Chapter 1

AUDI ISRAHEL

In religion the natural inclination of man is to establish for himself gods that he needs and can use, 'the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and on one another'.[1] In doing so man safeguards centrality for himself: *his* gods are in his image and likeness. Not so in Israel, though. Yahweh creates man in his own image, elects Israel to be his servant, and wants his people to be holy because he is Holy. The God of Israel is beyond any human idea of god, inscrutable, inconceivable. So he is from the first chapter of Genesis until the last Maranatha of the Apocalypse; always 'overthrowing human expectation; by the Cross defeating man's hope; with the resurrection terrifying his despair'.[2] Man does not always know what to do with this Living God, so supremely divine and, at the same time, so disconcertingly human. He just has to go on in obedient following. 'It is Yahweh who goes before you; he will be with you, he will not fail you or forsake you' (Deut xxxi 8).

It is this God's will and word that the prophet as man of God ('is ha-'elohim) announces, and, no wonder, sooner or later he is to be called a 'fool' (mesuga') by people of common sense.[3] His relation to God is dialogical. The word cannot simply pass through the prophet; it is not such a neutral force. 'The prophet', as A. J. Heschel wrote'is a person, not a microphone'.[4] Being Yahweh's messenger, he is a speaker for Yahweh and a proclaimer, and so necessarily an interpreter, of Yahweh's law; God's overseer and 'vizier'; Israel's sentinel and assayer; her intercessor before God.[5] In the nation's life the prophet is not only the representative of the Mighty One of Jacob, he is a power himself: 'the chariots and the horsemen of Israel' (2 Kings ii 12).[6] A tremendous power, and so a formidable threat not only to Israel's enemies, but to Israel herself: 'See! I am making my words a fire in your mouth .. that it may consume them' (Jer v 14; cf. Hos vi 5). Soul and body, the prophet is the vessel of the word. 'Son of man, let your body eat and fill your stomach with the scroll that I give you' (Ezek iii 1-3; cf. Jer xv 6). The prophet not only hears God, he *eats* the word, and so he exhales the Spirit.

However, the prophets of Israel must not be compared with mystics.[7] In the words of R. C. Zaehner, 'The mystic, simply by being a mystic and therefore incapable of giving expression to his experiences, can have no message from God to man. ... India produces sages, Israel prophets. The message of the first is renunciation of the world in order to partake in an eternal order, the message of the second is the dealings of the Eternal with this world

of space and time.... Mystics make no demands; they merely point a way: prophets make insistent demands, they demand obedience. They are extremely uncomfortable people'. In another place the same author pointed to the experience of union with God, so fundamental in mysticism and so absent from the prophets, and he emphasised again the exclusiveness and arrogance of the prophets, this deeply discordant element that 'has scarcely for a moment ceased to disrupt the concord that more gentle and civilized men have striven to create and maintain'.[8] The sign of a prophet is the word, that of a mystic is silence ('non parce que son objet fait defaut a la parole, mais parce que la parole fait defaut a son objet.... Leur parole est un voyage qu'ils font par charite chez les autres hommes. Mais le silence est leur patrie').[9]

Called by Yahweh (*nabi'*?), the prophet is appointed (*nae'aeman*, 1 Sam iii 20) and sent (*saluah*, 1 Kings xiv 6) to bring forth Yahweh's words (Jer i 5), to teach His will and His ways, i.e. *da'at*, the knowledge of God. The moment of his call and his personal encounter with God is of the utmost importance, and certainly the whole of the prophet's message is sealed by this experience. Out of it spring both his greatness and his misery, his public message and his personal tragedy. For Yahweh, who has called him, is not a tractable god that man either needs or can use for the tranquillity of his conscience, or the welfare of his life. *Jonah* is perhaps the most instructive story about the prophetic destinies. Jonah was told to arise and go to Nineveh (East); but he rose and fled to Tarshish (West). He knew that the outcome of this call would be his cry 'It is better for me to die than to live' (Jonah iv 28). It was that call to go to Nineveh and preach repentance which made Jonah a prophet and which also destroyed his own life. By ending abruptly with a question by Yahweh and saying nothing about the prophet's ultimate fate, the story shows to the reader that what is important for him is *the message* of the prophet, not his life and destiny. This is the concern of God, not even of the prophet himself — to say nothing of the reader. It is not the Vomiting of a fish that is important, Leon Bloy says somewhere, but the message which that Vomiting cried against the most terrible city of the East, and the repentance with which it was accepted. (Though no one, of course, would fail to think that prophets were not made in order to be vomited; or that in Israel this unhappy servant of God would have been perhaps forced to beseech his whale to re-swallow him....)

