Jesus: The Christ of Mystical Union or the Prophetic Christ?

(A paper written from the Biblical angle, with emphasis on the prophetic Christ)

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The full statement of our sub-theme 'Jesus: the Christ of Mystical Union or the Prophetic Christ'? places 'the Christ of mystical union' and 'the prophetic Christ' as mutually exclusive alternatives in Christology. Whatever may have been the intention of the framers of this title such a dichotomy is questionable. While Old Testament prophetism is still a subject of debate, its essence may be defined as 'that understanding of history which accepts meaning only in terms of divine concern, divine purpose, divine participation'.[1] It presupposes 'the decisive impingement of Yahweh upon history'.[2] Therefore, a person is 'prophetic' in the biblical sense when he makes men aware of the God-dimension of history, of 'divine concern, divine purpose, divine participation'. In speaking of one as 'prophetic' we are primarily stating his *function* or *activity* without necessarily describing his person or status. Moses, for instance, was a great political and religious leader and a lawgiver, besides being a prophet. Isaiah, the son of Amoz, was a prominent statesman and counsellor in the royal court of Judah. But he was also called to prophetic witness in the year king of Uzziah's death (Isa. 6:1ff). The *person* was much more than being 'prophetic' *functionally* (cf. Amos 7:14f). That being so, the description 'prophetic Christ' expresses a view of Christ with reference to one of his *functions* without confining his person or status. The Christ who makes himself present to, or addresses the believer as the embodiment or proclaimer of 'divine concern, divine purpose, divine participation' is surely much more than 'prophetic'; he can at the same time be the one encountered in mystical experience. Whether the designation of Jesus as a 'prophet' is an adequate way of speaking about the Lord of the Church's faith is another matter. But we cannot *a priori* rule out this designation from relevant Christology today.

As the two descriptions of Christ in our given title are not mutually exclusive or conflicting we shall here confine ourselves to the study of what Oscar Cullmann calls 'prophetiological' Christology[3], or a possible

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[1] M. H. Shepherd, Jr., 'Prophet and Prophetism' in *IDB* (Vol. K-Q), p. 896.

[2] *ibid.*, p. 905.

[3] O. Cullmann, *Christology*, p. 42.

Christian confession of Jesus as 'the prophetic Christ', leaving the subject of 'Christ of mystical union' to another paper. As a further narrowing of the scope of this paper we shall only survey the biblical data reflecting on the confession of Jesus as prophet. The unambitious aim of this paper is to be biblical and descriptive, with a brief evaluation of the data for Christology. The actual Christological discussion on that data belongs to the field of theology proper, and will, it is hoped, find a place in the other papers on our sub-theme.

Jesus as Prophet: A Brief survey of some scholarly Contributions

Oscar Cullmann sees in the designation of Jesus as a prophet 'one of the oldest Christologies we possess'.[4] By this he means that in designating Jesus as a prophet, or rather as '*the* Prophet' the earliest Christians did not simply place Jesus in a human professional category (like *Rabbi*) but attempted rather to explain his *uniqueness*. This is asserted particularly on the ground that, by the time of Jesus, prophecy had died out in Israel and the expectation of *the* Prophet of the end-time was widespread in contemporary Judaism[5]. But Cullmann also points out 'that the concept of the Prophet of the last days as such . . . is too narrow to comprehend the whole fulness of the person and work of Christ',[6] and proceeds to enumerate the advantages and disadvantages of the prophetic concept for explaining the uniqueness of the person and work of Christ in view of the total witness of the early Christians' faith[7].

H. McKeating begins his study on 'The Prophet Jesus'[8] by first criticising Cullmann's view of the prophetic office as too narrow, i.e., 'simply the preacher of repentance at the end of days'. He also points out a limitation of Cullman's work in that he restricts his attention to the texts which speak of Jesus as the eschatological prophet and ignores those which regard him as a prophet in the ordinary, wider sense. McKeating considers 'Jesus' teaching methods', the element of 'prediction' in Jesus' words, his 'intercession' and 'enacted prophecy' and observes that while Jesus was more than a prophet he was *at least* a prophet. Although the prophetic concept of Jesus is too narrow to describe the risen and ascended Lord 'there is something to be gained from looking at Him in this light, as one of the prophetic line', i.e. 'the Old Testament prophets may be illuminated by our regarding Jesus as one of their sons'.

