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Theodore Beza on Prophets and Prophecy

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On August 19, 1564, Theodore Beza described the scene following Jean Calvin’s death a few months earlier: “the following night and the day after as well, there was much weeping in the city. For the body of the city mourned the prophet of the Lord” (CO 21: 45-6). This is not the only time Beza referred to Calvin as a prophet. In his *vita Calvini*, Beza wrote: “Calvin in the dedication of his Lectures on the prophet Daniel to the French churches declares, in a prophetic voice, that tempestuous and severe trials were hanging over their heads” (CO 21: 91).¹

Study of prophets and prophecy in the medieval and reformation eras is hardly new. A myriad number of people—Birgitta of Sweden (Fogelqvist: 1993), Joachim of Fiore (Reeves: 1969; McGinn: 1985), Girolamo Savanarola (Herzig: 2008), Jan Hus (Oberman: 1999, 135-67; Haberkern: 2016), Martin Luther (Preuss: 1933; Kolb: 1999; Oberman: 1999, 135-67), Ulrich Zwingli (Büsser: 1950, Opitz: 2007, 2: 493-513; Opitz: 2017), Heinrich Bullinger

¹ Beza left Lausanne for Geneva in November 1558, see “Le départ de Bèze et son remplacement” (see Beza: 1962, II, Annexe XIV). Thus, he was with Calvin for a little less than ten years, though he knew Calvin much earlier ca. 1547. In February 1559, Beza tried to encourage Pierre Viret to come back to Geneva and join them in their work. On Beza’s life and ministry, particularly his ministry to France, see Manetsch: 2000.

(Peterson: 1991, 245-60; Bolliger: 2004, 159-177, Timmerman: 2015), Theodore Bibliander (Gordon: 2012, 107-41), John Calvin (Ganoczy: 1966, Engammare: 1998, 88-107, Balsarak: 2014), Argula von Grumbach (Matheson: 1995; Pak: 2012, 151-69), Katharina Schütz Zell (McKee: 1998), John Knox (Dawson: 2015), late-medieval women (Voaden: 1999), the Marian exiles (Dawson: 1994, 75-91)—have either been identified as people who believed themselves to be prophets or have had their views on prophecy examined. For example, concerning Peter Martyr Vermigli, I wrote an article in 2012 (Balsarak: 2012, 148-72) in which I examined his thinking on prophecy. I did not argue that he believed himself to be a prophet, though I did say I think he thought Ulrich Zwingli was one.

Thus, as we come to Theodore Beza, I am not going to argue that he himself thought he was a prophet because I do not think he did, but I'm going to examine his thinking on prophecy.

At this point someone may utter the objection: was it not the case at this time that prophesying was essentially the same as preaching. So, in that regard, all of the people whom I have just mentioned would have considered themselves to be prophets in the sense that they were preachers of the gospel, but that is all. This is, of course, true. And so we have works like William Perkin's *The Art of Prophesying* (1607) which is about preaching. Hence its full title is: *The arte of prophesying, or, A treatise concerning the sacred and onely true manner and methode of preaching*. In point of fact, Sujin Pak has argued in a monograph from 2018 something not entirely dissimilar from this. In a sophisticated and thoughtful analysis of the development of prophecy during the sixteenth century, she argues that the rise of Anabaptism in the 1520s and the tendency exhibited by Anabaptists and other Radicals to claim a prophetic calling despite lack of education, particularly education in the languages (what Pak identifies as a kind of "prophethood of all believers" doctrine) moved second generation reformers to adapt and soften their use of, and claims to, the prophetic mantle (Pak: 2018).

But that is not what Beza meant when he called Calvin “the prophet of the Lord” in the quote with which this paper began. Beza did not simply mean that Calvin was a preacher. There I adjudge Beza to have had in mind a special calling from God that had been given to Calvin. A calling distinct from the general calling to preach the gospel.

Or, perhaps we should not prejudge the case. So, instead let me ask: did Beza mean to indicate that Calvin possessed a special prophetic calling from God. Or, to state the question generally: did Beza identify such a category; that is, did he discuss prophecy so as to identify a category in which the prophet is an individual raised up by God during particular periods of decline in the church’s history with the special and authoritative calling to restore the church?