The whole life and existence of the prophet come under the hand (*yad*) of Yahweh. The very call and first encounter happen under the pressure of 'the hand'. Yahweh's hand fell upon Ezekiel, was strong, pressed hard upon him (Ezek i 3; iii 14, 22; viii 1). 'Thus spoke Yahweh to me when the hand grasped me strongly', says Isaiah (viii 11); and Jeremiah cries that, 'Under the pressure of Thy hand I have sat alone' (xv 17). It is the experience of being possessed by, and so possessing, the Spirit of Yahweh. A permanent state and

condition rather than momentary ecstasies — even if this state starts with an ecstasy and knows its high revelatory moments.[10] Living in the Spirit of Yahweh, the prophet, as we have seen in the previous chapter, knows Yahweh's plans, announces His decisions, and *creates* His word. Thus, he claims, not man's religious life — as the priest does too often — but man's whole life. Inevitably he becomes 'a man of quarrels' (Jer xv 10), and his word is a perpetual source of shame and insults (Jer xx 7ff). He is God's man, and so *contra mundum*. Not only a prophet, but a living prophecy himself, himself both *'ot* and *mopet*, sign and miracle; in his weakness, ridiculousness and isolation, 'a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls ... over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant' (Jer i 18, 10) God's city, the Kingdom of God. So, from Samuel's indignation at the desire of the people to have a king until Ezekiel's refusal to admit in the city of God David as a *king*: 'and David my servant shall be their *prince* (*nasi'*) for ever' (Ezek xxxvii 25). For God is the King.

Prophecy appears in Israel in the period before the united monarchy, that is at that period of Israel's history which has been called by G. Ernest Wright 'a period of adaptation'.[11] It is the time of the guilds of the *bene hannebi'im*. Our subject, however, is the prophecy of the next period, that of the divided monarchy, the 'period of tradition'. It is the time of the empires of Assyria and Babylon, when Euphrates, inflated with pride, bursts out to cover 'the waters of Shiloah that flow gently' (Is viii 5ff.). They battled for nearly three centuries until the people of God refused Shiloah and melted in fear before the powers of this world. Then the doors of Jerusalem collapsed, as it had been prophesied: 'If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established' (Is vii 9). To the prophets with the powerless miraculous hands nothing of all these tremendous events was alien. Everything was concurring towards the writing of a book which was not a kind of *Paralipomena* of God's acts, but the very mysterious book of his history with his people.

Some (R. Bultmann, for example, in his *Primitive Christianity*)[12] saw in the prophets one of the causes of Israel's political ruin. Their utopian requirements, opposing all political and economic progress as such, undermined the very foundations of the state, drew Israel out of history, and did not allow her to become realistic. Others understood the prophetic mission as primarily political and saw in the prophets great social reformers and political revolutionaries. Some acknowledge in them 'a keen and unprecedented awareness of the great historical movements and changes of their own day and generation', which was not, though, political calculation but theological conviction (G. von Rad). I have always believed that Israelite prophecy was a question of revelation more than of reflection. Religion was for the prophets neither politics, nor sociology nor intellectual reflection — albeit theological — but life

with God, humble obedience to him in trusting confidence and 'useless service' (cf Lk xvii 10). And this is not unrealistic — not even realistic. ... *'Il y a le reel et il y a l'irreel. Au-dela du reel et au-dela de l'irreel, il y a le profond'*.[13]

We can now proceed to examine some problems of tradition and prophecy in Israel's classical prophets. I shall confine myself mainly, though not exclusively, to pre-exilic and exilic prophecy. Jeremiah will be given special attention because of his extreme importance for our subject. Second Isaiah and Ezekiel will help us to pass over into the next period, which Ernest Wright calls the 'period of reforms', and others the 'period of tradition'!

What is meant by 'tradition' in the period now examined? Very few people will answer today: the Pentateuch or the Law. It would be extremely naive to give such answers so many years after Julius Wellhausen. This is a long story that cannot be related here any better than it has been by W. Zimmerli in his book *The Law and the Prophets*. [14] Suffice it to say that both the Deuteronomic and the Priestly traditions were shaped during this period, and took their final form in the next one. I will just add that I follow neither Wellhausen nor the reaction against him, but the more balanced and cautious thoughts that always prevail after such reactions against overdoses of great intellectual action. The Law is not posterior to the Prophets, nor are the Prophets posterior to the Law; and, though I do not have a Westcott's fondness for such paradoxes, I have to say that the contradiction is very near the truth. In Israel the prophetic movement certainly came after the great works of the Yahwist and Elohist traditions, and of course after the person and the work of Moses himself. This alone would suffice to remind us that a tradition existed before the classical prophets.

