



As It Is Written . . .

PATRICK HENRY REARDON

The Prophet & the Sage

BY SEPARATING its Wisdom literature from its prophetic books, the Bible also hints at a distinction between the vocations of the prophet and the sage. Without exaggerating this distinction—because in principle both callings may be found in a single person—it is worth inquiring, I think, in what way the prophet and the sage are different.

Let me suggest that at least part of the difference between them is the way they handle time and the events that take place within time.

Generally speaking, the prophet must deal with time on the move—as it approaches, so to speak. His hands touch time in the present and at those points where the future promises to become present. His words are burdened with the moral imperative of the instant, the *kairos*, where a decision is required. Events are taking place, or at least about to take place, which require the prophet to proclaim God's understanding of them. Normally, the mind of the prophet is seized and preoccupied by the dynamisms of the active moment.

It is different with the sage. Not usually caught up in time as it passes, the sage enjoys the leisure to reflect on time that has elapsed and to ponder things that have already come to pass. For this reason, one does not expect to find in Wisdom literature the pressing energy and sense of immediacy that are normal in the prophetic books. Although the sage may counsel some moral decision on the part of the reader, it is not customary for him to demand it with the urgency of the prophet.

As an event in biblical history that illustrates this difference, let me suggest the 18-year delay in the construction of the second temple.

When Israel's exiles returned from Babylon in 538 B.C., they carried an official decree, issued by Cyrus himself, that their ancient temple should be rebuilt. Indeed, the materials necessary for that rebuilding were quickly procured. For various reasons, nonetheless, chiefly opposition from local folks inimical to the returning exiles, the reconstruction was delayed until 520. Five years were required to

finish it, and the temple was at last completed on March 12, 515.

Now it happens that that recorded delay receives two different interpretations in Holy Scripture, one in the Book of Ezra and the other in two prophetic books: Haggai and Zechariah.

Let us start with the prophets, the two men alive and active in 520, the very ones who inspired the resumption of the project. The preoccupation of Haggai and Zechariah was immediate, determined, and of an entirely moral impulse. Those prophets blamed the prolonged delay on a lack of resolve on the part of the returning exiles, whom they accused of losing their vision. Instead of building God's house, they had spent nearly two decades building their own houses. They were reprimanded, therefore, for failing to seek first the kingdom of heaven. Thus, Haggai and Zechariah took charge of the "moment" and required the proper moral resolve from their countrymen. This is the sort of thing prophets do.

When we turn to the Book of Ezra, on the other hand, the outlook is completely different. Here we find the approach of the sage, the man of cultivated pondering, who sets his sights from a larger and more reflective angle. His is a perspective almost completely uninterested in an immediate moral concern. Thus, the author of Ezra utters not a word of reproach for the returning exiles with respect to the delay in the temple's reconstruction.

He endeavors, rather, to examine that 18-year postponement from the viewpoint of divine providence. After all, the sage reflects, no more could the building of the second temple be just the execution of a decree of Cyrus than the building of the first temple was simply a project mandated by David. It was significant that both these kings died before the construction was even begun. Truly, who among kings is authorized to build a house for the Lord? The Lord will see to the building of his own house at such time as he sees fit!

Consequently, our sage perceives another correspondence in the two cases: Each construction project had to await the Lord's command, conveyed in the prophetic word—that of Nathan in the case of David, that of Haggai and Zechariah in the case of Cyrus.

The approach to time and events in the Book of Ezra, then, is very different from that of the prophets. It is the perspective of the theological sage, who surveys with serenity what great works the wise Lord of history has caused to come about. ❖

Copyright of *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* is the property of Fellowship of St. James and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.