

## **Paul, A New Jeremiah**

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The Holy Father has announced that the coming year will be celebrated as Pauline year. At this time, it is but fitting to reflect over the letters and life of Paul. By analysing carefully the writings of Paul, we can infer how he has many close affinities with the prophets especially with the prophet, Jeremiah.

### **The Theological Meaning of the Term "Prophet"**

It means in general the one who speaks on behalf of another. The most important idea in this word is that it stands for an authorized or called spokesman (by God). Though the scholars disagree on its etymology, they agree almost unanimously on the general usage of this term "nabi", especially in Pentateuch (Ex 6:28-30; 7:1,2; Num 12:1-2,4-8; Deut 18:9-22).

A genuine prophet is, according to the O.T, the one who sees God; hence he is called 'seer' or 'visionary', (2 Sam 15:27; Am 7:12);<sup>1</sup> one who eats God's words and digests them; hence he may be called the eater of God's word (Ezek 3:1 cf. Jer 1:4); one who is authorized by Yahweh to announce His words; hence a prophet is called the bearer or herald of God's message (Jer 1:10; Ezek 2:1 ff). A prophet stands as a mediator between Yahweh and the people of Israel; he speaks to the people in the name of Yahweh and vice versa. That is why LXX aptly translates the Hebrew word "nabi" as prophētēs.<sup>2</sup>

### Geographical Affinity

When Paul speaks of his call as a minister of Christ, he gives his credentials, as “a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin” (Phi 3:5; Rom 11:1).

The birth place of Jeremiah was Anathoth, (Jer 1:1 cf: 11:21-23; 29:27; 32:7-9) where Jeremiah started his ministry at the beginning. In the time of Nehemiah, Anathoth was settled by Benjaminites. (Neh 11:32 cf Esd. 2:23; Neh. 2:27). It was Levitical town (Josh 21:18; 1 Chr 6:60) in the territory of Benjamin. Besides, the first monarch of the Israelites was King Saul, who too belonged to the tribe of Benjamin (1 Sam 9:1). In accordance with the Jewish custom, Paul was named after Saul, who too was from the tribe of Benjamin and therefore was one of his ancestors.<sup>3</sup> Since Jeremiah was from Anathoth, a territory of Benjamin, Paul in all probability would have compared his ministry to that of Jeremiah. This seems to be certain when we analyse the narratives which describe or allude to his call (cf. *infra*).

### A Conversion or Call?

Most of the preachers as well as some interpreters of N.T. call the experience of Paul on the way to Damascus as a conversion. But this is not how Paul himself understood it.

The call of Paul is given in three important passages: Acts 9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18. By comparing these parallel accounts and analysing them, the following conclusion can be deduced.

a) Paul's experience is described as a revelation of seeing rather than hearing. The companions of Paul saw the light but were not affected as it happened to Paul; nor were they blinded (Acts 9:3,8).

b) Paul's experience is similar to that of prophet Ezekiel, who in his inaugural vision, saw, “the glory of the Lord” (Ezek 1:28b; 21:1). Paul too saw God's glory and fell upon his face (Acts 26:16; Ezek 2:1).<sup>4</sup> In Acts 26:16, the Risen Lord's words to Paul, “Rise and stand upon your feet”, echo the words of Yahweh to Ezekiel (Ezek 2:1), “stand up on your feet”.

