

The Prophets and their God

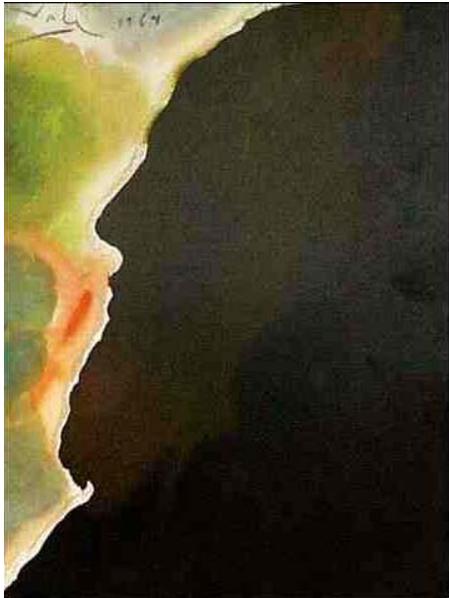
This essay deals with pedagogic strategy and education of divine Master when he is dealing with his prophets. This delicate relationship of the chosen ones with their God is the theme which requires that we go back to the prime law to read the Scriptures in the same Spirit in which they were written. It is the Holy Spirit of God, who drove Jesus in the desert for 40 days, the same Spirit who makes us rediscover the living and incarnate Word of God as our comfort and joy, our obligation and our agenda for today.

In the following elaboration we want to recognize what is the first mission of a biblical prophet (Abraham, Gen 20); we'll look for the exact definition of a prophet (Deut 18) and see the important school for the model-prophet Moses (Exod. 34). We shall encounter the strange phenomenon how after the complete success a prophet comes to recognize the true face of God in a sensitive manner (Elijah, 1Kings 19). We will look at how important is the sacred space of God's house for the calling of the prophet and how he himself needs purification (Isaiah 6). With the call of Jeremiah we shall look at God's holistic attitude towards his prophet and at the immense mission he entrusts unto him. After investigating how an open dispute leads to inner silence and listening, we'll finally look at the New Testament.

Abraham – the first prophet

The first person we find in the Bible with the title of a *prophet* is Abraham (נביא *nabi'* Gen 20:7). We can fully trust this designation Abraham's because it is spoken by God. To be a prophet means first of all to let oneself be defined by God.

- Abraham – the first נביא *nabi'* (Gen 20:7)
 - Revelation to the foreign king
 - Mission: to pray for others
- "I will show you the land" (Gen 12:1)



S. Dalí, Abraham, pater multarum gentium, 1964-67

The situation in land Gerar and the relationship Abraham's to their king Abimelech shows clearly that it is not the personal strength and value of Abraham that makes him a prophet.

The fact that God is speaking to a *foreign king* about the prophet points out that the mission of a prophet is not confined to only one people – to one ethnical, historical or religious group. The prophet represents the authority of God, who is God of all people, who is God of heaven and earth.

The most interesting point is yet the concrete mission of a biblical prophet. The first prophet in the Scriptures – in a sense the fundament and orientation for all the following – is not the one predicting the future, neither is

he proclaiming God's words, speaking in his name. No, the mission God defines for Abraham is the prayer of *intercession*, praying for others (for which Abraham already gave abundant evidence intervening for the sake of Lot in Sodom Gen 18). "He is a prophet" explains God to Abimelech, "*he will pray for you*" (Gen 20:7). And Abraham for his part complies. He fulfils his mission, he prays for the foreign king, and his prayer is successful.

The precious relationship Abrahams with his God is well known. He was called to go away from Chaldea, from the place of the Tower of Babel. He had to take clear distance from this gloomy project. And while all others, the vast majority, are simply driven away by God (Gen 11:8), Abraham is personally invited, to consciously and freely take steps (Gen 12:1). It was in a delicate moment of his life that he heard God's call for the first time. It was when his father died. And his attentiveness to God should be continuous. We know now all the story, but Abraham had to go where God "will show him" (12:1). He had to carefully look and discern what God is showing him. This relationship of close attention and dependence to God makes him a prophet. (In the first place for him and his own future.)

Moses – a model prophet

In the Book of Deuteronomy at the end of the Holy Law we find Moses defined as a role model for the biblical prophets. God will raise up a prophet like Moses – this is God's promise that Moses repeats (Deut 18:15.18). Here it is also very clear that God himself establishes and makes rise his prophet, not the human calculation and eminence. The report about Moses is very valuable because of the short and straightforward biblical definition of the prophet. It is in God's speech that we find the exact definition: "I will put my words in his mouth and he shall speak to them everything that I command." (Deut 18:18). The first mission of the prophet is that *his mouth* has to receive and carry on God's words. His duty is to relate to the community what God *commands* him to tell.