That is what I will address below, but let me first introduce the topic.

1. Antiquity to Early Modernity

Prophecy has been a part of the church for ages. The presence of biblical passages like 1 Corinthians 12: 10 and Romans 12: 6 guarantee this.²

From early on theological exploration began on this theme. For instance, differing views on the character of prophecy were produced. Some, like Cassiodorus, identified prophecy as “divine revelation.” He states this in the preface to his *Expositio Psalmorum* (PL

² Both these passages refer, of course, to prophecy. For instance, 1 Cor. 12: 8-10: “To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, ... to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, ...”. Romans 12: 6: “We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith ...”

Both passages quoted from the NIV.

70: 12). A similar note is struck in Augustine's *Super Genesim ad Litteram* (PL 34: 458-61) and Gregory the Great's homilies on Ezekiel (1986, 50-64).³

Others, however, identified prophecy with interpretation, specifically, the interpretation of scripture. Ambrosiaster, for example, states: "Prophets, however, are those who explain the scriptures" (1516, 2, fol. 208). Some in discussing this emphasized exploration of the scriptural mysteries and so in this way aligned themselves more closely to those who saw prophecy as revelation. While others emphasized the idea of proclamation and practical application (see, for instance, Bruno (PL 153: 192); Rabanus (PL 112: 116), Lanfranc (PL 150: 199); Strabo (PL 114: 542) and Haymo (PL 117: 580); Pseudo-Jerome (PL 30: 788); Thomas Aquinas in his *Expositio in Epistolam Romanos* 12: 6 (1852-73, 13, 123); and William of St Thierry (PL 180: 673)). In doing so, they move away from the idea that a prophet received revelation and towards the notion that a prophet is an interpreter and preacher. Early modern examples of this would be François Lambert of Avignon's *Commentarii de Prophetia* (1526) and his *Praefatio in In Primum Duodecim Prophetarum, nempe, Oseam* (1525, 8r) or, for that matter, works by Guilielmus Estius (1841, 1, 369), Johann Bugenhagen (1524, 13r), Conrad Pellican (1539, 250), Johannes Brenz (1588, 723), Rudolph Gwalter (1566, 169r-v; 1590, 270r), Caspar Olevianus (1579, 614) and Erasmus (1535). The same, broadly speaking, can be seen in Oecolampadius' commentary on Romans 12: 6 (1526, n.p.). In fact, there Oecolampadius focuses more on the congregational aspects of prophesying; viewing the text as encouragement for the congregation and as something that presumably could be done by any member.

But this is merely the tip of the iceberg. Innumerable questions were asked: Does prophecy have to be understood as either revelation or interpretation? Couldn't it be both? In

³ For more on the medieval period, see Alphandery: 1932, 334-59.

regards to revelation, should we understand it to be revelation of the future or can it relate to the past or the present? Is prophecy mediated or unmediated? Can it err? What's the difference between a prophetic spirit and demon possession? What's the difference between the prophetic spirit and madness? Are there different grades of prophecy? Do prophets still exist today and, if so, how do they differ from earlier prophets? Who was the greatest prophet and why? All of these, and many other, questions were addressed. So, for instance, with respect to one of them: Gregory the Great is extremely clear: "Prophecy has three tenses; the past, of course; the present and the future" (1986, 56). Similar thoughts abound; see, for instance, Theodoret (PG 80: 861), Lanfranc of Bec (PL 181: 958-59), Peter Lombard (PL 191: 1659), and Aquinas (ST II-II q171 a3).

Thus, many questions were raised and addressed and discussion of them became a standard part of most theologians' treatments of the locus of prophecy.

2. Prophecy and Authority

Also a part of thinking on prophecy from its inception has been the question of the relationship of prophets to authority. And this took on increasing importance beginning in the late medieval period.

