POETS NOT PROPHETS
A response to 'Prophets through the Looking-Glass'

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I am in basic agreement with the thesis of Dr Auld's paper.[1] I do not propose to make any comments on the Chronicles section, but will confine my remarks to its essential thesis about the prophets. For some time I have held the view, theoretically I grant but based on *a posteriori* grounds, that the individuals traditionally known as prophets should not be regarded as prophets (i.e. *n^eb̂î'îm*) but require a different description.[2] They were certainly poets, probably intellectuals, and possibly ideologues. Dr Auld's careful analysis of biblical texts has now provided a sound basis for developing such a view.

The competent reader, to use Northrop Frye's phrase, of the Bible will have noticed a serious problem in evaluating prophecy. There appear to be two very different attitudes towards prophets in the biblical traditions. There is a very positive view, most likely emanating from prophetic circles, which approves of the prophets as revealers of the divine will, speakers of the word of Yahweh to Israel (cf. Amos 3.7 and the stereotypal phrase 'thus says Yahweh ... '). These speakers are simply categorized in the later literature as 'his servants the prophets' (e.g. 2 Kings 9.7; 17.3, 23; 21.10; 24.2; Amos 3.7; Jeremiah 7.25-26; 25.4; 26.5; 29.19; 35.15; 44.4; Zechariah 1.6; Daniel 9.6, 10; Ezra 9.11), a phrase which clearly indicates redactional approval. Such a positive attitude is epitomized by the story of Eldad and Medad in Numbers 11.24-30. There Moses is represented as so approving of the spirit of prophecy that he can say 'Would that all Yahweh's people were prophets, that Yahweh would put his spirit upon them!' (v. 29).[3] It would be difficult to find a more positive evaluation of prophecy than such a statement attributed to the greatest prophet who had ever lived in Israelite memory (Deuteronomy

34.10-12; cf. 18.15, 18). However, there is an equally negative perception of the prophets in the Bible. The prophets are dismissed as false, as misleaders of the community (e.g. Isaiah 9.14-16; Micah 3.5-7; Jeremiah 23.9-32). They are denigrated as madmen (cf. 2 Kings 9.4, 11; Hosea 9.7; Jeremiah 29.26), condemned as the source of godlessness in society (Jeremiah 23.15), and blamed for the fall of Jerusalem (Lamentations 2.14). These negative views are epitomized in Zechariah 13.2-5 where the claim of any youth to be a prophet will be dealt with most severely by parents and all future claims to function as a prophet will be a source of shame.[4] Here there is no sense of the prophet as the servant of the living God. These two very different attitudes towards prophets in the Bible produce a very odd evaluation of the prophetic rôle in late Israelite society. The destruction of the community was caused by its failure to pay attention to its prophets (positive evaluation of prophets) on the one hand, but on the other hand the community was destroyed because it followed its prophets who misled it (negative perception of prophets). This formal contradiction is usually resolved by invoking notions of 'true' and 'false' with reference to various prophets, but this resolution is both too facile and too problematic to be maintained.[5] Dr Auld's thesis points to a way of resolving this problem.

Describing the figures usually called 'prophets' as poets is a relatively problem-free description in that there can be no disagreement that individuals such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel were poets. The speakers of the oracles in the anthologies we call 'prophetic' literature were clearly poets. That is indisputable. All other descriptions are highly disputable. Calling them intellectuals may involve using a term which is controversial still in our own cultural history, but it is, I believe, a useful category for considering these poets.[6] It would also help to account for the connections various scholars have made between their work and the wisdom traditions.[7] A common feature of these poetic collections is the open, and quite often extreme hostility shown towards social institutions in ancient Israel. The fierce denunciation of every aspect of social and religious life, king and temple, sacrifice and prayer, worship and values, indicate that these poets were social critics operating with a high level of theory.[8] They may even have been social reformers putting forward radical critiques of society and arguing for a serious changes in the life of the people. These critiques may well have had an ideological basis, hence the tendency for them to be viewed as