This definition connects the title of the prophet to the central, fundamental event of the biblical history: the *covenant of Sinai*. We know the story: the community there looks for the one who will bring them the words of God. God recognizes and accepts their anxiety and their wish: "They are right in what they have said" (Deut 5:28; 18:17). So, Moses becomes the *mediator*.



Peter will in the Acts of the Apostles give evidence with this same text of Deuteronomy 18:15 that Jesus, the Messiah is the promised prophet whose coming Moses announced (Act 3:22)

Maybe the most significant step of his education in God's school was when after the temptation with the golden calf Moses was called to come up, alone, before God on the top of the Mountain, for the second time, and he will spend there, once more, 40 days. God has promised (Ex 33:19) that he will reveal his glory before Moses and now he lets his goodness shine and he alone pronounces his sacred, eternal name (34:6). Moses is listening to God's self-revelation about *forgiving the sins* and he receives the confirmation about God *taking care* for the "guilt of the parents on their children too" (34:7), which he knows already from the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:5).

During this second visit to the top of the Holy Mountain there is a real mystical revelation. God reveals to Moses his true nature, his inner life. Fourfold description of his mercy and grace, of his slow anger and abundance of his love will become the important biblical *formula of God's mercy*, marking the key-moments in the Bible, even those who are otherwise full of threat and violence (cf. Joel 2:13).

When he was called to his mission Moses heard already the first definition of God's name יהוה, protecting God's exaltedness, sacredness and distance. One cannot dispose of him, he can show himself in the way he want.. After the pitiful and sad break of the covenant, only made up, Moses gets to know the immense world of

- **Moses** – a model prophet (Deut. 18:15.18)
 - "I will put my words in his mouth..." (18:18)
 - Mediator on Sinai
- Second time on Sinai Ex 34: God's sympathy
 - *merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love* Ex 34:6 – second definition of יהוה
 - Solidarity with *thousand* generations 34:7
 - School for Mose
 - Reaction: worship 34:8, radiant face 34:29

God's compassion and solidarity valid for thousand generations. If the first was the external identification, now God opens his heart. If the former was definition of God by himself, the latter is his loving attitude to his people. For sure, this is a valuable school for Moses himself: he was the one who broke the first tablets of the Covenant in his rage.

Interesting enough the close encounter at the top of Sinai has nothing of announced restrictions. According to the previous planning Moses should have been hidden in the cleft of the rock and covered with divine hand when God's glory is revealed. Nothing of that happens. God opens himself fully and without reserve. Moses bows immediately in reverence: "Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped" (Ex 34:8). The consequences are visible: the skin of his face radiates (34:29).

In the first encounter with his new servant God clearly showed his intention. He took time for the longest individual dialog in the Bible. He was so open to show Moses even his emotions, his anger. He didn't let his prophet get stuck on the difficulties and get lost with procedures and small things: he gave him the mission to free his entire people. This is how Hosea defines the Prophet Moses: *By a prophet* the LORD brought Israel up from Egypt, and by a prophet he was guarded (Hos 12:14). Prophet is the one who *frees* from the House of slavery and who is the *guardian* of the people of God.

The zealous prophet Elijah

On this very same Mountain, some 500 years later, the great, zealous Prophet Elijah, full of initiative, will be called to stand before his God. He will experience the delicate divine educational strategy: God who wants his prophet to show his true face, makes this himself: God shows his true face: not in storm-wind, not in earthquake and fire but in tender sound of a fine breeze. The Prophet was very zealous, he led the whole community to make spectacular decision, he was enormously successful.

God reveals him the mystery of his inner being. The tremendous exaltedness of the Lord reveals itself like perseverant gentleness. Elijah receive no intellectual definition in words like Moses, he perceives the divine tenderness in a tactile, sensible manner.

He is the man who gloriously called upon the most holy Name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel on the Mount Carmel. He repaired the destroyed altar of the Lord in solemn way, in front of the whole nation. This was somehow the peak of his carrier, he made almost everybody to be on his side. Now he is alone with his destiny, far away.

The lack of food, the long, 6-week journey show very quickly the real reason for his going away: he was afraid (1 Kings 19:3). The Holy Scripture is acquainted with the deepest bitterness, the sheer depression when a human being simply has enough. Some kind of suicidal tendencies come up. Elijah was looking for death: "Take away my soul, take my life" he prayed in the desert (19:4).

