

Abraham J. Heschel

THE PROPHETS

"The prophet is a person who sees the world with the eyes of God...a person who holds God and man in one thought at one time, at all times...who suffers harms done to others....Living in dismay, he has the power to transcend dismay."

THE PROPHETS

by

ABRAHAM J. HESCHEL

UPON the understanding of prophecy depends the understanding of all of the Bible. What is prophecy? What sort of person is the prophet? What is the nature of prophetic inspiration? What are the unique ideas they convey? These are some of the questions the author undertakes to answer.

This book provides a unique opportunity for readers of the Bible to gain fresh and deep knowledge of Israel's prophetic movement. The author's profound understanding of the prophets also opens the door to new insight into the philosophy of religion.

Abraham Heschel is known throughout the world as one of the leading authorities on Jewish thought. The range of his knowledge and the vividness of his writing mark him as one of the great teachers of our day. He is more than an expert scholar and student of those inspired figures and that stirring movement in Jewish history. Abraham Heschel enters into, understands, and feels with a deep passion the life and times of the prophets.

In this monumental study of "those who speak for God," the reader moves beyond mere knowledge about the prophets into participation in the lives of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and the other prophets.

To Thomas Merton

a dear brother in spirit

Abraham Joshua Heschel

ELOUIS

THE PROPHETS

BY ABRAHAM J. HESCHEL



THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY
OF AMERICA

The Revised Standard Version has been used throughout, interspersed occasionally with my own translation. Some paragraphs in this volume are taken from my book, *God in Search of Man*, Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, New York, 1955.

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Dear Dr. Louns
Many Thanks for
the loan. A very fine
book. If you ever
want to part with it,
it would be welcome
in the library

B Innocent

INTRODUCTION

This book is about some of the most disturbing people who have ever lived: the men whose inspiration brought the Bible into being—the men whose image is our refuge in distress, and whose voice and vision sustain our faith.

The significance of Israel's prophets lies not only in what they said but also in what they were. We cannot fully understand what they meant to say to us unless we have some degree of awareness of what happened to them. The moments that passed in their lives are not now available and cannot become the object of scientific analysis. All we have is the consciousness of those moments as preserved in words.

My aim therefore is to attain an understanding of the prophet through an analysis and description of his *consciousness*, to relate what came to pass in his life—facing man, being faced by God—as reflected and affirmed in his mind. By consciousness, in other words, I mean here not only the perception of particular moments of inspiration, but also the totality of impressions, thoughts, and feelings which make up the prophet's being.

By insisting on the absolutely objective and supernatural nature of prophecy, dogmatic theology has disregarded the prophet's part in the prophetic act. Stressing revelation, it has ignored the response; isolating inspiration, it has lost sight of the human situation. In contrast with what may be called "pan-theology," psychologists have sought to deduce prophecy entirely from the inner life of the prophets. Reducing it to a subjective personal phenomenon, they have disregarded the prophet's awareness of his confrontation with facts not derived from his own mind.

A rejection of both extremes must spring from the realization that the words of the prophets testify to a situation that defies both pan-theology and pan-psychology. Careful analysis shows that this situation is composed of revelation and response, of receptivity and spontaneity, of event and experience. I maintain, therefore, that the marks of the personal element are to be traced, not outside the prophet's act, but within it.

The prophet is a person, not a microphone. He is endowed with a mission, with the power of a word not his own that accounts for his greatness—but also with temperament, concern, character, and individuality. As there was no resisting the impact of divine inspiration, so at times there was no resisting the vortex of his own temperament. The word of God reverberated in the voice of man.

The prophet's task is to convey a divine view, yet as a person he is a point of view. He speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his own situation. We must seek to understand not only the views he expounded but also the attitudes he embodied: his own position, feeling, response—not only what he said but also what he lived; the private, the intimate dimension of the word, the subjective side of the message.

In the prophets of Israel we may trace similarities and parallels to personalities to be encountered elsewhere, since indeed the religion of the Hebrews shared much with other Semitic religions. It is therefore important to compare them with other types of men of ancient history who made similar claims. Yet the more difficult question is: What are the features that set the prophets of Israel apart? What constitutes their uniqueness?