ideologues.[9] By ideology here I would understand not only a system of ideas, but also those distorting elements characteristic of ideology in the Marxian sense which breed 'false consciousness'.[10] Such distortion can be seen in the sweeping judgments of the community which condemn everybody (especially Jeremiah 5.1-5; 8.4-7; 9.2-6), the denunciation of opponents without argument (especially Jeremiah 23.9-32), and the stereotyped analyses of disparate situations (e.g. Jeremiah 7.16-20; 44.15-23). The ideological slant is a keen characteristic of intellectual attitudes and activities. I think Max Weber was on the right lines when he described the prophets as 'demagogues and pamphleteers': 'The preexilic prophets from Amos to Jeremiah and Ezekiel, viewed through the eyes of the contemporary outsider, appeared to be, above all, political demagogues and, on occasion, pamphleteers'.[11] It is probably the case that the redactors of the anthologies shared some, if not all, of the ideological traits of the original poets and this may account for the development of these poets in the direction of a more structured account which eventually produced the correlation of poet and prophet in postexilic times.

If the demand to rethink the category of prophet for these poets is correct then a number of consequences will follow from this analysis. We will have to rewrite the history and structure of prophecy. The role of the redactors' ideology (theology may be a preferred word but only if it includes a connotation of ideological holdings) will be seen as having a much more creative and constructive part to play in the emergence of the traditions than has often been allowed in the past. Recent work done by American scholars on anthropological, ethnographical and sociological investigations of prophecy will need to be modified to apply to the redactional frameworks of the traditions more than to the original poems.[12] The book of Jeremiah provides perhaps the best paradigm of how redactional transformation of a poet's work eventually produced the fullest account of the life and times of a 'prophet'. Although the debate about the book of Jeremiah is a matter of controversy the tradition itself constitutes one of the primary areas for this discussion.[13] This is partly because of the poetry-prose differentiations in the book. Here are focused many of the problems of orality and textuality so beloved of structuralists and deconstructionalists, but also of importance for conventional biblical scholars who, however much they may dislike contemporary theorizing, face nevertheless many similar problems in interpretation. Dr Auld's analysis of the use of *nābî'* in Jeremiah, and especially the

contrasts between its use in the MT and in the LXX, indicates quite
clearly the centrality of the book of Jeremiah to this debate.

The canonical understanding of scripture which has become an
important aspect of biblical interpretation in recent years, partly due
to Brevard Childs's advocacy of it, will insist on treating these poets
as prophets because the final form of the text presents them as
such.[14] We therefore cannot avoid treating them as prophets at some
stage of our interpretation of the text, but 'final form' interpretation
should not be allowed to so dominate our thinking that we are misled
into giving it an importance it should not have. The canonical
reading of a text is very much a process of narrowing down meaning
until it is limited to the redactors' intention and ideology. The
original poets were free spirits, poets of the imagination, denouncing
the social structures of their own time, but through redactional
transformation have become conventional 'prophets', a fixed form of
institutional activity, and thereby made to serve purposes which they
themselves might very well have despised (even denounced on
occasions)! Such a process deprives them of much of their force
because it serves ends other than their own. Unfortunately canonical
criticism or the interpretation of the final form of the text is an
approach which elevates one particular 'freezing' of the traditions
into an authoritative reading of the text, often to the exclusion of
considerations of other readings or the various stages of construction
through which the text has gone. In place of a very rich reading of the
text it substitutes a rather etiolated and most undialectical reading
which approximates to a supposed ancient 'orthodoxy'. This is a
most unsatisfactory approach to understanding the Bible and therefore
I welcome Dr Auld's thesis as a way towards restoring a richer
reading of the text.