His God comes with interest for the person: What are you doing here, Elijah? What is up with you? Elijah gives his well-known, prompt answer, pointing out his deeds and danger that now threatens his life. Does Elijah give an answer why he is here?



They have killed the prophets says Elijah. But didn't he also kill many? God told that there was the end of the dry period, of the drought, and that the life should come again, but Elijah had all Baal's prophets killed. Obadiah saved 100 prophets of the Lord, and Micaiah ben Yimla is there, well known because of his vision of the sheep without shepherd and because he was hit in his face, like Jesus will be. So Elijah is actually not the only one left. And it is not the children of Israel who seek his life, but a foreigner, queen Jezebel.

God patiently lets his prophet repeat the same answer once more. And Elijah for the second time describes himself as the very *zealous* one although this word in the Scriptures is actually reserved for God.

The spectacular competition that Elijah and King Ahab made up on the Mount of Carmel the Lord didn't command with a single word. God's message was that he wants to give rain once more (1 Kings 18:3), and Elijah calls upon the fire from heaven (18:38) – in the middle of the still ongoing drought. Even in his prayer Elijah is inclined to point out himself. Asking for God's glorification he wants his dignity confirmed (18:36). Even when he was on the run full

- The same Mountain
 - Tactile, sensible revelation (1 Kings 19:12): soft sound of the fine breeze
 - After great success: "Take my life" (19:4)
- What are you doing here?
 - Alone? 100 saved by Obadiah, Micaiah ben Yimla
 - Divine zeal
 - At the entrance of the cave (19:13)
- On Carmel in solitude
- Ascension: *taken לקח laqach* (2 Kings 2; Enoch Gen 5:24)

of fear, he still tries to decide for God and to determine that it is enough (19:4) although the angel is announcing that there is a long way (19:7).

In the mysterious heights of Horeb, the mount of God, Elijah will meet his God. The Lord asks him to go out and stand on the mountain, but he remains at the entrance of the cave. That is why the same patient question has a new meaning. What is he doing here, why he did not stand outside on the mountain before the Lord? This situation makes it clear that a prophet of the Lord is not in the first place the one guessing the future

events, but attentive listener who perceives the word of the Lord as it is, in order to fulfil and proclaim. God who opens his inner life gives the best fundament to Elijah that he also shows his face.

The effects are significant. God does not steel the future from Elijah. His zealous prophet may work further on, and he will live longer than two next kings. The "long journey" (19:7) announced to Elijah in the Scriptures means long life.

The essential difference is that Elijah will go into the solitude, his dealing will be more modest and with more reserve. He will carefully wait for the word of God, and not run before it. With his second stay as a hermit on the Mount Carmel he will become example for the John of the Cross and a kind of founder of the Carmelites.

The encounter on Horeb made it possible. God prepared a special finale for Elijah, the ascension that had until then only Enoch, the righteous (Gen 5:24). God will take Elijah and keep him for the day of glory.

Isaiah – the priest and prophet

The famous and well known call of the great prophet Isaiah is very instructive. It points out the importance and relevance of the sacred space of worship. The calling takes place in the temple, in God's house. And Isaiah himself is a priest.



Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, **The Prophet Isaiah**, fresco, Archdiocese Udine (1726-29)

In the middle of our world stressing that God is beyond and above, he is the Other, not in human reach and reasoning, Isaiah offers an effective comfort. His experience in the temple he describes simply as: "I have seen the Lord" (Is 6:1.5). Such gift of profound and close encounter with God's greatness and mystery is at the core of prophetic life. And we know today that this testimony of Isaiah provided fundament for the proclamation of Mary Magdalene when she on the day of resurrection says: "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18). And the apostles

will try to persuade his colleague Thomas about their new encounter with Jesus using the same words: "We have seen the Lord" (John 20:25).

The call of Isaiah clarifies that a prophet needs purification and cleansing. Before God the lips of the prophet are comparably unclean as the lips of the people. The communication is disordered, human speech polluted. Isaiah will undergo the well known purification, not without pain, like disinfection by high temperature. It is God's power that removes his guilt and cleanses his sin, without hiding or minimizing it.