First, the tradition of their predecessors, the *bene hannebi'im*. For certainly the great prophets are spiritual sons of those prophetic bands and court prophets of the immediately preceding centuries. It is not for nothing that Elijah became the archetype of prophecy. And Nathan could very well be considered a predecessor of an Isaiah. Samuel I would not hesitate to call 'father of the prophets', by which I do not mean that he himself was just a *nabi'*.[15] Paradoxical though it may appear to some, prophets become themselves tradition, especially the literary prophets, who left their message in written form. Thus we can speak of a prophetic tradition, or an Isaian tradition, or Jeremian traditions.

Secondly, there are the royal traditions in both Israel and Judah, especially in the latter. With David, God's Anointed became an integral part of Yahwism. D. F. McCarthy has shown how the kingship had been integrated into the fundamental relationship between Yahweh and the people, and the relationship reaffirmed, in 1 Samuel viii-xii (a theology that I consider as dating back to the times of the united monarchy and the court prophets of Jerusalem).[16] Classical prophets were among the formative factors

of these royal traditions in a degree no smaller than the earlier *nebi'im*. In Judah prophets were trying to direct the royal ideology, in Israel they were its real controllers, the 'Chariotry of Israel and the Horsemen thereof', according to the title of Elijah and Elisha, which has been felicitously compared with the title that Muhammad accorded to his great general Khalid ibn al-Walid, 'The Sword of Allah'.[17] In Israel indeed there was no dynastic royal theology and the prophets, in the name of Yahweh, could appoint and, only too frequently, oust the kings. It must never be forgotten that the prophetic ideal was not in its essence the royal one but the nomadic. In this respect the prophets were not reformers but conservatives. The famous prophecy of Nathan itself (2 Sam vii) is a defence of the traditions of the earlier community. And R. de Vaux was certainly right in saying that, starting from Ahijah, there was a prophetic trend in the North which, while justifying the political independence of the ten northern tribes (i.e. the political schism), condemned, nevertheless, the religious reforms of the northern kings.[18] In Judah the royal theology was linked with the Zion theology, which eventually was destined to survive to this day in the three major monotheistic religions. Here also, as we shall see, the classical prophets both inherited and formed (not only reformed) the tradition.

Yahwism, of which both early prophecy and God's Anointed were parts, is the great religious tradition that stood behind, in front of, above, and below the classical prophets. To say that the prophets inherited this tradition is a mistake, because Yahwism is not only a tradition, not even just a 'religion', but a whole world, within which the prophets were born, to which they belonged. It would be more just to say that the prophets belong to Yahwism than to speak of Yahwism in the hands or in the minds of the prophets. Ernest Wright has rightly indeed called our period 'the period of tradition'. Not only a religious tradition, but also a national and cultural one.

What I mean by national must not, of course, be understood in any modern sense. The consciousness of belonging to twelve different tribes was very strong, the more so as the northern tribes were quite distinct from the southern, and the political schism after Solomon's death froze the situation permanently. Yet an assumed common ancestry and a common religion — blood and election — maintained a national spirit (the people of Yahweh as distinct from the rest of the nations), regardless of the wars between the two rival states. As for the cultural tradition, it must be viewed as a natural reflection of the religion; for, to quote T. S. Eliot, 'in the most primitive societies no clear distinction is visible between religious and non-religious activities; and ... as we proceed to examine the more developed societies, we perceive a greater distinction, and finally contrast and opposition, between these activities. ... A higher religion is one which is much more difficult to believe. ... A higher religion imposes a conflict, a division, torment and struggle within the individual; a