The prophet is not only a prophet. He is also poet, preacher, patriot, statesman, social critic, moralist. There has been a tendency to see the essence and chief significance of prophecy in the display of one or another of these aspects. Yet this is a misapprehension of the intrinsic nature of prophecy.

The first objective of our inquiry should not be to see the prophet as an example of a species, but rather to ascertain the characteristics that set him apart as well as those he shares with others. In order to meet him truly as a prophet, the mind must shed certain habits of inquiry; traps and decoys of convenient patterns are to be avoided. The most assured way of missing the goal is an approach carried on with the preconceived certainty of being able to explain him. To explain the prophet in terms of a neat set of preconceived notions would be putting the cart before the horse. Explanation, when regarded as the only goal of inquiry, becomes a substitute for understanding. Imperceptibly it becomes the beginning rather than the end of perception.

The bias which so many scholars share and which may be defined as a principle—namely, that nothing is to be recognized as a datum unless it can be qualified *a priori* as capable of explanation—besides being pretentious and questionable, obstructs the view of much of reality and seriously affects our power to gain a pristine insight into what we face.

Confining attention to what is given in the literary sources, i.e., the

prophetic books, I have sought to gain some insight into the minds of the prophets and to understand the decisive moments of their existence from that perspective.¹ It was not my intention in this study to pass judgment on the truth of their claim to have received revelation, nor to solve the enigma of prophecy by means of psychological or sociological explanations, nor yet to discover the conditions of its possibility or suggest means of its verification. The intention was to illumine the prophets' claim; not to explain their consciousness, but to understand it. By unveiling the decisive features of their awareness, the essential structure of experience as reflected in that consciousness may become manifest.

What I have aimed at is an understanding of what it means to think, feel, respond, and act as a prophet. It was not part of the task to go beyond his consciousness in order to explore the subconscious or reach out to the antecedent conditionings and experiences within the inner life of the individual. A surmise of what lies beyond and below the threshold of the prophet's consciousness can never be a substitute for the understanding of what is displayed in consciousness itself. Nor is it possible to confirm what he affirms. We may arrive at some knowledge of what stirred the prophet as a prophet—of the ideas by which he was moved at particular moments; we cannot prove the realities and events which preceded these moments.

The inquiry, then, was aimed, not at psychological motives to be looked for in the preprophetic background of the prophet's life, but at motives which are consciously given, even if not explicitly stated, and which constitute or at least reflect the decisive categories or the structural forms of prophetic thinking.

The procedure employed in an inquiry for gaining such insight was the method of pure reflection. Observation, inspection, tackling and probing, the sheer seeing of what we face, serve to introduce us to the realness of the phenomenon and sharpen our ability to formulate questions conducive to the discovery of what is unique about it. Indeed, it requires much effort to learn which questions should not be asked and which claims must not be entertained. What impairs our sight are habits of seeing as well as the mental concomitants of seeing. Our sight is suffused with knowing, instead of feeling painfully the lack of knowing what we see. The principle to be kept in mind is to know what we see rather than to see what we know.

¹ The destruction of Jerusalem in 587 marks the end of the classical era in the history of prophecy, and the understanding of the prophetic figures who emerged during the exile raises problems of a special kind. This book deals with the classical or literary prophets of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E. Of other prophets there is only occasional mention, with the exception of Second Isaiah, whose message illumines many of the enigmas in the words and intentions of his predecessors.

Rather than blame things for being obscure, we should blame ourselves for being biased and prisoners of self-induced repetitiveness. One must forget many clichés in order to behold a single image. Insight is the beginning of perceptions to come rather than the extension of perceptions gone by. Conventional seeing, operating as it does with patterns and coherences, is a way of seeing the present in the past tense. Insight is an attempt to think in the present.

Insight is a breakthrough, requiring much intellectual dismantling and dislocation. It begins with a mental interim, with the cultivation of a feeling for the unfamiliar, unparalleled, incredible. It is in being involved with a phenomenon, being intimately engaged to it, courting it, as it were, that after much perplexity and embarrassment we come upon *insight*—upon a way of seeing the phenomenon from within. Insight is accompanied by a sense of surprise. What has been closed is suddenly disclosed. It entails genuine perception, seeing anew. He who thinks that we can see the same object twice has never seen. Paradoxically, insight is knowledge at first sight.