God makes his prophet ready for very unpleasant double *mission* that is from the beginning condemned to failure. Isaiah

- In the temple
- "see the Lord" (Isa 6:1.5)
 - Magdalene (John 20:18);
 - apostles to Thomas (20:25)
- Purification needed
 - Unclean lips=communication disorder
- Unpleasant mission
 - *Proclaim* the lack of comprehension
 - *Make* heart, ears and eyes unperceptive
- "holy seed"

has to proclaim lack of comprehension and understanding. He has to make the heart, ears and eyes of the people unperceptive. And this for so long as to have the whole land desolate. Only the remaining stump will resemble the holiness of God and allow positive future. Like the prophet went through purification by the fire from the altar, so will the whole community experience purification.

Jeremiah – boy made a city, a pillar and a wall

God's dealing with Jeremiah (Jer 1) brings us back to the significance of the first prophet Abraham: Jeremiah is appointed a prophet to the nations (1:5), not to Israel alone. And his call shows that God is not waiting for a certain suitable moment in his life. A prophet is known to his God from the beginning. As it is today well known the education starts in mother's womb. Jeremiah himself will object that he is only a boy (1:6) like Samuel was and Joshua before him (na'ar 1 Sam 3:1.8, Ex 33:11). God dismisses this objection because from the start he made Jeremiah holy. Like the seventh day at the end of creation is consecrated and dedicated to God, so it is his prophet.



Jeremiah's objection that he doesn't know how to speak turns out to be very subjective and not valid because his prophecies are the most beautiful and powerful, extant and poetical master-pieces of the whole Bible.

- Jeremiah: a prophet to the nations (Jer 1:5)
- Called from the beginning
 - Boy נַאֲר *na'ar* – Samuel (1 Sam 3:1), Joshua (Exo 33:11)
 - Consecrated קִדֵּשׁ (like 7th day)
- God's words in his mouth (Jer 1:9)
 - God is watching over them (1:12)
 - Turned to fire (5:14)
- In Jer 52:
Jerusalem, the walls and the temple destroyed

In accordance with the definition given at the beginning to Moses God puts his words in the mouth of Jeremiah (1:9). God is watching over his word to perform it (1:12). God makes his word in Jeremiah's mouth become a fire (5:14).

God's action with Jeremiah is tremendous. He makes his prophet to be a city, a pillar and a wall. What does this mean? At the end of the Book the city of Jerusalem and its protecting wall will be destroyed, the temple with its two pillars at the entrance also. The prophet has to take over this significant role for the whole community.

Amos – *taken*, and called by name

The experience of the prophet Amos with God has a special value. Amos is not a professional prophet, he is not from a prophetic family and school (Amos 7:14), he was with his sheep like Moses and David. God *took* him, he describes (Amos 7:15), calling to mind exceptional experience of Enoch and Elijah at the end of their lives. A prophet is the one taken to the reserved and mysterious space of God.

Amos has a special value also because, like Isaiah, in his visions he gives the same precious testimony: "I saw God." (Amos 9:1). And Amos is among those happy men of the Bible that God called by their own name (7:8; 8:2).

Jonah in dispute with God

Jonah's open and engaged dispute with God in the last chapter of his book is extremely convenient example of how God is educating his prophet. (It is extremely convenient also because it is well-known.)

God let Jonah make a double success already. The king and the people of Nineveh repented. The captain and the sailors on the ship to Tarshish came to believe in God, to pray and they took vows.

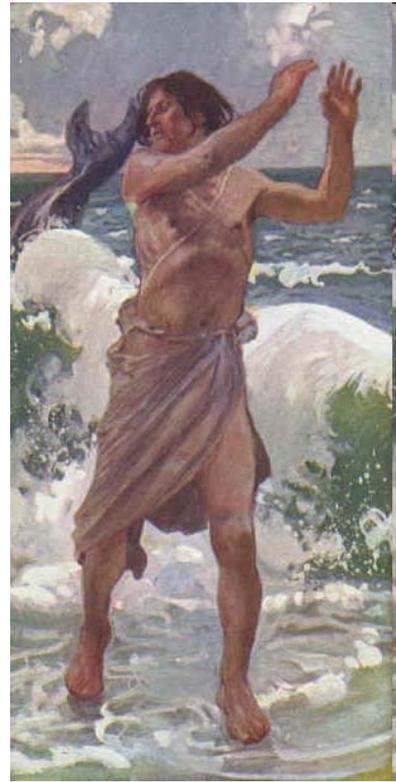
Even on Jonah's personal spiritual way God led him to a great progress. After his perseverance in fleeing that brought him deeper and deeper down, lower and lower, Jonah himself started to pray and was now ready for the mission.

