

Paul Kalluveetil

CSWR, Dharmaram

## THE GURU AND THE HEBREW CONCEPT OF THE PROPHET

“ You must not be called ‘ master ’; for you have one ‘ Master ’, and you are all brothers . . . Nor must you be called ‘ teacher ’; for you have one ‘ Teacher ’— the Messiah ” (Mt 23, 8-10).

These words of Christ elucidate the biblical concept of *guru*, the spiritual guide or master. The Bible knows only one *guru*, God. Human teachers are sent by him to act as his envoys. He provides them their identity as spiritual guides. They are commissioned to transmit or reveal his words to men, and thus guide the people in his path. Dt 18, 18 expresses this very well : “ I (God) will put my words in his (prophet’s) mouth and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ” These interpreters of the divine will had the function of mediators between God and man.

The Old Testament prophet played the role of *guru* in this representative sense. The word is used throughout the study in this sense. But the prophet was not the only spiritual master or religious guide in ancient Israel. Chapters 17-18 of the Book of Judges recount the story of a young Levite who served as preceptor and priest of the family of Micha, and later, of the whole Danite tribe.

### Inoculating Titles

The ordinary Hebrew word for prophet, *nābi*’ denotes “ one who is called (by God) ” or “ recipient of the (divine) announcements. ”<sup>1</sup> This word illustrates the basic function of a prophet. He is the envoy who announces or communicates God’s words to man. It is his sacred task to reveal the divine will in this world. Hosea (9, 7f) referred to himself as *nābi*’. Habakkuk (1, 1), Haggai (1, 1.3.12; 2, 1.10) and

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1. The Hebrew word is related to the Akkadian cognate *nabû* which means “ to call ”, “ to announce. ”

Zechariah identified themselves as God's men by this title. Jeremiah (1, 5) and Ezekiel (2, 5) were appointed as *nebi'im*, the former to the nations, the latter to the people of Israel.

Two other titles for a spiritual guide, *hōzeh* and *rō'eh*, are almost synonymous in meaning : seer, visionary.<sup>2</sup> The prophets are said to have been in contact with the divine world. They communicated to men what they saw in dreams or visions (Num 12, 6). According to Am 3, 7 God does nothing without first revealing his secrets to the prophets. As Is 2; Jer 38, 21; and Am 1, 1 attest, the prophetic revelations are regarded as visions.<sup>3</sup>

Another title, "man of God" expresses the spiritual guide's intimacy with God.<sup>4</sup> As an envoy who deals with the word of God, he is regarded as being invested with supernatural powers. Thus Saul approached the seer Samuel for guidance, since "everything he said came true" (1 Sam 9, 6). Man of God is defined in 1 Kg 17, 24 as a holy person through whom the Lord actually speaks. Indeed, the biblical narratives depict him as a man who speaks the word of God : 1 Kg 12, 22; 13, 2. 4. 6. 7. 8. 11. 12. 14. 21. 29; 2 Kg 4, 7. 21; 8, 2. 4. 11; 13, 19; Dt 33, 1; and Jos 14, 6. His prayers had the power to produce the desired results (1 Kg 13, 6). He performs miracles in the name of God (1 Kg 13, 3-6. 11). People addressed Elijah and Elisha by this title (1 Kg 17, 18. 24; 2 Kg 1, 9. 13; 4, 9). An unnamed prophet is simply called "man of God" throughout the narrative in 1 Kg 13. Sometimes prophets worked wonders by invoking the authority implied in this title. To cite an instance from the story of Elijah : "If I am a man of God", the prophet said, "may fire come down from heaven and kill you and your men." At once fire came down and killed the officer and his men (2 Kg 1, 10).

Hos 9, 7 designates a spiritual guide as "man of the spirit", since he is often overcome by the spirit of God : 1 Sam 10, 6; 1 Kg 18, 12; 22, 21f; 2 Kg 2, 9. 16; cf. Is 61, 1. The divine spirit guided his words and behaviour. It is even said that this spirit carried him to different places (cf. 1 Kg 18, 12).

2. The Biblical concept of *rō'eh* strikingly corresponds to that of the Ancient Babylonian *bāru* : see A. Halder, *Associations of Cult Prophets Among the Ancient Semites* (Uppsala : 1945).
3. According to the Semitic mentality, "seeing" could imply reception of all kinds of mental impression.
4. The Hebrew title is analogous to the Akkadian *amēl-ili* : see Halder, *Associations of Cult Prophets*, pp. 29f; 126 ff.

