

St. Thomas Aquinas

The Summa Theologica

(Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by

Fathers of the English Dominican Province

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OF THE MANNER IN WHICH PROPHETIC KNOWLEDGE IS CONVEYED (FOUR ARTICLES)

We must now consider the manner in which prophetic knowledge is conveyed, and under this head there are four points of inquiry:

- (1) Whether the prophets see God's very essence?
 - (2) Whether the prophetic revelation is effected by the infusion of certain species, or by the infusion of Divine light alone?
 - (3) Whether prophetic revelation is always accompanied by abstraction from the sense?
 - (4) Whether prophecy is always accompanied by knowledge of the things prophesied?
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Whether the prophets see the very essence of God?

Objection 1: It would seem that the prophets see the very essence of God, for a gloss on Is. 38:1, "Take order with thy house, for thou shalt die and not live," says: "Prophets can read in the book of God's foreknowledge in which all things are written." Now God's foreknowledge is His very essence. Therefore prophets see God's very essence.

Objection 2: Further, Augustine says (De Trin. ix, 7) that "in that eternal truth from which all temporal things are made, we see with the mind's eye the type both of our being and of our

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they, especially, see the Divine essence.

Objection 3: Further, future contingencies are foreknown by the prophets "with unchangeable truth." Now future contingencies exist thus in God alone. Therefore the prophets see God Himself.

On the contrary, The vision of the Divine essence is not made void in heaven; whereas "prophecy is made void" ([1 Cor. 13:8](#)). Therefore prophecy is not conveyed by a vision of the Divine essence.

I answer that, Prophecy denotes Divine knowledge as existing afar off. Wherefore it is said of the prophets ([Heb. 11:13](#)) that "they were beholding... afar off." But those who are in heaven and in the state of bliss see, not as from afar off, but rather, as it were, from near at hand, according to Ps. 139:14, "The upright shall dwell with Thy countenance." Hence it is evident that prophetic knowledge differs from the perfect knowledge, which we shall have in heaven, so that it is distinguished therefrom as the imperfect from the perfect, and when the latter comes the former is made void, as appears from the words of the Apostle ([1 Cor. 13:10](#)).

Some, however, wishing to discriminate between prophetic knowledge and the knowledge of the blessed, have maintained that the prophets see the very essence of God (which they call the "mirror of eternity") [*Cf. De Veritate, xii, 6; Sent. II, D, XI, part 2, art. 2, ad 4], not, however, in the way in which it is the object of the blessed, but as containing the types [*Cf. FP, Question [15]] of future events. But this is altogether impossible. For God is the object of bliss in His very essence, according to the saying of Augustine (Confess. v, 4): "Happy whoso knoweth Thee, though he know not these," i.e. creatures. Now it is not possible to see the types of creatures in the very essence of God without seeing It, both because the Divine essence is Itself the type of all things that are made---the ideal type adding nothing to the Divine essence save only a relationship to the creature---and because knowledge of a thing in itself---and such is the knowledge of God as the object of heavenly bliss---precedes knowledge of that thing in its relation to something else---and such is the knowledge of God as containing the types of things. Consequently it is impossible for prophets to see God as containing the types of creatures, and yet not as the object of bliss. Therefore we must conclude that the prophetic vision is not the vision of the very essence of God, and that the prophets do not see in the Divine essence Itself the things they do see, but that they see them in certain images, according as they are enlightened by the Divine light.

Wherefore Dionysius (Coel. Hier. iv), in speaking of prophetic visions, says that "the wise theologian calls that vision divine which is effected by images of things lacking a bodily form through the seer being rapt in divine things." And these images illumined by the Divine light have more of the nature of a mirror than the Divine essence: since in a mirror images are formed from other things, and this cannot be said of God. Yet the prophet's mind thus enlightened may be called a mirror, in so far as a likeness of the truth of the Divine foreknowledge is formed therein, for which reason it is called the "mirror of eternity," as representing God's foreknowledge, for God in His eternity sees all things as present before Him, as stated above ([Question \[172\]](#), [Article \[1\]](#)).

Reply to Objection 1: The prophets are said to read the book of God's foreknowledge, inasmuch as the truth is reflected from God's foreknowledge on the prophet's mind.

Reply to Objection 2: Man is said to see in the First Truth the type of his existence, in so far as the image of the First Truth shines forth on man's mind, so that he is able to know himself.

unalterable truth, it follows that God can impress a like knowledge on the prophet's mind without the prophet seeing God in His essence.

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Whether, in prophetic revelation, new species of things are impressed on the prophet's mind, or merely a new light?