Such an inquiry must suspend personal beliefs or even any intent to inquire—e.g., whether the event happened in fact as it did to their minds. It is my claim that, regardless of whether or not their experience was of the real, it is possible to analyze the form and content of that experience. The process and result of such an inquiry represent the essential part of this book as composed a good many years ago.² While I still maintain the soundness of the method described above, which in important aspects reflects the method of phenomenology, I have long since become wary of impartiality, which is itself a way of being partial. The prophet's existence is either irrelevant or relevant. If irrelevant, I cannot truly be involved in it; if relevant, then my impartiality is but a pretense. Reflection may succeed in isolating an object; reflection itself cannot be isolated. Reflection is part of a situation.

The situation of a person immersed in the prophets' words is one of being exposed to a ceaseless shattering of indifference, and one needs a skull of stone to remain callous to such blows.

I cannot remain indifferent to the question whether a decision I reach may prove fatal to my existence—whether to inhale the next breath in order to survive. Perhaps this is the issue that frightens the prophets. A people may be dying without being aware of it; a people may be able to survive, yet refuse to make use of their ability.

To comprehend what phenomena are, it is important to suspend judg-

² *Die Prophetie*, published by the Polish Academy of Sciences, Krakow, 1936 and by Erich Reiss, Berlin, 1936. For further details of the method employed, see the preface to that volume, pp. 1-6, as well as discussion throughout the present work.

ment and think in detachment; to comprehend what phenomena mean, it is necessary to suspend indifference and be involved. To examine their essence requires a process of reflection. Such reflection, however, sets up a gulf between the phenomena and ourselves. Reducing them to dead objects of the mind, it deprives them of the power to affect us, to speak to us, to transcend our attitudes and conceptions.

While the structure and the bare content of prophetic consciousness may be made accessible by an attitude of pure reflection, in which the concern for their truth and validity is suspended, the sheer force of what is disclosed in such reflection quietly corrodes the hardness of self-detachment. The magic of the process seems to be stronger than any asceticism of the intellect. Thus in the course of listening to their words one cannot long retain the security of a prudent, impartial observer. The prophets do not offer reflections about ideas in general. Their words are onslaughts, scuttling illusions of false security, challenging evasions, calling faith to account, questioning prudence and impartiality. One may be equally afraid to submit to their strange certainties and to resist their tremendous claims because of incredulity or impotence of spirit. Reflection about the prophets gives way to communion with the prophets.

Pure reflection may be sufficient for the clarification of what the prophet's consciousness asserts—but not for what his existence involves. For such understanding it is not enough to have the prophets in mind; we must think as if we were inside their minds. For them to be alive and present to us we must think, not *about*, but *in* the prophets, with their concern and their heart. Their existence involves us. Unless their concern strikes us, pains us, exalts us, we do not really sense it. Such involvement requires accord, receptivity, hearing, sheer surrender to their impact. Its intellectual rewards include moments in which the mind peels off, as it were, its not-knowing. Thought is like touch, comprehending by being comprehended.

In probing their consciousness we are not interested only in the inward life, in emotion and reflection as such. We are interested in restoring the world of the prophets: terrifying in its absurdity and defiance of its Maker, tottering at the brink of disaster, with the voice of God imploring man to turn to Him. It is not a world devoid of meaning that evokes the prophet's consternation, but a world deaf to meaning. And yet the consternation is but a prelude. He always begins with a message of doom and concludes with a message of hope and redemption. Does this mean that no human wickedness can prevail over God's almighty love? Does this mean that His stillness is stronger than the turmoil of human crimes, that His desire for peace is stronger than man's passion for violence?

Prophecy is not simply the application of timeless standards to particular

human situations, but rather an interpretation of a particular moment in history, a divine understanding of a human situation. Prophecy, then, may be described as *exegesis of existence from a divine perspective*. Understanding prophecy is an understanding of an understanding rather than an understanding of knowledge; it is exegesis of exegesis. It involves sharing the perspective from which the original understanding is done. To interpret prophecy from any other perspective—such as sociology or psychology—is like interpreting poetry from the perspective of the economic interests of the poet.

The spirit of such exegesis makes it incongruous for our inquiry to take refuge in the personal question (however vital): What do the prophets mean to us? The only sensible way of asking the personal question is to be guided by another, more audacious question: What do the prophets mean to God? All other questions are absurd unless this one question is meaningful. For prophecy is a sham unless it is experienced as a word of God swooping down on man and converting him into a prophet.