The title "servant of God" defines the nature of the prophet's status. It implies dependence and subservience. The prophet's words and actions come from God. The prophetic identity results from his relationship with the deity. He stands for God; he imparts God's ideas to man. He guides the people along the divine path. God himself frequently refers to the prophets as his servants whom he sent as his envoys : Is 20, 3; Jer 7, 25; 26, 5; 29, 19; 35, 15; 44, 4; Zech 1, 6; cf. Jer 25, 4. They speak his words : 1 Kg 14, 18; 2 Kg 14, 25 and execute his commands Ezr 9, 11. God, on the other hand, always comes to the aid of his envoys. He proves the identity of Elijah as his true servant (cf. 1 Kg 18, 36). He avenges the blood of his men upon the people (2 Kg 9, 7).

Further, spiritual guides of Israel are qualified in the Bible as "messenger of God" (Is 44, 26); and his "watchman" (Ez 3, 17). The title "chariotry and horsemen of Israel" which is attributed to Elijah and Elisha (2 Kg 2, 12; 13, 14) probably referred to their guidance and leadership of the country. The prophet as preceptor or counsellor is frequently addressed as *āb*, "father"<sup>5</sup> : 2 Kg 2, 12; 6, 21; 13, 14; 1 Sam 10, 12.

### Called and Confirmed

No one could assume for himself the prophetic office. It is God who calls his envoys. He sends, commissions and speaks to them (cf. Jer 23, 21). Fortunately, the accounts of the call given to major spiritual guides have come down to us.<sup>6</sup> Persons belonging to different statuses in life were elevated to this office. This list includes a shepherd-farmer like Amos (7, 14), Elisha the farmer (1 Kg 19, 19), aristocrats like Isaiah, priests like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, persons from the countryside like Micah and Uriah (cf. Jer 26, 20). The Bible also mentions prophetesses. Housewives like Huldah (2 Kg 22, 14 = 2 Chr 34, 22) and Deborah (Jg 4, 4), the widow Anna (Lk 2, 36), Miriam the sister of Moses (Ex 15, 20), and Noadiah (Neh 6, 14) appear on the scene.

Chapter 6 of Isaiah records the ecstatic experience of his call. It consisted of theophany, purification of his lips, commission and revelation of the content of his preaching. Jeremiah's vision-account

5. See Antony Phillips, "The Ecstatic's Father", *Words and Meanings*, edited by P. R. Ackroyd and B. Lindars (Cambridge : 1968), pp. 183-194.

6. For a detailed study of the call narratives : J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford : 1973), pp. 182-197.

(1, 4-19) records his initial resistance to the divine call. But the young man was enticed and overpowered by the deity (cf. 20, 7). God put his words in his mouth and appointed him as his envoy. The elaborate and pictorial story of Ezekiel's call (1-3) begins with theophany and commission. He was then given to eat a scroll containing the main contents of the proclamation. There followed words of encouragement. Then a spirit lifted him up and took him to the land of his mission. These examples clearly show how God prepared a person for the task of proclaiming the divine word. One is made "a fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of bronze to stand fast against . . . . . the kings, princes . . . priests and people" (Jer 1, 18).

### **A Life of Charism**

The mode of life of the prophets deserves special attention. There did not exist any code which regulated the prophetic activities. The biblical *guru* was a man of freedom, one who followed the promptings of the spirit. Thus there was no room for a single delineated type of prophetic life. Some preceptors wandered from place to place, proclaiming the word of God. Some attached themselves to sanctuaries. Joel, Habakkuk and Zephaniah were cult prophets. The early envoys of God maintained close relationship with particular shrines. Samuel associated himself with the shrines of Shiloh and Ramah. He used to bless the offering at the beginning of the feast (1 Sam 9, 13). Shiloh also played an important role in the life of Abiyah. The unnamed prophet of 1 Kg 13 had connections with the sanctuary of Bethel. Elisha was related to Gilgal. As a priest-prophet Ezekiel had keen interest in temple and cult (cf. 1-3 and 40-48). Haggai and Zechariah intervened in favour of the reconstruction of the temple. It seems that a good number of the prophets lived in the precincts of holy places. These facts may explain the strong cultic dimension of the prophecy.

