred, saying 'Who is this?' And the crowd said, "This is the prophet, Jesus of Nazareth of Galilee" (Mt 21:10–11). When Jesus spoke against the chief priests and the Pharisees, they tried to arrest him. But they feared the multitudes, "because they held him for a prophet" (Mt 21:46). Also in the conversation between the risen Christ in disguise and the two disciples who were returning to Emmaus in utter disappointment, they said that many things had happened in Jerusalem in those days "concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people" (Lk 24:19).

So, it is clear that the people of Jesus' time had perceived in his person a prophet, even though the full depth of his personality could not be discovered by them. Jesus himself has never explicitly claimed the title of the prophet for himself. At the same time he has not rejected it when the people called him prophet. There are a few occasions when he implicitly appropriated to himself the title of the prophet. For example, when he came to his home-town of Nazareth, his own people were not ready to believe in him; and then he said: "A prophet is not without honour except in his own country and his own house" (Mt 13:57). Similarly when he referred to Jonah, he claimed for himself a position even superior to that of the prophets of the Old Testament; he said: "... behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (Mt 12:41). In fact, Jesus' consciousness went beyond the stature of being a prophet. At Caesaria Philippi, when the disciples reported briefly of the opinions of the people leading to the conclusion that he is a prophet, he was not satisfied, and he asked his disciples further: "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered him: "You are the Christ" (Mk 8:29). Then he did not ask further questions. This shows that Jesus in his self-consciousness was more than a prophet, and he was the Christ.

This self-consciousness of Jesus, of being Christ the prophet, is reflected in the developed theology of the early Church, which exhorts one to see in Jesus the prophet like Moses of the end-time foretold by Moses in Dt 18:18 (Cf. Acts 3:22; 7:22b, 25, 37ff). Jesus is greater than Solomon, and greater than Jonah (Cf. Mt 12:4ff). That is to say, that he is the revelation of the wisdom of God that surpasses Solomon, and that he is greater than the prophets who in the Old

Testament called men to repentance. He is more than a mere prophet, destined to bring the consummated renewal of the time of salvation already announced in the past (Cf. Is 43:16-21; 54:9f).

THE REASONS WHY JESUS WAS CONSIDERED A PROPHET

Jesus was considered a prophet by the people of his time, because all the important characteristics of a prophet of the Old Testament were found exemplified in his personality.

Prophet, a Man of God

According to the Jewish tradition, a prophet is above all a "man of God" (Cf. 1Sm 2:27; 9:6-10; 1K 12:22; 13:1; 17:18, 24; 20:28; 2K 1:9-13; 4:38ff, 42ff; 6:1ff). Now in the New Testament Jesus is generally acknowledged as a man of God. Nicodemus, the learned rabbi said to Jesus: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him" (Jn 3:2). The blind man who received eyesight from Jesus defended him saying: "If this man (Jesus) were not from God, he could do nothing" (Jn 9:33). The great crowd which came to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover considered Jesus a man of God, as they took him in procession shouting: "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord" (Jn 12:13). The Roman centurion, who pleaded with Jesus to cure his dying servant, acknowledged him in his heart as a man of God (Mt 8:5-13). Jairus, the Synagogue official, who requested Jesus to come and lay his hands on his daughter who had just died, had taken Jesus for a man of God (Mt 9:18ff). The Syro-phoenician woman, who pleaded with Jesus to cast out the devil out of her daughter, had the conviction that Jesus was a man of God (Mk 7:24-30). Thus, all the people—the Jews as well as non-Jews, the learned as well as the illiterate—all have acknowledged Jesus as a man of God like one of the great prophets of the Old Testament.

Prophet, a Seer

In the OT, a prophet was known as a "seer." Thus, in the book of Samuel it is stated: "He who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer" (1Sm 9:9; cf. 1Sm 9:11, 18, 19; 2Sm 24:11; Am 7:12). In the NT even though such a title is not explicitly applied to Jesus, it is implied that he is the most perfect seer. So Jesus said to Nicodemus:

"I tell you most solemnly, we speak only about what we know and witness to what we have seen" (Jn 3:11). On another occasion Jesus said to the Jews: "I speak of what I have seen with my Father" (Jn 8:38; Jn 5:19-20). In the Gospel of John Jesus is presented as the incarnate Word of God, who is the perfect seer, and thereby also the perfect revealer of God. So the evangelist says: "No one has ever seen God, except the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, who has made him known" (Jn 1:18).

A Prophet Converses with God

Many persons in the early history of Israel were given the title of prophet by retrojection, because they converse with God. Thus for example, Abraham (Gen 20) and Moses (Num 12:6-8; Dt 34:10; 18:15-19) were called prophets. More than Abraham and Moses, Jesus was intimately conversing with God, calling Him his Father. For example, in moments of his anguish he said: "Now my soul is troubled, what shall I say: Father, save me from this hour? But it was for this very reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" Then, "a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again'" (Jn 12:27-28; cf. 17:1ff).