And once more Jonah is praying.

But, as we know, he is profoundly displeased and angry.

In these circumstances God's dialogue with his prophet is excellent. There is openness without restrictions, the deepest issues open up.

Twice God expresses his interest for Jonah's extremely loaded emotion (4:4.9). Jonah is "angry enough to die." (4:9). Twice Jonah expresses typically suicidal depression: "It is better for me to die than to live" he claims (4:3.8). His case is clear: "Take my life from me" (4:3).



If we take in account that Assyria, whose capital is Nineveh, destroyed the Northern Kingdom, a homeland of the ten out of twelve tribes of Israel, we can discover what troubles him. We can very well understand Jonah's emotion of hatred and contempt that bothers him deeply.

- Success: Niniveh and the sailors
- Jonah prays (Jonah 2 and 4)
- Angry
 - God's interest (4:4.9)
 - "Better for me to die" (4:3.8)
- Niniveh – capital of Assyria
- Jonah knows God's sympathy
- "what I tell you" (3:2)
- Concluding God's word

Jonah states without hesitation the reason for fleeing in the first place. He was trying to flee from gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (4:2). Of course he came to know God because he experienced salvation when he was swallowed by the fish on the bottom of the sea. And at the end of his first prayer there he proclaimed that it is "deliverance that belongs to the Lord" (2:10) And he knew from the beginning the Holy Law of God's people, where there is

the great revelation of God's solidarity and sympathy unto Moses (Exod 34:6) The Law is an obligation for Jonah. Yet this knowledge didn't settle down in the lower layers of his soul.

He proclaimed in Nineveh destruction in 40 days. But we won't find this in the words spoken by God. Jonah was sent to proclaim the message that God tells him (3:2) – not his own. So, the first step for a prophet is to listen carefully. That may be why the dialogue remains somewhat open: the concluding paragraph of the Book is God's speech to Jonah, who listens.

John the Baptist

It would be wrong to finish this encounter with the biblical prophets and their precious relationship with God without mentioning the one who came "with the spirit and power of Elijah" to go before Jesus (Lk 1:17). It is John the Baptist whom we know very well from the Morning Prayer. His father says clearly in his canticle that John will be called the prophet of the Most High (Lk 1:76). A look in the original text shows the important feature, that he will "also" be called the prophet (kai). His father, Zechariah, prophesied (1:67). John will join in the tradition of the "holy prophets of old through whose mouth" (1:70) God was speaking. He continues the proven institution.



The special place in the New Testament belongs to John because the main point there is to follow Jesus. Following Jesus is general mission of the New Testament. But John had to go before him. And he did it. Six months elder, announced by the same Gabriel, John was the first one to preach *metanoia* – repentance and conversion. The same call that Jesus, the Lord, has at the beginning of his public work we find first in John's words: "Repent!" (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). Before Jesus, he gathers disciples to be with him, to teach them. Before Jesus John was the first one to be accused and killed as martyr.

For us the special meaning has the first John's encounter with Jesus and his first reaction. It was as we know in his mother's womb, before he was born. Similar to Jeremiah John provides an evidence of holistic calling of a prophet, God counts on him from the beginning. Maybe that is why he was able to recognize Jesus as the *Lamb of God* giving this way the central definition for the Revelation of Saint John at the end of the Bible and for the liturgical life of the Church through centuries. Isaiah proclaimed the preparation of the way for the Lord and defined the role of John the Baptist. He was already talking about a newborn son, who is a child and mighty God at the same time (Isaiah 9:5). Does John go even further recognizing how God made himself – not only a Shepherd, well accepted in the old tradition but – a lamb, that needs care, tender lamb that can be harmed and slaughtered?

Summary

The quick run over the prophetic experience in the Bible showed in some points how God is dealing with his chosen ones. We saw that the first mission of the biblical prophet is to pray for others (Gen 20:7). To his model-prophet the pedagogue God showed not only his holiness and distance, but also – in a manner of repetition and second chance – his inner life, his compassionate heart, and sympathetic solidarity with generations (Exod. 34:6). We saw how significant is a holy place of worship and how the prophet himself needs to be liberated from guilt and sin (Isaiah 6:7). The example of Jonah gave us insight into God's concern about deeper emotions and anger. The prophet of the Gospels, John the Baptist, showed clearly how essential it is to make a way for Jesus – like the group of disciples the Lord is explicitly sending before him (e.g. Luke 10:1). This is where our prophetic mission is very modern and actual.

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