c) Paul's address to Agrippa (Acts 26) makes the latter to understand the former as a prophet in the line of O.T. in whom Agrippa a half – Jew still believes.<sup>5</sup> This pericope (26:12-18) depicts Paul's career as a prophet. "I send you to open their (Gentiles') eyes that they may turn from darkness to light" (26:17). These words resemble the style of the prophetic writings (Is 42:7-16; Jer 1:10). Moreover the words of Paul in 26:20b – "The gentiles should repent and turn to God and perform deeds worthy of their repentance" – put him on a par with the last great prophet of old dispensation namely the fearless John the Baptist "of whom this Agrippa may be expected to have heard".<sup>6</sup> In Acts 26:22 Paul is prophesying and testifying that which prophets and Moses said would come to pass. Festus, the Roman procurator who was bewildered by Paul's religious zeal said with a loud voice, "Paul, Ravest those! – mainh - mainê (Acts 26:24)." "Mainê" is second person singular of mainomai (mainomai) which means "to become insane or to be out of one's mind." The word "raving" in an expression to designate the ecstasy of **mantis**. This is sometimes used in connection with the prophets who were filled with the spirit of Yahweh and it translates the Hebrew word "meshuga" cf. 2 kg 9:11; Hosea 9:7; Job 19:4.

To the words of Festus, Paul answers "I am not mad but prophesying". The verb "apothengomai" denotes delivering an oracle or an utterance, generally connected with the divine inspiration (cf. Acts 2:4, 14. comp. Acts. 12:15). From the foregoing analysis we can say for certain that Paul understood his call in the line of the O.T. prophets especially in the order of Jeremiah. This is confirmed further by the following observations.

### **Vocational Affinity**

Gal 1:15-16 where Paul speaks of his vocation as a "revelation of Jesus Christ" deserves our special attention. "It pleased him who from my mother's womb had set me apart and who called me through his grace to reveal his son in me that I might preach him among the Gentiles...". "To set apart" connotes to set somebody apart for a particular service; it means "to consecrate".

“Form my mother’s womb” – this phrase is to be understood in its usual meaning i.e. indicating the time namely “from birth”. (Sec Judg 16:17; Jer 1:5; Is 49:1; Job 1:21; 38:3; Ps 22:10; 71:6; Lk 1:15; Jn 9:1; Acts 3:2; 14:8).

In the prophetic writings there are two persons who are said to be called “from the womb of their mother”; one is Jeremiah (1:5) and the other is the servant of Yahweh (Is 49:1). When Paul speaks of the revelation to him from his mother’s womb, whom does he compare himself to? It may be either Jeremiah or the Servant or both of them.<sup>7</sup> But we must bear in mind that while interpreting and identifying the object of the servant songs, many scholars are of the opinion that the figure which lies behind these songs is probably Jeremiah,<sup>8</sup> (comp Is 42:3=Jer. 1:19; Is 49:1 = Jer. 1:5; Is 49:2 = Jer 23:29; cf 1:9; Is 50:4b = Jer 15:16; 18:20; 20:9; Is 53:7 = Jer. 11:19), because there exist many verbatum similarities between these two. If this interpretation were to be accepted, then we can say in all probability that Paul, in Gal 1:15-16, has in his mind not only the servant of Yahweh but also through him the prophet Jeremiah, who were set up by Yahweh for a particular task.

### Ministerial Affinity

Paul is called from the womb of his mother to preach His (God’s) Son; this is Paul’s goal. In Gal 1:16 “hina” (ἵνα) is not consecutive but final.<sup>9</sup> Paul is chosen as an instrument (skenos – σκενος) to carry Christ’s name before the Gentiles and Kings and the sons of Israel (Acts 9:15; 22:15 cf 22:18, 21; 26:16-18; 1 Thess 2:1-6; Rom 11:13). Paul seems to have hesitated to start his missionary activities (Acts 22:17-21). The Greek proverb, “It hurts you to kick against the goads (Keutra – κέντρεα) (Acts 26:14b) exhibits the image of an ox which, “by kicking against the goads succeeds only in wounding itself”.<sup>10</sup> This indicates indirectly that Paul was compelled in a way to accept the Divine Mission. This is confirmed further by his statement in 1 Cor 9:16, “For necessity (anagkê – ἀνάγκη) is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel. “Anagê” means compulsion of any kind, outer or inner, that originates from the nature of the things. The

sufferings which originate from the nature of his mission namely to preach the Revelation of God's son and which Paul has to undergo is an integral part of the Divine Task (See Acts 9:16; 20:22; 21:11; 23:11). Paul narrates the lists of his sufferings and persecutions which he experienced in his ministry for Christ's sake, in 2 Cor. 4:8-9; 6:4b – 10.<sup>11</sup>