A Prophet being Inspired by God, Speaks in the name of God

Aaron (Ex 7:1) and Miriam (Ex 15:20) were also given the title of prophet, because they were inspired by God and spoke in the name of God. Jesus also spoke in the name of God, and only in the name of God. For, he said: "The word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me" (Jn 14:24); "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me" (Jn 7:16).

A Prophet has an Immediate Mystical Experience of God

The prophets of the OT were men, who had immediate mystical experience of God. And from their experience they revealed the nature and character of God, and they also pointed out the implication of such a nature and character of God for human thought and action. Jesus had that experience in the highest degree. He says that he lives by his heavenly Father (Jn 6:57). He and his Father are mutually present to one another constantly and totally (Jn 5:20; 8:16; 16:32; 10:38; 14:10). Jesus was conscious of his immediate communion with God his Father. So he says: "Even though you do not believe

me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I in the Father" (Jn 10:38). At the Last Supper he asked his disciples: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works" (Jn 14:10). Jesus knows the Father and the Father knows him in a perfect manner (Cf. Jn 10:15). There is absolute communion between Jesus and his Father so that he could say: "I and my Father are one" (Jn 10:30).

Just like the prophets of the OT, Jesus also taught the people about the true nature and character of God, and their implications to the life of man on earth. People called him rabbi, and he willingly accepted that title (Cf. Jn 3:2, 10; 11:28; 13:13-14). Although he had never gone to any school (Jn 7:15), he used a method of teaching which was appropriate (Jn 7:17). "He taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (Mt 7:29). Since he is the one who descended from heaven (Jn 3:2, 12, 13), he could teach from his first-hand experience of God. As he is the Word of God incarnate, he is the truth, and thereby the perfect revelation and the revealer of God to mankind (Jn 1:1-18).

A Prophet is one filled with the Spirit of God

According to the Old Testament, a prophet is a man of the Spirit of God *par excellence*. The Spirit of God was the source of all prophetic inspirations. So the prophet Micaiah claimed: "I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord and with justice and might to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (Mic 3:8). In the NT, Jesus was a person filled with that Spirit of God in a supreme way. In his very conception there was a special "overshadowing" of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35). When he received baptism in Jordan, the Spirit of God descended upon him in a conspicuous manner, and a voice came from heaven, "You are my son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you" (Cf. Lk 3:22; Mt 3:13-17; Mk 1:9-11; Jn 1:32-34). Jesus was then "filled with the Holy Spirit" and "led by the Spirit" (Lk 4:1). He began to preach "with the power of the Spirit in him" (Lk 4:14). In the Synagogue of Nazareth he read the passage of Isaiah 61:1-2, and appropriated it to himself: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those

who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Lk 4:16-22).

Jesus was not only filled with the Spirit of God, but also became the giver of that Spirit to men. To the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well he promised to give this Spirit in the symbol of "living water" (Jn 4:10, 14). At the Feast of the Tabernacle, he invited the crowd to come to him and drink from him the "living water" of the Holy Spirit (Jn 7:37-39).

The prophets of the OT had foretold an outpouring of the Spirit of God on the community of believers at the eschatological time of salvation (Joel 2:28; Zech 12:10; Is 32:15; 44:3-4; Ez 39:29). Jesus showed that such a time has already dawned with his arrival. So he promised the Spirit of God to his followers (Jn 14:26; 16:7-15). When he left the world, he told his disciples to wait in prayer to receive the Holy Spirit. And on the day of the Pentecost, there took place the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the redeemed community (Lk 24:49; Acts 2:1-47).

A Prophet is a Person of Charisma of the Word of God

The great prophets of the OT have testified clearly how intensely they had experienced the charisma of the Word of God. Isaiah describes it in his call-vision, in which his lips were purified to receive the Word of God (Is 6:1-13). Jeremiah explains it as the coming of the Word to him, with which the Lord touched his mouth: "Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, 'Behold I have put my Words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and break down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant'" (Jr 1:9-10). Ezekiel describes it through a vision, in which he was asked to eat a scroll of the Word of God (Ez 2:2-3). In all these experiences there is always an element of compulsion by a personal will, that is of Yahweh (Cf. Jr 1:7; 6:11; 20:9; Am 3:8). Jesus also was a person of such a charisma, and he was well aware of it when he declared it in the Synagogue of Nazareth (Lk 4:16-24). Just like the prophets of the OT, he had also felt the inner compulsion of the will of his Father. So he said: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work" (Jn 4:34). He often speaks of his hour of "glory," to which his whole being was tending (Jn 2:4), and for which he came to this world (Jn 12:27). His "glory" shines forth in his willing renouncement of all glory that is not willed by his Father (Cf. Jn 5:41; 8:49-50). He speaks only what the Father gave him power to speak (Jn 8:27; 12:49-50).