C. H. Dodd's treatment of the subject in 'Jesus as Teacher and Prophet'[9] has been widely acclaimed as comprehensive and convincing.

[4] *ibid.*, p. 41; also see pp. 31, 38 etc.

[5] *ibid.*, p. 13.

[6] *ibid.*, p. 42.

[7] *ibid.*, pp. 43, 50.

[8] *Expository Times*, Vol. LXXIII, No. I (Oct. 1961), pp. 4-7, and Vol. LXXII, No. 2, (Nov. 1961), pp. 50-53.

[9] In *Mysterium Christi*, ed. G. K. A. Bell and D. A. Deissmann, (1930), pp. 53-66.

He lists altogether fifteen points[10] from Jesus' life which earned him the title of prophet. According to Dodd, Jesus resembled the traditional prophet not only in 'the external or more obvious aspects'[11] of his ministry but also at a deeper level 'in the purport of his teaching'[12] and 'personal traits'[13]. He concludes that while in many ways Jesus stood in the line of Old Testament prophets, the evidence places him in the category of 'more than a prophet'. In the teaching of Jesus the content of the prophetic message is present in a form which 'passes from anticipation to realisation'. And 'This', says Dodd, 'carries with it a profound change in the religious character and value of the teaching itself, and it has important implications in regard to His Person'.[14]

C. K. Barrett[15] accepts the fifteen-point evidence adduced by C. H. Dodd and with some hesitation adds to it 'certain classes of the

[10] (*i*) 'Note of sovereign authority in his teaching', p. 57f. (*ii*) Poetical character of Jesus' utterances (e.g., Mt. 11:25-27; Lk. 10:21-22 cf. C. F. Burney's, *The Poetry of Our Lord*), p. 58. (*iii*) Jesus as 'a man of the Spirit' with traditional pneumatic traits like vision and audition (e.g. at Baptism, Temptation, and Lk. 10:18, etc.), though as infrequent as in the case of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel etc: *ibid.* (*iv*) The element of 'prediction' in Jesus' utterances (Mt. 23:38=Lk. 13:35; Mk. 13:2; 14:58; also 10:39 and Lk. 13:1-5): *ibid.* (*v*) Jesus' 'symbolic actions' or 'enacted prophecy' (e.g. feeding of the multitudes, cursing of the fig-tree, Last Supper actions, and Johannine 'signs' etc.): p. 59f. (*vi*) Like Hosea, Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jesus denounced the formalism of contemporary Judaism, and called Israel to a deeper relationship with God: p. 60f. (*vii*) Like the O. T. prophets, Jesus 'dissociated himself from the national hope of His day': p. 61. His eschatology tends to be in harmony with that of the classical prophets. (*viii*) He announced the reality of the Reign of God in the face of the power of evil in the world: p. 62. (*ix*) Jesus was a preacher of *repentance*, which recalls the prophetic *shub* (return). This is the *differentia* of the prophet as a religious phenomenon: *ibid.* (*x*) Jesus regards himself as *sent* by God and like the prophets his fortunes are 'predestined' by the divine will (Mt. 11:26=Lk. 10:21; 12:50; note *dei* of Mk. 8:31; Mk. 14:36 cf. Jer. 25:15-17): *ibid.* (*xi*) Jesus possessed divine revelation and was in intimate communion with God (Mt. 11:27=Lk. 10:22 cf. Jer. 1:5; 9:24; Amos 3:7, etc.): p. 63. (*xii*) 'Like the prophets, He is the representative of God; to follow His teaching is to do the will of God; to reject Him is to reject God' (Mt. 9:37, cf. I Sam. 7:7; Ezek. 33:30-33 etc.). Herein lies Jesus' unique authority: *ibid.* (*xiii*) Jesus had a mission to Israel (Mt. 15:24 Mt. 19:28=Lk. 22:30; also Mk. 12:1-12; Mt. 23:34-36=Lk. 11:49-51): p. 64. (*xiv*) Jesus was not only declared the word of God but also, in his death, fulfilled it: p. 64f. (*xv*) 'In His personal religion (so far as this is accessible to us in the records) Jesus stands in the succession of the prophets, while he goes beyond them': p. 65. His was a religion of dependence on, and trust in, a Loving Father.