Objection 1: It would seem that in prophetic revelation no new species of things are impressed on the prophet's mind, but only a new light. For a gloss of Jerome on Amos 1:2 says that "prophets draw comparisons from things with which they are conversant." But if prophetic vision were effected by means of species newly impressed, the prophet's previous experience of things would be inoperative. Therefore no new species are impressed on the prophet's soul, but only the prophetic light.

Objection 2: Further, according to Augustine (Gen. ad lit. xii, 9), "it is not imaginative but intellective vision that makes the prophet"; wherefore it is declared ([Dan. 10:1](#)) that "there is need of understanding in a vision." Now intellective vision, as stated in the same book (Gen. ad lit. xii, 6) is not effected by means of images, but by the very truth of things. Therefore it would seem that prophetic revelation is not effected by impressing species on the soul.

Objection 3: Further, by the gift of prophecy the Holy Ghost endows man with something that surpasses the faculty of nature. Now man can by his natural faculties form all kinds of species of things. Therefore it would seem that in prophetic revelation no new species of things are impressed, but merely an intellectual light.

On the contrary, It is written (Osee 12:10): "I have multiplied" their "visions, and I have used similitudes, by the ministry of the prophets." Now multiplicity of visions results, not from a diversity of intellectual light, which is common to every prophetic vision, but from a diversity of species, whence similitudes also result. Therefore it seems that in prophetic revelation new species of things are impressed, and not merely an intellectual light.

I answer that, As Augustine says (Gen. ad lit. xii, 9), "prophetic knowledge pertains most of all to the intellect." Now two things have to be considered in connection with the knowledge possessed by the human mind, namely the acceptance or representation of things, and the judgment of the things represented. Now things are represented to the human mind under the form of species: and according to the order of nature, they must be represented first to the senses, secondly to the imagination, thirdly to the passive intellect, and these are changed by the species derived from the phantasms, which change results from the enlightening action of the active intellect. Now in the imagination there are the forms of sensible things not only as received from the senses, but also transformed in various ways, either on account of some bodily transformation (as in the case of people who are asleep or out of their senses), or through the coordination of the phantasms, at the command of reason, for the purpose of understanding something. For just as the various arrangements of the letters of the alphabet

As to the judgment formed by the human mind, it depends on the power of the intellectual light.

Now the gift of prophecy confers on the human mind something which surpasses the natural faculty in both these respects, namely as to the judgment which depends on the inflow of intellectual light, and as to the acceptance or representation of things, which is effected by means of certain species. Human teaching may be likened to prophetic revelation in the second of these respects, but not in the first. For a man represents certain things to his disciple by signs of speech, but he cannot enlighten him inwardly as God does.

But it is the first of these two that holds the chief place in prophecy, since judgment is the complement of knowledge. Wherefore if certain things are divinely represented to any man by means of imaginary likenesses, as happened to Pharaoh ([Gn. 41:1-7](#)) and to Nabuchodonosor ([Dan. 4:1-2](#)), or even by bodily likenesses, as happened to Balthasar ([Dan. 5:5](#)), such a man is not to be considered a prophet, unless his mind be enlightened for the purpose of judgment; and such an apparition is something imperfect in the genus of prophecy. Wherefore some [*Rabbi Moyses, Doct. Perplex. II, xxxvi] have called this "prophetic ecstasy," and such is divination by dreams. And yet a man will be a prophet, if his intellect be enlightened merely for the purpose of judging of things seen in imagination by others, as in the case of Joseph who interpreted Pharaoh's dream. But, as Augustine says (Gen. ad lit. xii, 9), "especially is he a prophet who excels in both respects, so," to wit, "as to see in spirit likenesses significant of things corporeal, and understand them by the quickness of his intellect."

Now sensible forms are divinely presented to the prophet's mind, sometimes externally by means of the senses---thus Daniel saw the writing on the wall ([Dan. 5:25](#))---sometimes by means of imaginary forms, either of exclusively Divine origin and not received through the senses (for instance, if images of colors were imprinted on the imagination of one blind from birth), or divinely coordinated from those derived from the senses---thus Jeremiah saw the "boiling caldron... from the face of the north" ([Jer. 1:13](#))---or by the direct impression of intelligible species on the mind, as in the case of those who receive infused scientific knowledge or wisdom, such as Solomon or the apostles.

