

#### IV. The ways and means of God's revelation to the prophets

The prophets make it clear that their message is the fruit of divine revelation. They proclaim not their own thoughts but those that God made known to them. With this stands or falls Israel's prophets. Their great significance lies in the fact that they brought a message that was the very Word of God. There is no exegetical reason to deny this. The denial that God himself has spoken through the prophets comes ultimately not out of the prophetic message, but from a presupposition that divine revelation, that comes externally to a man, (ab-extra) does not exist. Because of this presupposition some have tried to explain the prophetic revelation along purely psychological lines (ab-intra). But in this way one destroys the prophetic witness. The prophets were receivers and transmitters of the Word of God. But we may ask what does the Bible say about the way or manner in which they received their message.

##### A. Prophetic seeing and hearing the Word of God

The prophets say repeatedly that God spoke to them (cf Jer 1:7; Isa 7:3; 8:1 etc).

This speaking is heard by the prophet with his ear ( אָזְנוֹ ), Isa 22:14; Isa 5:9; 1 Sam 9:15; Ezek 3:10).

Now the question is: what are we to understand by such expressions. Did the prophet hear something otherwise audible, i.e., did he perceive it with his ear mechanism just as it receives sound waves from any other source. Certainly this is possible. But it is not altogether necessary.

Many think God worked more directly and without an audible voice via the hearing mechanism. Rather he brought his message directly into the consciousness of the prophet. (As an analogous phenomena one might think of telepathy, in which it is alleged that influence from the consciousness of one person is transferred to the consciousness of another person.) In a similar manner God could have spoken directly to the consciousness of the prophet, so that the effect to him was as if he were spoken to by an external voice. Perhaps it is best to accept both as possibilities.

But not only did the prophets "hear" the word of God, but they also "saw" it. God revealed himself not only by the ear, but also by the eye. Cf. 1 Sam 3, esp vs. 15 (רָאָה וּשְׁמָעָה). Amos saw the words of the Lord, Amos 1:1; Micah saw the words of the Lord, Micah 1:1. Ezekiel in his visions says a man came to him and said, (40:4) "Son of man look with your eyes and hear with your ears and pay attention to everything I am going to show you . . ."

Young, p.188 , on the distinction between vision and dream - in a vision the prophet retains his intellectual faculties, cf., Isaiah 6.

B. The function of the Holy Spirit in the revelation of God to the prophets.

1. Some biblical passages which have a bearing on the function of the Holy Spirit in the revelation of God to the prophets.

Numbers 11:25-29. When the Spirit rested upon the 70 elders of Israel in the wilderness they prophesied. The same happened when the Spirit rested on Eldad and Medad. Moses wished that all the people of God were prophets, "and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them."

1 Sam 10:6,10. When the Spirit of the LORD came on Saul, he prophesied.

1 Sam 19:20. The same happened when the spirit came upon the messengers of Saul who came after David.

1 Sam 19:23ff. Saul himself prophesied when God's spirit came on him.

2 Sam 23:2. On his deathbed David spoke by God's spirit prophetic words and said: "The Spirit of the LORD spoke through me; his word was on my tongue." (cf. Acts 2:30).

See further:

Micah 3:8

2 Chron 15:1

2 Chron 20:14

2 Chron 24:20

Ezek 11:5

From these texts it appears that there is a direct connection between the Spirit of God and prophesying. It is by God's spirit that one prophesies.

1 Cor. 14:32? cf., NIVSB, nt. - prophecy is not an uncontrollable religious ecstasy.

2. The Holy Spirit, ecstasy and the prophets.

- a. Spirit and ecstasy belong together (Mowinckel).

The Norwegian O.T. scholar Sigmund Mowinckel is of the opinion that in the above cited cases the activity of the H.S. always had the result that the prophet was brought into an estate of ecstasy. To him spirit and ecstasy belong together. In addition he says that this ecstatic activity of the Spirit is found in the early days of Israel and also in the prophets of post-exilic times, but not in connection with the great writing prophets of pre-exilic times. It is seen for

example in the time of Samuel and Ezekiel, but not in the time of Amos, Obadiah, Nahum, Jeremiah etc. He claims that they consider the possession of the Spirit as undesirable. They lay all stress on possession of the Word in contrast with that of the Spirit. (S. Mowinckel, "The Spirit and the Word in the Pre-Exilic Reforming Prophets", JBL 53(1934)199ff.

- b. Sometimes the Holy Spirit produces abnormal behavior described as prophesying.

It can't be denied that sometimes the Holy Spirit produces abnormal behavior in an individual which is described as "prophesying." But indications of this are few, and in no instance do they concern a writer of a prophetic book. Such references seem to be the exception rather than the rule.

What are we to understand by the prophesying of the 70 at the tabernacle (Num 11:25-29)? Does it simply mean to "declare God's word", or to display abnormal behavior. The latter seems most likely. The Spirit took these men in control in a way that influenced their whole behavior. Probably we should think of some sort of enthusiastic praising of God. Thus Moses wished that all the people were prophets (vs. 29). 1 Sam 10:5 points in the same direction.