A Prophet receives the Word of God and reveals to the People

A prophet according to the OT, is one who receives the Word of God and reveals it to the people. He realizes the intervention of God in the history of man and of nature, and interprets them in the light of the Word he received from God. After having perceived the will of God with his mystical intuition, he reveals it to the people, so that they may submit themselves to the plans of God for the present as well as for the future. This will of God for his people is made known to them through the divine oracles uttered by the prophets (e.g. 2Sm 7; Is 7:13ff; 10:24ff; 14:22ff; Jr 23:1ff; 39:15ff; Ez 36:1ff; 1Sm 28:6; 1K 14:2; 2K 3:11; 22:13). These divine oracles originally fell under four categories: Oracles of threat, promise, reproach and admonition.

Jesus knows perfectly the will of God and proclaims it to the people. But here, he is superior to all the prophets. He is not merely receiving the word from God, but himself is the Word of God incarnate. From all eternity he is with God; everything is created in him, through him and for him; he is the perfect revelation of God, through whom God's grace and fidelity to his people became manifested in a tangible way (Jn 1:1-18). As a rabbi of authority, he taught the people the will of God concerning their present and future (Cf. Mt 5-7, 13, 24, 25; Jn 13-17). Just like the prophets of the OT, who criticised and rebuked kings and the people who did not live according to God's will (e.g. 2Sm 12:1-14; 1K 14:1-19), Jesus has sharply criticised the leaders of the people and all those who were leading a life contrary to God's will (Cf. Mt 23). He told them: "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like white-washed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Mt 23:27).

A Prophet Occasionally Performs Symbolic Acts

The great prophets of the OT have occasionally performed symbolic acts as part of their prophecy (e.g. Is 20:1ff; Jr 13:1-11; 19:1-13; Ez 4:1-5:17). Sometimes the events of his life or features in his manner of life have prophetic significance (e.g. Jr 16:1ff; Ez 24:15ff; Hos 1-3). The prophetic action is an extension of the prophetic word. Through such symbolic acts, accompanied by the word, the divine message is forcefully and vividly communicated to the people.

Jesus too has performed such symbolic, prophetic actions. Once when he looked for figs on a tree and could not find any, he cursed that fruitless fig-tree, and it immediately withered up to its roots. Through this symbolic action Jesus taught his disciples that God rejects Judaism as well as any individual who does not produce the fruit which God expects of him (Mk 11:12-14, 20-22). In order to show God's opposition to the Jewish hypocritical worship, Jesus took up the dangerous and daring symbolic action of cleansing the temple of Jerusalem. "Making a whip of cords, he drove them all (merchants), with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; you shall not make my Father's house a house of trade" (Jn 2:15-16).

Prophets, "Servants of Yahweh"

The prophets of the OT were called servants of Yahweh (eg. Ez 38:17). Isaiah sings of a special prophet who was a special servant of Yahweh. He draws a beautiful and amazing portrait of that Servant of God in his four songs (Is 42:1-9; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). These songs present a mysterious Servant of Yahweh, who is chosen by God. Filled with his Spirit, he carries out his mission of establishing righteousness on earth, himself having no sin, suffering and dying for the sin of others, bringing thus salvation to all, and finally exalted by God and becoming the light of the nations.

Jesus, in his life, has appropriated to himself this prophetic image of the Servant of Yahweh. Although he did not know sin, he joined with the sinners to receive baptism in Jordan from John the Baptist. When he had thus humbled himself, the voice of God was heard: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). This is an echo of Yahweh's voice in the Servant Song: "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights" (Is 42:1; cf. Mt 12:15-21). In the Synagogue of Nazareth, by reading Is 61:1-2, Jesus declared publicly his prophetic mission (Lk 4:17-21). He had always to fight against the false messianic expectation of his contemporaries, who expected only a royal Messiah filled with worldly pomp and glory. In Galilee, after the multiplication of the loaves, "the people, seeing this sign that he had given, said, 'This really is the prophet who is to come into the world.' Jesus, who could see they were about to come and take him by force and make him king, escaped back to the hills by himself" (Jn 6:14-15).

When Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from his plan of following the path of suffering after the model of the Servant of Yahweh, Jesus rebuked him (Mt 16:21-23). When Jesus solemnly entered the city of Jerusalem with the 'Hosanna'-procession, he preferred to sit on an ass rather than mount a horse. This was again to teach the people that he was coming to the city not as a king wielding power, according to their false messianic expectation, but as the humble royal Messiah as foreseen by the prophets of the OT (Zech 9:9f).

At the Last Supper, Jesus showed himself as the servant of all by washing the feet of his disciples (Jn 13; 1-16). This feet-washing was, in fact, a symbolic prophetic action, which represented Jesus' supreme act of self-emptying, which had to be fulfilled on the cross on which he had to suffer and die as the Servant of Yahweh foreseen by Isaiah.

Our study leads us to the conclusion that Jesus Christ is a prophet. But he is, at the same time, more than a prophet. He is the prophet *par excellence*, the unique prophet foretold by the OT prophets. He is the prophet, the Servant of God, the anointed of God, the Christ who brought salvation to humankind through his teaching, suffering, death and resurrection.