But intellectual light is divinely imprinted on the human mind---sometimes for the purpose of judging of things seen by others, as in the case of Joseph, quoted above, and of the apostles whose understanding our Lord opened "that they might understand the scriptures" ([Lk. 24:45](#)); and to this pertains the "interpretation of speeches"---sometimes for the purpose of judging according to Divine truth, of the things which a man apprehends in the ordinary course of nature---sometimes for the purpose of discerning truthfully and efficaciously what is to be done, according to Is. 63:14, "The Spirit of the Lord was their leader."

Hence it is evident that prophetic revelation is conveyed sometimes by the mere infusion of light, sometimes by imprinting species anew, or by a new coordination of species.

Reply to Objection 1: As stated above, sometimes in prophetic revelation imaginary species previously derived from the senses are divinely coordinated so as to accord with the truth to be revealed, and then previous experience is operative in the production of the images, but not when they are impressed on the mind wholly from without.

images, but by an intelligible image. Hence Augustine says (De Trin. ix, 11) that "the soul possesses a certain likeness of the species known to it." Sometimes this intelligible image is, in prophetic revelation, imprinted immediately by God, sometimes it results from pictures in the imagination, by the aid of the prophetic light, since a deeper truth is gathered from these pictures in the imagination by means of the enlightenment of the higher light.

Reply to Objection 3: It is true that man is able by his natural powers to form all kinds of pictures in the imagination, by simply considering these pictures, but not so that they be directed to the representation of intelligible truths that surpass his intellect, since for this purpose he needs the assistance of a supernatural light.

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Whether the prophetic vision is always accompanied by abstraction from the senses?

Objection 1: It would seem that the prophetic vision is always accompanied by abstraction from the senses. For it is written ([Num. 12:6](#)): "If there be among you a prophet of the Lord, I will appear to him in a vision, or I will speak to him in a dream." Now a gloss says at the beginning of the Psalter, "a vision that takes place by dreams and apparitions consists of things which seem to be said or done." But when things seem to be said or done, which are neither said nor done, there is abstraction from the senses. Therefore prophecy is always accompanied by abstraction from the senses.

Objection 2: Further, when one power is very intent on its own operation, other powers are drawn away from theirs; thus men who are very intent on hearing something fail to see what takes place before them. Now in the prophetic vision the intellect is very much uplifted, and intent on its act. Therefore it seems that the prophetic vision is always accompanied by abstraction from the senses.

Objection 3: Further, the same thing cannot, at the same time, tend in opposite directions. Now in the prophetic vision the mind tends to the acceptance of things from above, and consequently it cannot at the same time tend to sensible objects. Therefore it would seem necessary for prophetic revelation to be always accompanied by abstraction from the senses.

Objection 4: On the contrary, It is written ([1 Cor. 14:32](#)): "The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets." Now this were impossible if the prophet were not in possession of his faculties, but abstracted from his senses. Therefore it would seem that prophetic vision is not accompanied by abstraction from the senses.

I answer that, As stated in the foregoing Article, the prophetic revelation takes place in four ways: namely, by the infusion of an intelligible light, by the infusion of intelligible species, by impression or coordination of pictures in the imagination, and by the outward presentation of sensible images. Now it is evident that there is no abstraction from the senses, when

[Donate bitcoin](#). St. Isidore [e-book library/forum](#) » [aquinas](#) » [english](#) » [summa](#) » [SS](#) » [SS173.html](#) be divinely formed for this special purpose, as the bush shown to Moses ([Ex. 3:2](#)), and the writing shown to Daniel ([Dan. 5:](#))---or whether they be produced by other causes; yet so that they are ordained by Divine providence to be prophetically significant of something, as, for instance, the Church was signified by the ark of Noah.

Again, abstraction from the external senses is not rendered necessary when the prophet's mind is enlightened by an intellectual light, or impressed with intelligible species, since in us the perfect judgment of the intellect is effected by its turning to sensible objects, which are the first principles of our knowledge, as stated in the FP, Question [84], Article [6].

When, however, prophetic revelation is conveyed by images in the imagination, abstraction from the senses is necessary lest the things thus seen in imagination be taken for objects of external sensation. Yet this abstraction from the senses is sometimes complete, so that a man perceives nothing with his senses; and sometimes it is incomplete, so that he perceives something with his senses, yet does not fully discern the things he perceives outwardly from those he sees in imagination. Hence Augustine says (Gen. ad lit. xii, 12): "Those images of bodies which are formed in the soul are seen just as bodily things themselves are seen by the body, so that we see with our eyes one who is present, and at the same time we see with the soul one who is absent, as though we saw him with our eyes."