Prophets were deeply involved in the politics of their times. Elisha orchestrated the downfall of Ahab dynasty and the royal emergence of Jehu (2 Kg 9-10). Further, he secured for a Hebrew king victory over the Syrian army (2 Kg 13). The same prophet played an active role in settling the question of succession to the Damascus throne (2 Kg 8, 7ff; cf 1 Kg 19, 15). Isaiah practically controlled the policies of Judah. But the prophetic activities emerged from the politics of God. The preceptors were directly concerned with the reign of God on the earth. The prophets, who maintained an intimate relationship with royal families, are generally known as court prophets. Natan and Gad belonged to this category of royal counsellors (1 Kg 1, 8-10;

2 Sam 7; 24, 11; 1 Chr 21, 9; 2 Chr 29, 25). They advised King David on political and moral problems. Their intimate relationship with David did not prevent them from vigorously condemning the King for his sins.

The biblical texts refer to the community life of some preceptors, which was analogous to the Indian *gurukulavāsa*. Accepting a famous prophet as *guru*, they devoted themselves to a life of study and service. These disciples are called *bene han ebi 'im*, "sons of the prophets." Their preceptor trained them in the ways of God, and now and then sent them on errands. Thus the *guru* Elisha summoned one of his disciples and said: "Hitch up your cloak, take this flask of oil with you and go to Ramoth-Gilead ... you will find Jehu ... lead him through to an inner room. Then take the flask and pour the oil on his head and say: This is the word of the Lord: I anoint you King over Israel'. Then open the door and flee for your life" (2 Kg 9, 1-3). These coenobitic prophets used to sit at the feet of the *guru* (2 Kg 4, 38; 6, 1) and listen to his words. Meals were served in common (4, 38ff. 42 ff). These persons embraced a life of abject poverty (2 Kg 4, 1ff. 38 ff). They did not even possess an axe to fell the trunk (2 Kg 6, 5). The disciples lived in a small house which they themselves built (6, 1). The *guru* had often to provide for the material needs of his "sons." Elisha worked miracles to support his community. And the disciples held their *guru* in great respect. In coming into his presence they bowed to the ground (2, 15). They addressed him as *adoni* "master" (6, 5) and referred to themselves as "your servants" (2, 15; 4, 1; 6, 3).

These prophet-disciples often engaged in ecstatic exercises (1 Sam 10, 10-13). They seem to have borne a special mark on the forehead (cf. 1 Kg 20, 38-41). Elijah wore a cloak of animal skins fastened with a leather belt (2 Kg 1, 8). People easily recognized him as the *guru* by this attire. We do not know whether all the preceptors were clothed in the same manner.

The account of 2 Kg 4, 42-44 puts the number of Elisha's disciples around hundred. Not all of them always lived together. According to 2, 3-5; 4, 38 they were located at different holy places such as Bethel, Jericho and Gilgal. Some of them were married.

The divine call to preceptorship did not always take place in a theophanic setting. Take the case of Elisha. He was made the successor of Elisha by a simple ceremony, 1 Kg 19, 16-19. Elijah,

following the divine instruction, took off his cloak and put it on Elisha. When Elijah's disciples saw that Elisha was invested with the authority and charism of their master, they accepted him as their new *guru* (2 Kg 2, 15).

Lastly, a few prophets have recorded in writing their visions and judgement/salvation oracles. Some of them contain autobiographical details which depict how the call to the preceptorship transformed their personal life. The list of the major literary prophets comprises three names : Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The brief writings of twelve "minor" prophets are included in the Bible.

### **Counsellors and Mediators**

Ordinary citizens as well as members of the royal families (even those of foreign nations) often approached the prophets for consultation. Some days were specially set apart for this purpose. On the days of New Moon and Sabbath, people flocked together before the house of Elisha (2 Kg 4, 23). People for various purposes visited the preceptors with gifts. The young man Saul brought to Samuel a silver coin of three grams (1 Sam 9, 8); he wanted to know the whereabouts of his father's missing donkeys. King Jeroboam sent his wife with ten loaves, some cakes and a jar of honey, to Abijah. The prophet was requested to tell her whether her son would recover from his illness (1 Kg 14, 1-17). For a similar purpose the royal envoy of the sick Benhadad met Elisha with forty camel-loads of the finest wares of Syria (2 Kg 8, 8-13). King Josiah consulted the prophetess Huldah concerning the Book of the Law (22, 14-20). Sometimes the kings sent for the preceptors. Thus Micaiah was summoned by Ahab to consult him about the outcome of the war with Syria (1 Kg 22, 15-28). Now and then the prophets, of their own accord, went to the kings to offer counsel about current affairs: 1 Kg 20, 13.22.28; 12, 22 ff; cf. 2 Chr 28, 9-20.