conflict sometimes between the laity and the priesthood; a conflict eventually between Church and State'.[19] Even a superficial knowledge of Israel's history would suffice to indicate that by the time of the classical prophets Yahwism was already a 'high religion', with all that this means. The literary products of the period would alone be enough to show what a degree of culture Israel achieved at this time, and the material remains offer a similar testimony. The 'ivory house' of Ahab (1 Kings xxii 39) can be reconstructed by the imagination if one stands before the Samaritan ivories of the British Museum (ninth to eighth century). Had Collingwood known well the 'Succession Document', he would have hesitated to assert that, as compared with Near Eastern and Hebrew theocratic history and myth, Herodotus is the first proper historian in the world.[20] This Document can surpass in many ways both the scientific zeal, the historical research, and the humanism of Herodotus. Classical prophets found a high religion and made it higher. If dress and food are signs of refined culture, the descriptions of the ladies of Jerusalem by Isaiah show the degree of refinement, not to say decadence, that Judah attained by the eighth century among its high and civilized classes ('the dwellers in cities'). The conflict had started, and by the time of Jeremiah it was already a struggle within the individual. Prophetic conflict between prophets, prophets versus priests, prophets versus State, prophets versus their own selves. Religion was no longer a problem of *adhesion* (as in Canaan and the ancient world generally) but a problem of *conversion*. We shall come back to this later.

Prophets never have a private language. 'Even the most personal and transcendent mystical experiences', writes Mircea Eliade, 'are affected by the age in which they occur. The Jewish prophets owed a debt to the events of history, which justified them and confirmed their message; and also to the religious history of Israel, which made it possible for them to explain what they experienced'.[21] The Exodus, the Covenant of Sinai, the Mosaic institution with its law and priesthood, the Judges and their 'justice', the early prophets, Israel's Anointed, and before all these, the Patriarchs and their history and traditions back to the Creation 'when God began creating the Universe'; all this history and religion, is the world that I call Tradition. And the relation of Prophecy to this world is what I will try to examine in what follows.

If Tradition is everything that passed, or was believed to have passed, before the time of the Prophets between their God and his people, then Tradition is not a fetter that binds, but life and grace affectionately preserved and appropriated. It has nothing to do with endless laws, meaningless rituals in incomprehensible languages, squeamish priests, etc. Tradition is a dynamic principle of life, always young and always in need of rejuvenation, continuation, and progress. This is of the essence of the Old Testament's historicism, of its meaning and sense as signification and direction.

In case I did not make myself clear in the first chapter, I shall not hesitate here to restate that for me everything is not always history and only history. The Tradition about which I speak is not just history. It is revelation too, and not just revelation through history, but through history and word and theophany. (Scriptures indeed are not Scriptures because they relate the history of salvation, but, primarily, because they are written under the inspiration of God.) History is a very ambiguous thing to be so ultimately trusted; its interpretation very human to be believed, mortal, and so incapable of an everlasting youth and appeal. And I am not speaking either of myths or of symbols or reflections, beautiful as they may be and even able 'to make dreams truths; and fables histories'. I am speaking of true things and prime historical facts that for centuries have been so believed by some men — eighth century B.C. Hebrews or twentieth century A.D. Greeks — who put their trust not in history but in God: a God who, though revealing himself through history, is above and beyond it. The Hebrew man never forgot this. His God was the *Deus absconditus* of the Scriptures *'qui posuit tenebras latibulum suum'* (Ps xviii 11).

How far is prophecy rooted in the tradition, and to what extent does it surpass it, bringing in a new element? New not in the sense of form but of content; for we are not concerned with literary analysis, source criticism, or history of forms, but with the history of revelation. Fortunately, the problem was posed very early, and different solutions have been proposed ever since. This is indeed one of the most discussed problems in contemporary research on prophecy — the relation between prophecy and tradition. The story has been told many times. Debate started with Wellhausen, reached a climax with O. Procksch, and in recent years goes on under the rival flags of G. von Rad and G. Fohrer; though one is inclined to think that neither von Rad nor Fohrer would recognize themselves in much that is attributed to them by both friend and foe.[22]

I shall pass immediately into what I have called 'exemplary anatomy' and I will comment on von Rad and Fohrer after these tests. Three different subjects will be taken as samples: the cult, the traditions of Zion and David, and the covenant.

The Cult and the Prophets

The exaggerations concerning the prophetic attitude to the cult are well known. After the liberals had imagined the prophets as their own predecessors in rejecting cult, and everything like it, for the sake of *'das Wesen'*, the age of 'pan-liturgism' came, when prophets were viewed as little more than sanctuary servants. Liberals were unable to distinguish between prophecy and morality, and the propounders of the 'cult prophecy' theories unable to distinguish between prophecy and divination. Some scholars went so far as to seek in the prophet's association, or lack of association, with the cult the criterion of his truth or falsehood.[23]