Proper exegesis is an effort to understand the philosopher in terms and categories of philosophy, the poet in terms and categories of poetry, and the prophet in terms and categories of prophecy. Prophecy is a way of thinking as well as a way of living. It is upon the right understanding of the terms and categories of prophetic thinking that the success of our inquiry depends.

To rediscover some of these terms and categories requires careful exploration of the kinds of questions a prophet asks, and the sort of premises about God, the world, and man he takes for granted. Indeed, the most important outcome of the inquiry has been for me the discovery of the *intellectual relevance of the prophets*.

What drove me to study the prophets?

In the academic environment in which I spent my student years philosophy had become an isolated, self-subsisting, self-indulgent entity, a *Ding an sich*, encouraging suspicion instead of love of wisdom. The answers offered were unrelated to the problems, indifferent to the travail of a person who became aware of man's suspended sensitivity in the face of stupendous challenge, indifferent to a situation in which good and evil became irrelevant, in which man became increasingly callous to catastrophe and ready to suspend the principle of truth. I was slowly led to the realization that some of the terms, motivations, and concerns which dominate our thinking may prove destructive of the roots of human responsibility and treasonable to the ultimate ground of human solidarity. The challenge we are all exposed to, and the dreadful shame that shatters our capacity for inner peace, defy the ways and patterns of our thinking. One is forced to admit that some of the causes and

motives of our thinking have led our existence astray, that speculative prosperity is no answer to spiritual bankruptcy. It was the realization that the right coins were not available in the common currency that drove me to study the thought of the prophets.

Every mind operates with presuppositions or premises as well as within a particular way of thinking. In the face of the tragic failure of the modern mind, incapable of preventing its own destruction, it became clear to me that the most important philosophical problem of the twentieth century was to find a new set of presuppositions or premises, a different way of thinking.

I have tried to elucidate some of the presuppositions that lie at the root of prophetic theology, the fundamental attitudes of prophetic religion, and to call attention to how they differ from certain presuppositions and attitudes that prevail in other systems of theology and religion. While stressing the centrality of pathos, a term which takes on major importance in the course of the discussion, I have tried not to lose sight of the ethos and logos in their teaching.

Disregarding derivative and subordinate circumstances and focusing attention upon the fundamental motives which give coherence and integral unity to the prophetic personality, I have been led to distinguish in the consciousness of the prophet between what happened *to* him and what happened *in* him—between the transcendent and the spontaneous—as well as between content and form. The structure of prophetic consciousness as ascertained in the analysis was disclosed as consisting, on the transcendent level, of pathos (content of inspiration) and event (form), and on the personal level, of sympathy (content of inner experience) and the sense of being overpowered (form of inner experience).

The prophet was an individual who said No to his society, condemning its habits and assumptions, its complacency, waywardness, and syncretism. He was often compelled to proclaim the very opposite of what his heart expected. His fundamental objective was to reconcile man and God. Why do the two need reconciliation? Perhaps it is due to man's false sense of sovereignty, to his abuse of freedom, to his aggressive, sprawling pride, resenting God's involvement in history.

Prophecy ceased; the prophets endure and can only be ignored at the risk of our own despair. It is for us to decide whether freedom is self-assertion or response to a demand; whether the ultimate situation is conflict or concern.

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Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories, glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord Who practice kindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord" (Jer. 9:23-24 [H. 9:22-23]).

This message was expressed with astounding finality by a later prophet: "This is the word of the Lord . . . : Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit . . ." (Zech. 4:6).

ONE OCTAVE TOO HIGH

We and the prophet have no language in common. To us the moral state of society, for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim; to the prophet it is dreadful. So many deeds of charity are done, so much decency radiates day and night; yet to the prophet satiety of the conscience is prudery and flight from responsibility. Our standards are modest; our sense of injustice tolerable, timid; our moral indignation impermanent; yet human violence is interminable, unbearable, permanent. To us life is often serene, in the prophet's eye the world reels in confusion. The prophet makes no concession to man's capacity. Exhibiting little understanding for human weakness, he seems unable to extenuate the culpability of man.