[11] *ibid.*, pp. 57-60.

[12] *ibid.*, pp. 60-62.

[13] *ibid.*, pp. 62-65.

[14] *ibid.*, p. 66.

[15] C. K. Barrett, 'Jesus As Prophet' in *The Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition* (1947), pp. 94-99.

sayings of Jesus (which) have been held to have particularly authoritative nature'.[16] Among these are the sayings introduced with the words 'I am come' (*ēlthon*), 'I was sent' (*apestalēn*), and 'Truly, I say to you' (*amēn legō humin*). Barrett interprets the unfavourable pronouncements about Jesus in Mk. 3:21, 30 ('He is beside himself' and 'He has an unclean spirit') as a further evidence of Jesus' 'prophetic frenzy' or spirit-possession. He also concludes that 'There can be no doubt that Jesus was in fact regarded as a prophet by many of his contemporaries; the Evangelists, with their developed Christology, cannot have been subject to the temptation to introduce this category into their sources if it was not already there'.[17] But Barrett also suggests that 'Jesus did not think of himself as a prophet, and therefore did not speak of himself as such'.[18] In support of this view he cites Mk. 8:27-29=Mt. 16:13-16=Lk. 9:18-20, and Mt. 11:9=Lk. 7:26. This was so, because, according to Barrett, 'the description "Prophet" was inadequate'.[19]

Jesus as Prophet: Evidence of the New Testament

Without any pretentions to originality, we now outline the New Testament evidence of a primitive prophetiological Christology in two categories: (*a*) The Witness of Jesus' Contemporaries, and (*b*) Jesus' Own Understanding of His Mission.

(*a*) *The Witness of Jesus' Contemporaries:*

In the Gospels a variety of people directly or indirectly express the view that Jesus was a prophet.

First, we must note the witness of those who were hostile or indifferent to Jesus. (*i*) *The Pharisees'* demand for a sign (Mt. 12:38-42= Mt. 16:1-4=Mk. 8:11-13=Lk. 11:29)=betrays the underlying suspicion that Jesus might be a genuine prophet. (*ii*) *Herod's* opinion is recorded that Jesus was a 're-incarnation' of John the Baptist, a prophet (Mt. 14:1-2=Mk. 6:14-16=Lk. 9:7-9). (*iii*) *The mockers* after Jesus' trial made fun of his prophetic claims and conduct when they blindfolded him, struck him and said 'Prophesy'! (Mt. 26:68= Mk. 14:65=Lk. 22:63). All these three reactions to Jesus are an evidence of his reputation as a prophet which some of his hostile contemporaries were not inclined to accept.

Then, secondly, we have the witness of Jesus' disciples at Caesarea Philippi to the popular view that Jesus was a 'reincarnation' of one of the ancient prophets (Mt. 16:13-14=Mk. 8:27-28=Lk. 9:18-19).

Besides these references, which occur in all the three Synoptics, there are also evidences in the so called 'M. Source' (Mt. 21:11, 46), the 'L. Source' (Lk. 7:16, 19, 39; 24:19), and also in John (1:21, 25, 45ff; 4:19; 6:14; 7:40, 52; 9:47) and in Acts (3:22-26; 7:37 cf. Deut. 18:15, 18), which confirm the view that Jesus was regarded as a prophet by many of his contemporaries, as well as by primitive, post-

[16] *ibid.*, pp. 95-97.
[17] *ibid.*, p. 96.
[18] *ibid.*, p. 98.
[19] *ibid.*, p. 98.

Resurrection Christians[20]. In fact John's Gospel, for a different reason[21], labours to establish the view that Jesus was not only '*a* prophet' but that he was '*the* Prophet' who was to come, the eschatological prophet, and this may well be one of the earliest solutions to the so-called 'Christological problem'.

The interesting thing about the references cited from the Synoptics is that they occur in all the pre-literary sources of Synoptic Gospels. Therefore, on the basis of the widely accepted (though not without misgivings!) 'Four Document' source hypothesis, and by the criterion of 'Multiple Attestation', these represent a historically valuable primitive tradition about the earthly life of Jesus. J. Jeremias is right when he states: 'The unanimous verdict on him was that he was a prophet'.[22]

To this well attested primitive tradition we may add the fifteen point evidence adduced by C. H. Dodd from Jesus' teaching and personal traits (see *Note* 10 above) and that supplemented by C. K. Barrett (mentioned above) which point in the direction of an 'embryonic Christology of the Prophet'[23] going back to the earthly life of Jesus.