In the ministry and experience of Jeremiah, there were many similar elements as those of Paul. Jeremiah was set apart from the womb of his mother (1:5)<sup>12</sup> and also as a prophet of the Gentiles.<sup>13</sup> Yahweh appointed Jeremiah over the Gentiles and over kingdom to bring social reform (1:10). Jeremiah hesitates and even gives excuse to accept the mission of Yahweh – “Ah, Lord God! Behold I do not know how to speak, for only a lad I am” (V.6).<sup>14</sup> Yahweh commanded and compelled Jeremiah to carry out His messages (Ver 7). In ch. 25:13c-38; Ch. 46:1-51:64 Jeremiah exercises his ministry as “a prophet to the nations”, by passing judgment on the nations.<sup>15</sup> Like Moses (cf. Num 11:11f) and Elijah (cf. 1Kg 19:1-10), Jeremiah too suffers and is persecuted on account of the mission of Yahweh, which was entrusted to him; he gets frustrated and goes to the extent of cursing his birthday and even questions his own vocation. Jeremiah's family and acquaintances instigated a plot against his life. These things are expressed in his “confessions” (11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18). Jeremiah had to fight against false prophets (28:1-17) as we find Paul in N.T, fighting against hypocritical preachers (2 Cor 11:1-12; Col 2:20-22; Phil 3:1f; Gal 1:8f). Jeremiah was arrested (37:11-16)<sup>16</sup> and was also thrown in a miry cistern. (38:1-13).

The inner conflict and compulsion of Paul in Gal. 1:16 is nothing but the repetition of Jeremiah's experience. In 20:9 Jeremiah says, “If I say, ‘I will not mention him (In Heb – remember him) or speak any more in his name there within me (in Heb: in my heart) there is some thing like a burning fire (cf 23:29) shut up in my bones”. This kind of experience is felt also by Paul (cf 1Cor 9:16-17 supra). Jeremiah seems to be not only the eater of Yahweh's words like Ezekiel (3:1) but also His container. “The Lord is with me (‘othi – אֹתִי) like a warrior,

therefore my persecutors will stumble and they will not prevail..." (20:11). This same kind of experience is expressed by Paul too (cf. Phil. 3:12-14;<sup>17</sup> Gal 2:20; Rom 8:31).

### **Affinity in the Sort of Life**

Jeremiah was the only prophet in the O.T. who was positively asked by Yahweh not to take a wife (16:1-13).<sup>18</sup> This is interpreted by the most of the interpreters as a symbolic action. Whatever may be the explanation, one thing is certain that Jeremiah remained celibate for the sake of Yahweh's mission. His love for Yahweh stood undivided; he had Yahweh alone as basis for his love and support. The Lord alone is "his chosen portion" (Ps 16:5). He is a prototype for celibate life.

In the N.T. Paul remained single and was a celibate like his Great Master; that is why he can say, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1). "To imitate (mimeomai) means to follow another's example, lifestyle, (cf. 1 Cor 4:16) and morality".<sup>19</sup> While instructing about the marriage life, Paul writes, "to the unmarried and the widows I say, that it is good for them if they remain as I also [RSV single as I do] (1 Cor 7:8)." This, Paul proposes by way of concession (1 Cor 7:6). For the sake of Christ's love, Paul remained single; this made him say "I became your father in Christ through the Gospel. I urge you then be imitators of me" (1 Cor. 4:15b, 16). What was proposed to Jeremiah, was lived out by Paul. Thus both Jeremiah who can be called the father of the celibate life and Paul, gave significance to the spiritual fatherhood. Celibacy is not contradictory to the marriage but complementary.