See E.J. Young, 70,71, 75 concerning Num 11:24-26 (CC 7). I Chron. 25:1, 3 "prophesy with harps with psalteries, and with cymbals" (Hebrew - beth preposition). See Exodus 15:20,21.

See L. Wood H.S. in O.T., 90ff.

- c. Must not exaggerate this into more than the Bible says

It has been common for main-stream biblical scholars to use these rather obscure passages to define the origin and essence of prophetism in Israel. These references are then understood as depicting bands of ecstatic men that roamed the country in a semi insane manner. This is then linked with the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18:29), the experience of Wen-Amon, and the *muhhu* (ecstatics) in Mesopotamia as a basis for the rise of prophetism in Israel. Such conclusions, however, go beyond any warrant in the biblical text. It is imposing categories drawn from outside Israel on the Biblical text.

- d. To admit abnormal behavior does not mean derivation from heathen practices.

In the ANE it does seem that there was a form of ecstatic prophetism. Granting this, one need not conclude that prophetism in Israel was derived from what occurred in heathen countries. (The passage that is most difficult to understand is the Saul passage [1 Sam 19]. But here it seems that the Spirit overwhelms Saul to show him that God is sovereign, and that he can do nothing to David that God does not permit him to do. This is called prophesying, but it has little or nothing to do with the rise of the prophetic order in Israel)

- e. The Bible does not indicate that the coming of the Spirit on a man always brings about abnormal behavior.

Instances of abnormal behavior seem to be the exception rather than the rule. It is however the case that the spirit plays an important role in prophecy.

- f. Mowinckel's contention that the activity of the Spirit was present in post-exilic and early times, but not with the great prophets is not well founded.

It is certainly not valid to conclude that the great prophets had cast aside the idea of the Holy Spirit. While it is interesting that most of them do not mention the Spirit (Amos, Nahum, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Habakkuk). But that is not necessarily because they knew nothing of the Spirit and wanted to stress Word in place of Spirit. There is no need to posit a contradiction between Word and Spirit. It is the Spirit who gives the Word. The prophets proclaimed the Word by the Spirit. The fact that some do not explicitly mention this is no proof that it is not so. The only difference is that they stress the Word which they bring, rather than the manner in which the word comes to them.

Yet some of the prophets of the pre-exilic period do speak of the Spirit. Micah 3:8 is the clearest example. Mowinckel says the words "Spirit of the LORD" are a later addition. This seems to be a clear example of arbitrary textual emendation to force the text to fit a preconceived theory.

C. In what sense may we speak of ecstasy among Israel's prophets?

- 1. There has always been a difference of opinion here.

As far back as Philo of Alexandria (died 42 A.D) it was taught that as the divine spirit came on a man, the mind was driven from its home, since the mortal and the immortal cannot share the same home. It is this experience

that according to Philo regularly comes on the prophets. (See Young, 165).

Various scholars in this century have stressed the ecstatic character of the prophets (e.g., G. Holscher, 1914, one of the influential advocates of this idea). Most advocates of this view maintain that:

- a. Ecstasy belongs to the essence of prophetism.
- b. The older prophets in Israel were ecstasies as a result of their Canaanite origin, but later prophetism developed beyond this ecstatic form and cast it aside.

At the same time there have been other scholars who have concluded that a careful examination of the Scriptural data does not lead to the conclusion of any necessary connection between ecstasy and prophetism.

2. Ecstasy is a broad concept and very different things can be understood by it.

J. Lindblom (see OTMS, 137; Prophetism in Israel, 1934, see Bibliography p. 4) made a distinction between what he termed absorption ecstasy and concentration ecstasy.

In the first form the prophet dissolves into the divine all. "His personality is fused with God" (Young.).

In the second type such radical concentration is directed upon a particular idea or feeling that it results in normal consciousness being lost and the external senses are made more or less inoperative.

The first form is found in eastern and Indian religions. The highest purpose of the ecstasy is to lose oneself in the infinite. By ecstasy an attempt was made to be loosed from the earth and from ones own consciousness in order to be one with the All.

In the Greek cult of Dionysus (Olympic god, giver of grape and wine, worshiped with orgiastic rites) this sort of ecstasy is found. The Greek word ekstasis is used to indicate the setting of the soul loose from the body, but not that the soul may aimlessly drift about, but that it will unite with the deity. The purpose of ecstasy is enthusiasmos, and the ones who are in ecstasy are the entheoi. The entheos is entirely in the power of the deity, the deity speaks and acts through him. The entheos loses his own self-consciousness.

This kind of ecstasy is found again in Plato and the Neo-platonists and also was influential on the mystics of the Middle Ages.

But this form of ecstasy is foreign to Israel. In the OT the distance between man and God is so great that there is no idea of man being absorbed into the deity. God does establish a personal relationship to man, but there is never an eradication of the distinction between the essence of God and man. There is fellowship but not fusion.