Prophets were called to "represent the people before God and bring their causes to Him" (Ex 18, 19). By virtue of their office, these preceptors had to offer pleas and petitions on behalf of the people and plead with God (cf. Jer 7, 16). Accordingly, we find them interceding on behalf of the people (Am 7, 2.5; Num 12, 13; Ex 32, 11-13) and praying for them (1 Kg 13, 1-6; 17, 20; 2 Kg 4, 33; cf. Gen 20, 7). People implored them for prayers in times of distress (Is 37, 1-7). And their prayers worked wonders the dead came back to life; 1 Kg 17, 22; 2 Kg 4, 35 ff.

### Symbols Speak

The literary prophets, especially Ezekiel and Second Isaiah, were gifted with poetic imagination. They frequently expressed their thoughts in symbolic language. Chapters 16, 20 and 23 of Ezekiel exhibit passages of purple prose and bizarre images. Isaiah depicts the coming golden age of Israel in extravagant metaphors<sup>7</sup>: 41, 5.15.18; 43, 19.20;55, 12.13.

Prophets often resorted to symbolic actions to energize their word.<sup>8</sup> These symbols, one might say, made their word visible. These graphic and pictorial extensions of the word served to convince the audience that the proclaimed event would certainly take place. This, in turn, would normally arouse in them fear and grief, hope and trust.

Hosea in his person was God's dramatized word, the living symbol of the history of God's people. His wanton wife represented the disloyal Israel. His love for this adulterous woman signified God's love for the unfaithful people. The inflicted chastisement symbolized the eventual punishment of Israel. Hosea's children bore symbolic names: Lo-ruhamah ("Without Mercy") and Lo-ammi ("Not-My-People") pointed to the total rejection of the impenitent people. Also Isaiah's two sons were given symbolic names (7, 3; 8, 3) which revealed the future of the nation. Chapter 20 recounts how the prophet moved about naked and barefoot as a sign and portent against Egypt and Cush.

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel performed symbolic actions. Once Jeremiah, following the divine instructions, bought a clay jar and shattered it to pieces in front of the crowd saying: "Thus says the Lord Almighty: I will smash this nation and this city just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired" (19, 10 ff). Ezekiel was "a sign to the people" (12, 6.11). He proclaimed the destruction of Jerusalem by a strong act described in chapter 5: he shaved off his beard and hair which he weighed on the scales and divided into three parts; a third of it he chopped with the sword all round the city; the remaining third was scattered to the winds. The prophet's action, which symbolized the coming deportation of the people, is quite

7. See Remi Lack, *La Symbolique du Livre d'Isaie* (AB 59) (Rome: 1973).

8. On the symbolic actions of the prophets: G. Fohrer, *Die symbolischen Handlungen der Propheten* (ATANT 25) (Zurich: 1953).

interesting. He packed his belongings in bright daylight in full view of the people and at evening he broke through the city-wall with his hands; when dusk fell he covered his face, shouldered his pack and carried it out of the city before the eyes of the people (cf. 12, 1-16).

### **Uprooting and Building**

A prophet's mission is summarized in God's words to Jeremiah in 1, 10: "See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms, to pull down and to uproot, to destroy and to demolish, to build and to plant." He confronted man with God-in-history. His role was that of a performing person who actively intervened in history. These critics of the community, trenchantly denounced the existing corruptions and oppression. This is evident, especially in the oracles of Amos. They virulently attacked the irreligious cultic structures of the society: Is 1, 10-15; 58, 1-5; 12, 11; Am 4, 4.5; 5, 25; Mic 6, 6-8. They rejected and delegitimized the human politics of exploitation and countered it with the divine politics of loving justice.<sup>9</sup> They denounced the economics of affluence and religion of static triumphalism, and preached an economics of equality and a religion of God's freedom. These prophets wanted to energize people by God's vision of life. Thus they tried hard to nurture, nourish and evoke a new consciousness and perception in the community. Prophecy was a definite call to decide for or against God. This decision calls forth a radical change in the vision of life.

One can speak of two poles of prophecy.<sup>10</sup> Most oracles expressed indictment and repudiation of the society: Is 1, 7-9; 6, 11-12; Am 7, 7-9; 8, 1-3; 9, 1-4; Hos 10, 13-15; Mic 1-3; Jer 4, 18-26; 15, 5-9; Ez 9. This negative pole of the dialectic exhibits the "NO of God against the people."<sup>11</sup> A set of speeches was, however, of positive salvific character: these speeches contained God's compassion and pardon, his promises of prosperity; Is 2, 2-4; 4; 9, 1-6; 11, 1-9; 12; 40-55; Am 9, 11-15; Hos 2, 16-25; Mic 4, 1-4; 5; Jer 23, 5-6; 31; 33; Ez 34; 36; 37. This "YES of God for the people" indicated the positive pole of prophecy.