### **For our Life**

In the O.T. Jeremiah developed in his life a conflict spirituality (20:7-18). So also did Paul in the N.T. (Rom 7:14-24). Our Lord Himself had this experience at Gethsemane (Mk 14:35-36). We, who are in the valley of tears, cannot expect a different life from theirs. Let us therefore imitate Jesus who relived the life of Jeremiah and stood as a

model for Paul. Let us follow the path of Paul, who by imitating Christ, became a New Jeremiah of his time and our time.

<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew Word הוזה "hozeh" and ראה 'roh'e' are often used synonymously. Hozeh appears 6 times & "roh'eh" occurs 7 times.

<sup>2</sup> LXX translates all the three terms (hozeh, nabi, roh'eh) by prophētēs which is a combination of πρὸ on behalf of; φηκε to speak; hence prophētēs means "one who speaks on behalf of another" (spokesman). See Ex.7:1; 2 Chr. 35:15; 2 Esd. 5:1,2.

<sup>3</sup> In the Jewish family (like our Tamil Custom) the child is given one of the names of its ancestors. Saul is Hebrew name while "Paul" (Paulus) is its Roman form.

<sup>4</sup> See further D. M. Stanley S.J. *The Apostolic Church in the N.T.* (The Newman Press, 1966) p.303ff.

<sup>5</sup> The Agrippa who appears in Acts 26 is Marcus Julius Agrippa (Agrippa II) who is a descendent of Herod the Great, who was an Idumean. The Idumeans had been forcibly converted to Judaism by John Hyrcanus in 134-104 B.C.

<sup>6</sup> See D. M. Stanley, op. cit. p.306

<sup>7</sup> We exclude Jdg 16:17 because it comes outside the vocation narrative of Samson. The texts of Job 1:21 & Ps 22:10 occur in different context. The historicity and identity of Job is much disputed; so also the identity of the Psalmist in 22:10.

<sup>8</sup> The study of the servant songs (Is 42:1-4 (possibly 5-9); 49:1-6; 50:4-9 (possibly 10-11); 52:13-53:12) is a vast subject. cf. Any classical commentary on Dt. Isaiah. See also G. Von Rad, *O.T. Theology* IIp250 f. For the extensive study cf. W. Zimmerli & J. Jeremias, *The Servant of God*, trans. H. Knight and others. (SCM Press, London 1957) Studies in Biblical Theology No.20.

<sup>9</sup> For the use of "hina" see C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of N.T. Greek*, Cambridge Press, 1953 p.144-145.

<sup>10</sup> See New Jerusalem Bible; note on Acts 26:14.

<sup>11</sup> Regarding Paul's suffering: see further Acts 13:45f; 14:2, 19f; 17:5f; 18:6, 12f; 19:9; 20:3f; 21:2f.

<sup>12</sup> So also the servant of Yahweh (Is 49:1) It is to be remembered that some identify the servant with prophet Jeremiah.

<sup>13</sup> Note the servant too obtains a Mission to the Gentiles. (Is 49:6b).

<sup>14</sup> "Nayar" (נָיָר) signifies a teenage boy i.e. in his early twenties; hence he has no authority (Is 3:4; 1 Kg 3:7) Note Moses too had similar reaction. (Ex. 4:10-15). But he gives different reason.

<sup>15</sup> Whether all these oracles were to be attributed to Jeremiah is much disputed by the scholars. But the kernel belongs to him. See New Jerome Biblical Commentary 18:17,109.

<sup>16</sup> Paul too was likewise arrested: Acts 16:16-24; 21:27f; 23:22f.

<sup>17</sup> Note the deep meaning of καθ'αλαμβανω - Katalambanō- to make something completely as one's own possession.

<sup>18</sup> Elijah seems to have remained celibate; however it was not explicitly mentioned anywhere in O.T.

<sup>19</sup> See also D. M. Stanley S.J. *The Apostolic Church in N.T. Ch.13* pp.371-389. This is reproduced in, *A Companion to Paul* ed., M. J. Taylors S. J. pp.197-211.