It is thus not in keeping with Israel's religion for someone like Holscher to say that if the prophet is to be the mouth of God it is necessary that there be a complete change in his consciousness and an absorption of the human into the divine essence.

The question then is if the other form of ecstasy (concentration ecstasy) mentioned by Lindblom can be seen in the prophets. Here one might conclude that there are similarities in formal characteristics, yet any form of ecstasy associated with the prophets must be lifted from a merely psychological explanation based on concentration to include recognition of the work of the Spirit of God (*ab-extra*).

3. Certainly not everything labeled as ecstatic behavior on the part of the canonical prophets can be so considered.

We must be careful of exaggeration in speaking of ecstasy among Israel's prophets. Evidence for ecstasy among Israel's prophets cannot be satisfactorily substantiated from such things as:

- a. Symbolic acts.  
Holscher held that the symbolic acts of the prophets, as for example those of Ezekiel, were done in an ecstatic condition.

In Ez 4

- he lived on bread baked on human excrement
- he lay on one side for a long time to depict the discomfort of the siege
- he shaved off his hair and beard and destroyed it to show the fate of Jerusalem

In reality there is no need to conclude that these things were not done in normal consciousness.

- b. Strong emotional expressions

Even less convincing as evidence of an ecstatic condition are strong emotional expressions by the prophets. Isa 21:3 has been pointed to. But here we have to do with a deeply upset prophet, that affects his entire body, because of the vision which was given him of God's judgment on Babylon. But there is no need to say the prophet was in ecstasy.

The same is true for Jeremiah 23:9. Here Jeremiah says: "My heart is broken within me; all my bones tremble. I am like a drunken man, like a man overcome by wine, because of the LoRD and his holy words." He expresses how great an impression the revelation of God has made on him. This contained a sharp proclamation of judgment on the people and their leaders. But he is not in a state of ecstasy.

The same can be said for Ezekiel when he stamps his feet and smites with his hand. Ez. 6:11

c. The "I" or 1st person style of prophetic speech

Holscher also speaks of the divine "I" style of the prophetic speech. The prophets speak not only in the name of God, but often speak in the divine "I" style as if they were God themselves. God speaks through the mouth of the prophets in the first person. (Amos 3:1,2; 5:4; Isa 1:10,11). Holscher sees here proof that the prophets are speaking ecstatically because they identify themselves with God. But such an argument does not hold. There are other instances in the OT of messengers who give a message in the first person. See Kgs 18:29ff. We have here a style, by which it is made clear that what the messenger says is not his own word but the word of the one who sends him.

d. The labeling of prophets as being mad.

2 Kgs 9:11 is sometimes appealed to in this way. Here a messenger of Elisha anoints Jehu king. One of Jehu's officers speaks of the prophet as "mad" Some seek here evidence that the prophets were strange people and as such were characterized by ecstatic behavior. But notice that the remark is made by someone making fun of the prophet. Jeremiah 29:26f. (the words of Shemiah, a false prophet in Babylon). Here to be mad and to be a prophet are somehow related. Prophets were considered to be madmen. Jeremiah himself is placed in that category. But certainly this is no proof that he was an ecstatic. John 10:20 says that there were those who called Christ "mad" This had nothing to do with ecstasy. He was called that because of what he said. It is likely that the prophets also were called mad, not just because of what they did, but because of what they said.

Acts 26:24 - Paul before Festus

4. The form of ecstatic behavior most frequently displayed among Israel's prophets is that of the visionary experience, not wild abnormal behavior.

If there is something that points in the direction of ecstatic phenomena with the prophet is the vision, not wild abnormal behavior. The vision is a means of revelation used rather frequently with the prophets. It seems to play a greater role with some prophets than others (used quite often with Ezekiel, very little in Jeremiah).

Some explain these occurrences as purely literary devices without any historical actuality. Others go the other direction and say they were hallucinations that arose out of the psyche of the prophets themselves. In either case one denies divine revelation by this means.

The scripture makes it clear that God used the vision as a means of divine revelation.

The vision is in an awakened condition what a dream is in a sleeping condition. The consciousness of the prophet is shut off from the surrounding world, and he perceives another world which cannot be perceived by normal sense perception. Some say that in the vision the consciousness of the prophet is entirely lost. But this does not seem to fit the descriptions in the biblical text. When Isaiah had his vision in Chapter 6 he responds to the question Who shall I send with here am I sen me.

Augustine said that we do not have a loss of consciousness, but a making of the consciousness loose from the bodily senses, so that what "God wanted shown could be shown. The prophets feel themselves in another spiritual world, in which they hear voices and see images which cannot be perceived with the normal human ear or eye."

It is certainly permissible to term this visionary perception a form of ecstasy. In the New Testament the vision of Peter of the sheet with the clean an unclean animals is called in the Greek ekstasis (Acts 10:10 ekstasis) Also Paul saw a vision in ecstasy (Acts 22:17). We can term this visionary ecstasy.