Yet this abstraction from the senses takes place in the prophets without subverting the order of nature, as is the case with those who are possessed or out of their senses; but is due to some well-ordered cause. This cause may be natural---for instance, sleep---or spiritual---for instance, the intenseness of the prophets' contemplation; thus we read of Peter ([Acts 10:9](#)) that while he was praying in the supper-room [*Vulg.: 'the house-top' or 'upper-chamber'] "he fell into an ecstasy"---or he may be carried away by the Divine power, according to the saying of Ezechiel 1:3: "The hand of the Lord was upon him."

Reply to Objection 1: The passage quoted refers to prophets in whom imaginary pictures were formed or coordinated, either while asleep, which is denoted by the word "dream," or while awake, which is signified by the word "vision."

Reply to Objection 2: When the mind is intent, in its act, upon distant things which are far removed from the senses, the intensity of its application leads to abstraction from the senses; but when it is intent, in its act, upon the coordination of or judgment concerning objects of sense, there is no need for abstraction from the senses.

Reply to Objection 3: The movement of the prophetic mind results not from its own power, but from a power acting on it from above. Hence there is no abstraction from the senses when the prophet's mind is led to judge or coordinate matters relating to objects of sense, but only when the mind is raised to the contemplation of certain more lofty things.

Reply to Objection 4: The spirit of the prophets is said to be subject to the prophets as regards the prophetic utterances to which the Apostle refers in the words quoted; because, to wit, the prophets in declaring what they have seen speak their own mind, and are not thrown off their mental balance, like persons who are possessed, as Priscilla and Montanus maintained. But as regards the prophetic revelation itself, it would be more correct to say that the prophets are subject to the spirit of prophecy, i.e. to the prophetic gift.

Whether prophets always know the things which they prophesy?

Objection 1: It would seem that the prophets always know the things which they prophesy. For, as Augustine says (Gen. ad lit. xii, 9), "those to whom signs were shown in spirit by means of the likenesses of bodily things, had not the gift of prophecy, unless the mind was brought into action, so that those signs were also understood by them." Now what is understood cannot be unknown. Therefore the prophet is not ignorant of what he prophesies.

Objection 2: Further, the light of prophecy surpasses the light of natural reason. Now one who possesses a science by his natural light, is not ignorant of his scientific acquirements. Therefore he who utters things by the prophetic light cannot ignore them.

Objection 3: Further, prophecy is directed for man's enlightenment; wherefore it is written ([2 Pt. 1:19](#)): "We have the more firm prophetic word, whereunto you do well to attend, as to a light that shineth in a dark place." Now nothing can enlighten others unless it be lightsome in itself. Therefore it would seem that the prophet is first enlightened so as to know what he declares to others.

On the contrary, It is written ([Jn. 11:51](#)): "And this he" (Caiphas) "spoke, not of himself, but being the High Priest of that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation," etc. Now Caiphas knew this not. Therefore not every prophet knows what he prophesies.

I answer that, In prophetic revelation the prophet's mind is moved by the Holy Ghost, as an instrument that is deficient in regard to the principal agent. Now the prophet's mind is moved not only to apprehend something, but also to speak or to do something; sometimes indeed to all these three together, sometimes to two, sometimes to one only, and in each case there may be a defect in the prophet's knowledge. For when the prophet's mind is moved to think or apprehend a thing, sometimes he is led merely to apprehend that thing, and sometimes he is further led to know that it is divinely revealed to him.

Again, sometimes the prophet's mind is moved to speak something, so that he understands what the Holy Ghost means by the words he utters; like David who said ([2 Kgs. 23:2](#)): "The Spirit of the Lord hath spoken by me"; while, on the other hand, sometimes the person whose mind is moved to utter certain words knows not what the Holy Ghost means by them, as was the case with Caiphas ([Jn. 11:51](#)).

Again, when the Holy Ghost moves a man's mind to do something, sometimes the latter understands the meaning of it, like Jeremias who hid his loin-cloth in the Euphrates ([Jer. 13:1-11](#)); while sometimes he does not understand it--thus the soldiers, who divided Christ's garments, understood not the meaning of what they did.

Accordingly, when a man knows that he is being moved by the Holy Ghost to think something, or signify something by word or deed, this belongs properly to prophecy; whereas when he is moved, without his knowing it, this is not perfect prophecy, but a prophetic instinct.

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stated above, even true prophets know not all that the Holy Ghost means by the things they see, or speak, or even do.

And this suffices for the Replies to the Objections, since the arguments given at the beginning refer to true prophets whose minds are perfectly enlightened from above.