That this should be the case is easy to see. Even if one considers the New Testament prophets mentioned in 1 Corinthians, one has to acknowledge that they represented a potential threat in that they claimed the right to speak on God's behalf in the midst of the congregation, and so Paul set down guidelines for how their work ought to be understood and dealt with so as to avoid conflict. These guidelines were not always followed, as the rise of the Anabaptists in the 1520s illustrates. One cannot help but be amused by the portion of Wolfgang Capito's 1526 letter to Nicolaus Prugner in which he says that "Today our weaver

shouted at Matthew in the cathedral” (Capito: 2009, 2: 204).⁴ The Matthew he has in mind is Matthew Zell, who was preaching at the time. Zell had read a passage from Deuteronomy 28 and commented on the repercussions of disobedience, and the weaver, Hans Wolff, “Barked,”

You are disobedient to the Holy Spirit. What you say goes against him and is a lie.

In his name I command you to withdraw and permit me to say what the Spirit wishes to say (Capito: 2009, 2: 204).

The relationship between prophets and authority is arguably more awkward and pugnacious in regards to the Old Testament prophets. It may come as little surprise, then, that many who arose in the medieval and early modern eras with the idea of reforming the church and civil realm aligned themselves in various ways with OT prophets. John Knox comes to mind (Dawson 1994: 75-91; Dawson: 2015: 33-35). Also John Calvin aligned himself with prophets like Jeremiah, or so Rodolphe Peter argued in 1971 (Peter: 1971, XIV-XVI).⁵ Additional examples abound.

3. Interpreting the Rise of the Prophet

Given the late-medieval rise in tensions between prophets and the authorities, it is arguably not surprising that theologians around this time began to turn their attention to interpreting these tensions. Accordingly, we discover increasingly-sophisticated interpretations of the

⁴ For more see, Balsarak: 2014: 17-32.

⁵ So, Ulrich Zwingli identified Martin Luther as Elijah, who was both an OT prophet and also one of the two witnesses—Elijah and Enoch—promised in Revelation 11: 3 (ZW 7: 218-22). For more see Peterson: 1991, 97-101.

momentous work that God was doing through his prophets in the Reformation. We will have a look at this briefly now.⁶

Ulrich Zwingli for instance, produces an inchoate, but perceptive, discussion of his times in which he notes that just as the Spartans had their ephors, the Romans their tribunes, and German cities their chief guildmasters, so God has his shepherds or prophets⁷ “God always sends his prophets in time to warn the sinful world, as Jeremiah 25 and 29 point out.” (ZW 3: 36; HZW 2: 102). This is from *Der Hirt*. Likewise, Philip Melanchthon identifies Luther as a prophet and, interpreting the times, explains that prophets are singularly gifted for the renewal of doctrine “as Augustine was in his age and Luther is in ours” (CR 15: 1133-34).

In both these brief examples, the basic ideas are present: that (1) God raises up prophets during particular periods of Redemptive history; (2) these are times when renewal is needed; and (3) those whom God raises up are specially gifted to do this work. These writings were produced quite early. Zwingli’s *Der Hirt*, for instance, was published in 1524.

If we move into the 1540s and 1550s, we find Peter Martyr Vermigli speaking in a more prolix manner. His analysis of prophecy was historical in its approach. He asserts that there is, with respect to prophecy, a discrimination of times (*discrimina temporum*) (1567, 112r); that there were prophets before the law, “Abraham, Noah, Enoch and Adam,” prophets during the time of the law, “such as Moses and others,” and prophets during the apostolic era, “such as the prophecies of many holy men during the time of the primitive church” (1567, 112r). Vermigli employed this historical framing in his assessment of the role of the prophet

⁶ For my initial foray into this subject, Balsarak: 2017, 123-36.

⁷ Zwingli aligns shepherds with pastors, bishops, people’s priest, prophet, evangelist or preacher (ZW 3: 13; HZW 2: 86).

in redemptive history. And what we find for example in his treatment of 1 Samuel, is Vermigli explaining:

If the ordinary ministry at any time does not fulfill their duty, God raises up prophets extraordinarily (*extra ordinem*) in order to restore things to order (1567, 113r).