No biblical scholar is required or bound to take a canonical
approach to the interpretation of the text. Yet in tracing the stages of
the growth of the biblical traditions some analysis is needed of those
forces which gave rise to the *need* to turn the highly individual poetic
traditions of Amos, Isaiah, or Jeremiah into conventional works of
prophecy. Did some crises in the community (the inevitable candidate
for such a crisis is invariably the exile) or some breakdown in
authority demand such a development? Did some developing or
emerging ideology of the word or some pressure group of theologians
utilize such a transformation to put forward a programme of social
construction or control? The inevitable candidate for such a group

would be the deuteronomists; though some scholars may feel that too much has been made of the deuteronomistic redaction of the prophets.[15] I have always found it problematic that there should have been two levels of canoncity in the Bible: Torah *and* Prophecy. One would have been sufficient. If Torah had been the binding force in the community what possible grounds could there have been for adding a supplement to it? It simply does not make sense (and did not for various Jewish communities of the second temple period). Between Torah and Prophecy there are substantive tensions (e.g. the word given once for all in the past and the word given regularly in the immediate present: Moses versus the prophet) and these tensions point in a different direction from the conventional account given of the rise of canonical writings.[16] Could Prophecy have been 'canonical' in some circles before Torah achieved that status or did it appeal to circles which felt quite unrepresented by Torah? Was the model of canonical utterance derived from the 'prophetic' collection in the first place (cf. Isaiah 8.16-20) and then taken over by Torah circles? Was then the radical shift which transformed the poets and intellectuals of the past into 'prophetic' mediators of the divine word in the present a movement necessitated by questions of authority in the postexilic period? It is, I suspect, along these lines that the debate about canon might fruitfully pursue its investigations and it is certainly here that Dr Auld's main arguments have much to contribute.

Although I am in agreement with Dr Auld's thesis I am aware of many questions which it raises, some of which I have already voiced. Were there 'prophets' in ancient Israel? Were these individuals or groups? What relationship or similarity, if any, did the intellectual poets (the so-called literary prophets) have to these $n^e b\hat{i}\,\hat{i}m$? What were the processes whereby individual poets were transformed into prophets? Why? What movements or ideologies (when and where?) turned such individuals into figures from conventional patterns of behaviour? Attempts to answer such questions must inevitably be speculative because there is so little, if any at all, information in the Bible. The biblical data for answering such questions are invariably the output of ideological circles and it is now very difficult (if not impossible) to get behind such material in order to trace the stages in the transformation. But the approach of Dr Auld offers one way of raising the questions and answering them. That makes it an exciting thesis. If it is accepted it will alter radically the way we think about

the poets and prophets of the Bible. Such a radical alteration means that his thesis will be resisted vigorously by many in contemporary biblical scholarship, but I warmly welcome it for its promise of a complete rethinking of a very old subject.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Dr Auld for my having had access to his earlier study 'Prophets and Prophecy in Jeremiah and Kings' (to be published in *ZAW* 96 [1984]). Dr Auld's SOTS paper is dedicated to Professor G.W. Anderson, and I would certainly wish to be associated in this response with that dedication as a mark of my respect and esteem for an outstanding British OT scholar and in memory of the years (1963-67) when I was a research student of Professor Anderson's.

2. Expressions of this view may be found in R.P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah*, London & New York, 1981, especially 11-13. See also A.G. Auld, 'Poetry, Prophecy, Hermeneutic: Recent Studies in Isaiah', *SJT* 33 (1980), 567-81.

3. It should be recognized that Numbers 12.1-8 corrects this overvaluation of prophets in favour of the authority of Moses based on his special, i.e. superior to a prophet, relationship with Yahweh. Cf. M. Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (OTL), London, 1968, 96.

4. See D.L. Petersen, *Late Israelite Prophecy: Studies in Deutero-Prophetic Literature and in Chronicles* (SBLMS 23), Missoula, 1977, 33-38.