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9. W. Bruggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: 1978), poignantly presents these ideas.

10. R. P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed* (London: 1979), pp. 16-21

11. See the classical study of C. Westermann of the "judgment"-oracles; *Grundformen prophetischer Rede* (München: 1971).



### “Thus Says the Lord”

The preceptors introduced their speeches under this title. It points to the divine origin of their words. They, as God's messengers, were communicating the desire or decisions of their patron. But they functioned not as mere representatives, but as heralds of the divine presence. The deity was there in their words as the one who “pushes” or “drives forward”<sup>12</sup> the action formulated by the words. For the Semites, the word possessed creative energy: it could actualize the spoken reality. Ez 37 illustrates the efficacy of the divine word: the dry bones became alive by the power of God's word! The divine word is often compared to fire, Jer 5, 14: “I will make my words a fire in your mouth; and it shall burn up this people like brushwood.” Cf. also Sir 48, 1. The phrase “Thus says the Lord” introduces either condemnation or salvation. To cite an instance of the former case which predominated the prophetic speeches, 2 Kg 22, 15-18: “Thus says the Lord! I am bringing disaster on this place and its inhabitants ... because they have forsaken me ... therefore my wrath is kindled ... and will not be quenched.”

### Living Paradox

The spiritual guides of Israel were fully conscious of the power of the word. Hence their aversion and anguish in pronouncing the words of doom. By the very act of proclamation they were releasing the power to produce the debacle. They were collaborators in the destruction of their beloved country. Naturally they too grieved because of the grief of their people. Take the case of Jeremiah. This spokesman of doom was crushed by the tremendous responsibility. His inner conflicts are recorded in 20, 7-18: “Cursed be the day I was born! Why did I come forth from the womb to know only trouble and sorrow, and to end my days in shame? ... O Lord, you have duped me and I have been your dupe ... Whenever I speak I must cry out and proclaim violence and destruction. I am reproached and mocked all the time for uttering the word of the Lord. But if I say: ‘I will not mention him or speak any more in his name’, his word is in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.” The prophet, because of his office, was jeered at all day long. Indeed, it deeply affected his personal life: Jer 16, 1 ff; Ez 24, 15 ff; Hos 1 and 3. His prophetic call condemned

12. This is the primary meaning of the Hebrew root *dbr*,

Jeremiah to a solitary life. A preceptor has to become a sign for the people : Is 8, 18; 20, 3. Finally, his call led him to martyrdom : Jer 37 and 38.

### **False Gurus**

The biblical period bears witness to the emergence of false prophets.<sup>13</sup> Some people seem to have arrogated to themselves this status as a profession for earning a living : Jer 23, 31; Ez 13, 6.7; Mic 3, 5. They did not hesitate to speak in the name of God even though He had not sent them : Jer 14, 14 f; 23, 21.32; 27, 15; 28, 15; 29, 9.31; Ez 6f. They prophesied falsehood and vanity : Jer 5, 31; 6, 13; 8, 10; 14, 13f; 23, 14.25f : 32; 27, 9f. 14-16; 29, 8f; Ez 13, 6-9. This band spoke what men would like to hear; they predicted success in war or a speedy end to exile : Jer 14, 13; 27, 9.14.16; 29, 8.10. Micah 2, 11 suggests that they preached even of intoxicating beverages ! They often misrepresented the true situation by making it appear better than it was : Ez 13, 10-15; 22, 28. These wretched men did all these things for money : Mic 3, 5-7. Of course, their words originated from their own hearts : Jer 14, 14; 23, 16.26; Ez 13, 2f. They were guilty of leading immoral lives : Jer 23, 2f. God would severely judge these fakes : Ez 13, 8f. 11-16. Their final lot will be horrible : "I will give them wormwood to eat, and a bitter poison to drink" (Jer 23, 15); "By sword and famine shall these prophets meet their end" (Jer 14, 15); cf. also 28, 16; 29, 21f; Ez 14, 9f.

### **Conclusion**

A prophet was God's word in human form. This spokesman of God lived the word of His *Guru*. He condemned the social and cultic evils of the society and preached a dynamic religion of love. He spoke for God and God vindicated his claim. In drawing this portrayal of the biblical preceptor or the author had in mind readers well acquainted with Hindu institution of *Guru*. Hence he has made no attempt to make any comparative remark, for the similarities between the office of a prophet and that of a *Guru* are so striking that they need no explicit mention.

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13. S. J. De Vries, *Prophet Against Prophet* (Michigan : 1979).