The paradigm Vermigli sets out is one which helps explain his thinking about his own Reformation era. So, he states elsewhere “[i]n my judgment, it ought not to be denied that there are still prophets in the church” (1579, 81r)—though precisely who he had in mind he does not say. But it is obvious he does not mean “everyone who preaches the gospel,” because if that were his meaning, it would be bizarre for him to assert it in the way he does. Such historical framing is also found in the thinking (on prophecy) of individuals like Martin Bucer (1527, 84v-85r and 1530, 113v-115v) and Wolfgang Musculus (1569, 106).

Turning to Calvin, whose lectures and commentaries also appeared in the 1540s through early 1560s, we find that he also adopted an historical approach to the treatment of the prophets. In fact, Calvin and Vermigli employ the same language. When lecturing on Jeremiah 32, Calvin explained that: “when through either laziness or ignorance, the priests failed in the performing of their office, God raised up prophets in their place.” (CO 39: 28). Calvin made the same remark in comments on Amos 7: 10-13 (CO 43: 131-32), and comments on Micah 3: 11-12. On the latter, he adds that due to the corruption of the priests, “it became necessary that prophets should be raised up as it were extraordinarily (*quasi extra ordinem*) (CO 43: 333-4). In his sermons on Deuteronomy 18, he explains the same, asserting that this is God’s pattern throughout the church’s history up to the present day (CO 27: 499). That’s from a sermon on Deut 18: 9-15, preached on Wed, Nov 27, 1555; (on which see Balsarak: 2010, 85-112).

4. Theodore Beza

Where does Theodore Beza fit into the development we have briefly mapped out? As we shall see, he produces a similarly historical reading of the prophets. He discusses prophets in *Sermons sur l’histoire de la passion* (1592), *Annotationes majores in Novum ... Testamentum* (1594), and elsewhere. Much like Calvin, he did not devote a separate locus to the subject of prophecy—the way Vermigli and others did. But that said, he did treat the topic. In fact, his treatment of it is as substantial as Calvin’s discussions, or perhaps more so.

Let us set his thought into a fuller theological context, as we begin to examine it. Beza believes that the church is born of the word of God. This is true of the church ever since it came into being (Beza: 1579, 54). The word of God gave birth to the church as mother to daughter.⁸ This, of course, is fundamentally different from the Roman Catholic understanding which believed the opposite. So, for instance, if we listen in on the debate that took place over the issue particularly as it was manifested in their dispute over the meaning of the famous words of Augustine’s from his *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti*, where he said: “For my part, I should not believe the gospel except as moved by the authority of the catholic church” (PL 42: 176).⁹ The simple Roman reading of this was: the church preceded everything else, and in particular, it preceded production of the New Testament writings for which reason it has authority over the New Testament and its interpretation. We see this in myriad places (e.g. Biel: 1968, 74-75 and Cochlaeus: 1524, 1, 7). By contrast,

⁸ Beza could have, of course, adopted such a belief from numerous sources, including Calvin; see CO 7: 612-13.

⁹ “Ego vero Evangelio non crederem, nisi me catholicae Ecclesiae commoveret auctoritas”
PL 42: 176.

Beza insists that the word of God is the “incorruptible seed” from which the church grew and grows still (Beza: 1579, 54 as cited in Maruyama: 1978, 217).

Fundamental here for Beza was John 10: 27, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” For an earlier generation, New Testament passages such as this one had prompted reflections on prophecy that focused on the congregation as I mentioned above briefly with respect to Oecolampadius (e.g. Luther: WA 11: 408-416; Zell: 1523; Bucer: 1523),¹⁰ but Beza was not a part of that generation. Nonetheless, Jesus’ words from John 10 still served a role for him, but that role had to do more with the part it plays in identifying the true church as the body which listens and follows the true Shepherd.

Given this focus on the priority of the scriptures, it will come as no surprise to see that Beza is conscious of canonical and text-critical issues (Krans: 2006) and is sufficiently concerned with, and condemns, the Anabaptists and others who would like to claim the ability to speak through the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit apart from the scriptures. To Beza, these groups—the Anabaptists and other radical sects—are heretics, as could easily be seen by their rejection of infant baptism and their anti-trinitarianism (Beza: 1592, 211, 217).¹¹ Beza, thus, labored to ensure that the understanding of the closing of the canon is made clear (Beza: 1593, 406).