5. See J.L. Crenshaw, *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect Upon Israelite Religion* (BZAW 124), Berlin, 1971; Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant*, 158-97 and the literature cited there on 319-24. There are some useful observations on this vexed question in S.J. De Vries, *Prophet Against Prophet: The Role of the Micaiah Narrative (1 Kings 22) in the Development of Early Prophetic Tradition*, Grand Rapids, 1978.

6. On intellectuals in modern culture see E. Shils, 'Intellectuals', *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1968), vol. 7, 399-415.

7. On this issue see most recently R.N. Whybray, 'Prophecy and Wisdom', in *Israel's Prophetic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter R. Ackroyd*, Cambridge, 1982, 181-99.

8. There are many problems here, some of which relate to the presence of critical elements in the framework sections of prophetic texts (e.g. the polemic against sacrifice appears in Isaiah 1.10-15; Amos 5.25; Jeremiah 7.21-26). Some theoretical account needs to be provided for these collections and for connections between the original sayings of the poets and the subsequent redactional holdings. For a recent attempt to provide a theoretical treatment of these poets see K. Koch, *The Prophets: The Assyrian Period*, London, 1982; Koch certainly differentiates between the 'prophets' and the *nᵉbî'îm*.

9. Cf. L.S. Feuer, *Ideology and the Ideologists*, Oxford, 1975, 197-202; M.A. Cohen, 'The Prophets as Revolutionaries: A Sociopolitical Analysis', *Biblical Archaeology Review* V/3 (1979), 12-19.

10. On this see K. Marx & F. Engels, *The German Ideology*, London, 1965; for a very fine treatment of the history of ideology and its changing meaning see H. Barth, *Truth and Ideology*, Berkeley & London, 1976.

11. *Ancient Judaism*, New York, 1952, 267.

12. I have in mind here the valuable work done by scholars such as Thomas Overholt, David Petersen and Robert Wilson, e.g. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, Philadelphia, 1980; Petersen, *The Roles of Israel's Prophets* (JSOTS 17), Sheffield, 1981; Overholt, 'Commanding the Prophets: Amos and the Problem of Prophetic Authority', *CBQ* 41 (1979), 517-32. See also the work of Burke O. Long and the articles in *Semeia* 21.

13. See Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant*; W. McKane, 'Relations between Poetry and Prose in the Book of Jeremiah with Special Reference to Jeremiah III 6-11 and XII 14-17', *Congress Volume: Vienna 1980* (VTS 32), Leiden, 1981, 220-37. A rather fine study of the way the redaction of Jeremiah has transformed the private individual into a public figure is to be found in W.E. March, 'Jeremiah 1: Commission and Assurance', *Austin Seminary Bulletin: Faculty Edition* 86 (1970), 5-38. For similar developments in the Isaiah tradition see now O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12* (OTL), London, 1982 (2nd edition), especially 114-218 on Isaiah 6.1–9.6 (this is the section of the commentary which Kaiser (viii) would prefer to be read first of all).

14. See B.S. Childs, *Introduction the Old Testament as Scripture*, London, 1979. For reactions to his approach see *JSOT* 16 (1980), 2-60; Carroll, 'Childs and Canon', *Irish Biblical Studies* 2 (1980), 211-36; R.N. Whybray, 'Reflections on Canonical Criticism', *Theology* 84 (1981), 29-34.

15. See W. Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 1-25* (WMANT 41), Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1973; *idem, Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 26-45* (WMANT 52), Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1981; J. Vermeylen, *Du Prophète Isaïe à l'apocalyptique: Isaïe I-XXXV, miroir d'un demi-millénaire d'expérience religieuse en Israël*, Paris, 1978, vol. 2, 693-709; W.H. Schmidt, 'Die deuteronomistische Redaktion des Amosbuches: Zu den theologischen Unterschieden zwischen dem Prophetenwort und seinem Sammler', *ZAW* 77 (1965), 168-93.

16. The best book on these tensions within the canon that I know of is Joseph Blenkinsopp's *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins*, Notre Dame & London, 1977.