(*b*) *Jesus' Own Understanding of His Mission:*

Despite the much debated issue of Jesus' 'messianic consciousness' it is legitimate to assume Jesus' *prophetic consciousness*. There is sufficient evidence in the Gospels that Jesus was *at least* conscious of his prophetic mission. There is, first, the saying of Jesus reproduced in all the four Gospels: 'A prophet is not without honour except in his own country and in his own house' (Mt. 13:57; Mk. 6:4; Lk. 4:24; Jn. 4:44), where Jesus views his fate like that of a prophet. Then, in the 'Q-Source' we have Jesus' lament over Jesusalem (Mt. 23:37f=Lk. 13:34f), which recalls the Old Testament prophets. To these may be added the other Q-material preserved in Mt. 23:29-36 and Lk. 11:47-51, and the L-saying: 'it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem' (Lk. 13:33). The arguments of C. H. Dodd and C. K. Barrett referred to above further lend support to the view that Jesus knew himself to be *at least* a prophet.

The Prophetic Christ: an Evaluation for a Relevant Christology

The evidence cited above from the Gospels and Acts points to the prevalence of a prophetiological Christology in certain primitive Christian circles. But the complete absence of references to it in the rest of the New Testament shows that it soon went out of currency mainly because it was found to be inadequate as an expression of the Christians' deepest convictions about the Risen, Ascended Christ. In the words of O. Cullmann:

[20] See also F. Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (1969), pp. 372-388 (especially 387f.), and J. A. T. Robinson, *Twelve New Testament Studies*, pp. 147-153.

[21] F. Hahn: 'The expectation of the eschatological prophet was applied in a very much modified form to Jesus' relation to the Paraclete' *loc. cit.*

[22] *New Testament Theology*, Part I, p. 77.

[23] J. A. T. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

> The future did not belong to this Christology, however, but to other explanations of the person and work of Christ. The 'prophetiological' solution of the *Preaching of Peter* disappeared from the scene with Jewish Christianity. It exerted scarcely any influence at all on the historical development of Christian theology. On the other hand, it did have a remarkable influence on another religion, Islam, in which the Prophet is the Central figure[24].

While Cullmann sees in this Christology an adequate affirmation of certain aspects of the 'earthly work' of Jesus and admits that 'it does not contain anything which contradicts the nature and goal of the work of Jesus as it is presented in the Gospels',[25] he concludes that:

> the concept of the Prophet cannot be united at all with those Christological titles of honour which refer to the present Lord, since it excludes by definition an interim following Easter. It is fundamentally incompatible with the perspective in which the whole New Testament sees the event of salvation[26].

Nevertheless, we must recognise 'a divergence of theologies within the primitive proclamation[27]' and a 'pluralism in Christology[28]', and that the prophetiological Christology was one among them. It continued to influence some semi-Christian or 'extra-Christian' religious movements (cult of John the Baptist, Gnostic-Jewish-Christian, Islam etc.). Could it not even now say something meaningfully about Christ in the context of our religiously pluralistic society, and other world-affirming, materialistic or humanistic ideologies? William Barclay, while admitting its obvious limitations, describes the prophetiological view as one which was 'capable of becoming the gateway to a larger belief and the starting point of a wider vision[29]'. This prospect is still open.

Moreover, while the prophetiological Christology fell out of use in the early Churches, its essence was extended and continued within the Church in the person and ministry of Christian prophets individually and corporately in the Church's prophetic role in society. As such the 'prophetic Christ' has a vital place within the Church and society.

A few words from an unpublished report of a Refresher Course held at the United Theological College, Bangalore, in summer 1974, aptly express the point:

> The Christian Community should not be a mere worshipping community, but a liberated community and liberating community. The prophetic function of a Church for society should receive the emphasis it has not received.

[24] O. Cullmann, *Christology*, p. 42.

[25] *ibid.*, p. 49.

[26] *loc. cit.*

[27] J. A. T. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

[28] J. Macquarrie, *Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 23, Nos. 3 and 4, July-Dec. 1974, p. 156.

[29] W. Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, p. 232.