God appointed ministers to care for God’s church through the preaching of the sacred scriptures. The preaching of God’s word is not for anyone and everyone within the church to handle (Beza: 1579, 85). Beza’s understanding of this ministry exhibits nuance and care, but

¹⁰ For more, see Pak: 2018, 35-63.

¹¹ Beza’s concerns on the church do not reflect the kind of intense concern over schism (and the charge of schism hurled at evangelicals by the Roman Catholics) that one finds in the writings of Calvin; see Balsarak: 2011, 19-64.

is not provocative or especially original. God calls pastors (pastor-doctors), deacons, and elders (Beza: 1560, V, XXIV, XXV, XXVI). These are found under the heading or under the category of ordinary vocations. Prophets, apostles, and evangelists fall under the category of extraordinary vocations on which we will have more to say momentarily.

In God's providence, the church has been allowed to fall into corruption. The Roman Catholic Church had descended from piety to such a degree that it no longer possessed true doctrine nor did it exhibit true ecclesiastical government (Beza: 1560, V, XVII). Again Beza, though clear and sophisticated in his thinking here, is not provocative. Likely adopting ideas from Calvin, *inter alios*, Beza spoke of the church in different ways and from different perspectives (Maruyama: 1978, 197-211). The church is mother; school, body of God's elect, and such like (e.g. Beza: 1593, 400). In terms of identifying the church, Beza argued that the two standard marks set out by Protestant and evangelical theologians—namely Word and Sacrament—are, indeed, the marks for which one ought to look (Beza: 1554, 214; Beza: 1586, XI, 1, 220). Beza did occasionally, famously or infamously (depending on one's point of view), add the third mark of discipline to his discussion of the *notae ecclesiae*, yet, as Maruyama has rightly argued, Beza focused the greatest focus and significance to the first mark of the right preaching of the word of God (Beza: 1586, V, 8, 100; VI, 13, 138; II, 5, 36; see Maruyama: 1978, 209-10).

As Beza plotted the history of the church from its inception to the present day and sought to explain the disappearance of these marks and the decline of the Roman Catholic Church, we find him again following lines already etched and made visible by Calvin and others. In the Old Testament era, the church of God gradually fell into spiritual decline,

though it still retained the divine promise.¹² God raised up Moses and Aaron and also the Judges. There was a division between false church and remnant which emerged, with God raising up prophets for the purpose of caring for his remnant church. With the advent of the New Testament era and the establishment of the New Testament Church at Pentecost, there was a great restoration of piety. Beza viewed the ancient church era as a kind of golden age (Beza: 1586, XXX, 1, 624-26). But with the eventual rise of the papacy, the ecclesiastical order came to be destroyed as the Anti-Christ took over and exerted greater authority (Beza: 1560, VII, vi).

Beza's understanding of the Reformation exhibits similar lines of analysis. In it, God has restored God's church. The links we find between Beza and the others, particularly Calvin, concerning how God did this are clear and obviously unsurprising. "The Reformers above all the ones who restore the original apostolic doctrine and build the church upon the apostolic foundation" (Maruyama: 1978, 220). Beza identifies Jan Hus and John Wyclif (Beza: 1579, 79) in this capacity—that is to say, as prophets whom the Lord had raised up extraordinarily. Beza is, in fact, profoundly conscious of the work God has been doing in his day (see e.g. Beza: 1579, 87-90), and this work is a manifestation of God's great power and love for God's church. Through that work, right order has been re-established in the church as well as correct doctrine (Beza: 1593, 390).

Beza's comments on the mechanisms (so to speak) which God employed include discussion of prophets, as I have already suggested. Beza can identify others as doing the work of reform, including pastors and doctors (Beza: 1565, II, 239f) and magistrates (Beza: 1559, V, xvi). Such occasional ambiguity does not strike the present author as particularly

¹² There is a long and detailed discussion of this to which Beza was privy, and surely read, in Calvin's *Institutio Christianae Religionis* 4.2-4 (CO 2: 767-798).

problematic; it is simply part of the bargain when dealing with thinkers writing at this time. As we explore more deeply the question of who Beza identified as God's reformers and how God seems to have worked to effect such a reforming, we find Beza pointing to the very divine method we found discussed by Calvin and Vermigli. Accordingly, in a sermon he preached on Mark 14: 60-61 (and the parallels from the other synoptic gospels), Beza sets out the same principle, illustrated by identifying the divine protocol when reforming the Old Testament church by raising up prophets:

Foreseeing that not all the priests would be like Aaron or Phineas, ... the Lord extraordinarily raised up those who are called prophets, on the promise that he had made in Deut. 18:15 (Beza: 1592, 327).

The mention of Deuteronomy 18 suggests a possible link with Calvin, though of course we cannot be even remotely certain of this.¹³

So we find these kinds of statements—just as we did with the others at whom we looked. But we also find more. In Beza's development of thought on this theme, or cluster of related-themes, one finds some impressive development, which may be due to his distance from the early days of the Reformation coupled with his extensive biblical and theological knowledge. Whatever the source of it, we find the following. When responding in 1592 to Adrianus Saravia's defense of episcopacy *De diversis gradibus ministrorum Evangelii* (1590), Beza takes up the subject of ordinary and extraordinary vocations specifically. Saravia had argued that the work of reforming the corrupt church belonged to the ordinary ministry. Against this, Beza argues that just as God raised up the prophets extraordinarily to

¹³ See, Balsarak: 2010, 85-112.

reform the Old Testament people of God, so “in the post-Apostolic Church” he raised up extraordinary reformers to do this work (Beza: 1592, 15, 17-19); that reform “is primarily the responsibility of the extraordinary vocations” (Maruyama, 1978, 188). This helpfully returns us to the question with which this paper began, which we will pick up again, though one issue must be briefly commented on first.

The idea of Hus, Wyclif, or anyone being raised up by God and possessing prophetic authority may well make one wonder about the kind of authority these figures really possessed and whether Beza believed, for instance, that their authority was such that their writings (those of Wyclif or Calvin, for instance) ought to be added to the canon. Nor was this only an issue associated with Beza’s understanding, but also with any number of Protestant and evangelical theologians: Zwingli, Bullinger, Vermigli, Calvin, John Knox, and others. They all seem to have believed that God called individuals, such as Martin Luther, and imbued them with divine authority. Given this fact, though, none of them asserted that that individual’s writings ought to be added to the canon. This simply did not seem to have occurred to them. Though it may, perhaps, seem unusual to us or may cause us to wonder about the precise character of the divine authority given to figures like Luther and Zwingli, it is nonetheless true that one does not find the idea present in their thought; certainly not in the thought of Beza. To him, the canon is closed and the books of the Old and New Testament are those of which it consists.

5. Conclusion

And so we return to Beza’s reference to Calvin as “the prophet of the Lord.” I would suggest it is clear, in fact crystal clear, now that Beza meant to reflect upon something quite profound when he spoke of Calvin in this way.

First, I would contend that his identifying of Calvin here is intended to identify him as a prophet in this special sense—that is, as an individual raised up by God at a time of decline, when the ordinary priestly ministry had failed in its duty, for the purpose of restoring the church.

Second, and moreover, I would argue that Beza said this because he—like the others at which we looked—had developed a theological understanding of the extraordinary vocation of the prophet raised up by God to restore the church, and was simply identifying Calvin as one who legitimately fits into this category.

Third, it seems that some of the debates into which Beza entered almost thirty years after Vermigli and Calvin's deaths help clarify quite significantly thinking on the idea of the prophet reformer—thinking which began at the beginning of the Reformation, with thinkers like Ulrich Zwingli.

There were, of course, others who identified Calvin in the same way. Antoine Fumée, a contemporary and friend of Calvin, refers to him as a prophet in an undated letter to the reformer (see Millet: 1998, 65) as does Jean Morley, writing in *Traicté de la discipline & police chrestienne* (1562, book 3, chapter 4, 257). Nor does this seem surprising, given that we have seen the existence, within the theology of a range of different figures, of an understanding of redemptive history which identifies God as an active part in it specifically through his act of raising up authoritative interpreters who are tasked with 'righting the ship' of the church.

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