Who could bear living in a state of disgust day and night? The conscience builds its confines, is subject to fatigue, longs for comfort, lulling, soothing. Yet those who are hurt, and He Who inhabits eternity, neither slumber nor sleep.

The prophet is sleepless and grave. The frankincense of charity fails to sweeten cruelties. Pomp, the scent of piety, mixed with ruthlessness, is sickening to him who is sleepless and grave.

Perhaps the prophet knew more about the secret obscenity of sheer unfairness, about the unnoticed malignancy of established patterns of indifference, than men whose knowledge depends solely on intelligence and observation.

*The Lord made it known to me and I knew;
Then Thou didst show me their evil deeds.
Jeremiah 11:18*

The prophet's ear perceives the silent sigh.

In the Upanishads the physical world is devoid of value—unreal, a sham, an illusion, a dream—but in the Bible the physical world is real, the creation of God. Power, offspring, wealth, prosperity—all are blessings to be cher-

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them: Obey My voice and I will be your God, and you shall be My people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.

Jeremiah 7:21-23

The prophet knew that religion could distort what the Lord demanded of man, that priests themselves had committed perjury by bearing false witness, condoning violence, tolerating hatred, calling for ceremonies instead of bursting forth with wrath and indignation at cruelty, deceit, idolatry, and violence.

To the people, religion was Temple, priesthood, incense: "This is the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord" (Jer. 7:4). Such piety Jeremiah brands as fraud and illusion. "Behold you trust in deceptive words to no avail," he calls (Jer. 7:8). Worship preceded or followed by evil acts becomes an absurdity. The holy place is doomed when people indulge in unholy deeds.

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, We are delivered!—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I Myself have seen it, says the Lord. Go now to My place that was in Shiloh, where I made My name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of My people Israel. And now, because you have done all these things, says the Lord, and when I spoke to you persistently you did not listen, and when I called you, you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house which is called by My name, and in which you trust, and to the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I did to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of My sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Jeremiah, 7:9-15

The prophet's message sounds incredible. In the pagan world the greatness, power, and survival of a god depended upon the greatness, power, and survival of the people, upon the city and shrine dedicated to his cult. The more triumphs the king achieved or the more countries he conquered, the greater was the god. A god who would let enemies destroy his shrine or conquer the people who worshiped him would commit suicide.

A tribal god was petitioned to slay the tribe's enemies because he was conceived as the god of that tribe and not as the god of the enemies. When the Roman armies were defeated in battle, the people, indignant, did not hesitate to wreck the images of their gods.

The prophets of Israel proclaim that the enemy may be God's instrument in history. The God of Israel calls the archenemy of His people "Assyria, the rod of My anger" (Isa. 10:5; cf. 13:5; 5:26; 7:18; 8:7). "Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, My servant" whom I will bring "against this land and its inhabitants" (Jer. 25:9; 27:6; 43:10). Instead of cursing the enemy, the prophets condemn their own nation.

What gave them the strength to "demythologize" precious certainties, to attack what was holy, to hurl blasphemies at priest and king, to stand up against all in the name of God? The prophets must have been shattered by some cataclysmic experience in order to be able to shatter others.

AUSTERITY AND COMPASSION

The words of the prophet are stern, sour, stinging. But behind his austerity is love and compassion for mankind. Ezekiel sets forth what all other prophets imply: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?" (Ezek. 18:23.) Indeed, every prediction of disaster is in itself an exhortation to repentance. The prophet is sent not only to upbraid, but also to "strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees" (Isa. 35:3). Almost every prophet brings consolation, promise, and the hope of reconciliation along with censure and castigation. He begins with a *message of doom*; he concludes with a *message of hope*.⁵

The prominent theme is exhortation, not mere prediction. While it is true that foretelling is an important ingredient and may serve as a sign of the prophet's authority (Deut. 18:22; Isa. 41:22; 43:9), his essential task is to declare the word of God to the here and now; to disclose the future in order to illumine what is involved in the present.⁶

⁵ See *Sifre Deuteronomy*, 342, beginning. Some modern scholars maintain that the pre-exilic prophets had no message except one of doom, that true prophecy is essentially prophecy of woe. Yet such a view can be maintained only by declaring, often on insufficient grounds, that numerous passages are interpolations. See H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord* (London, 1952), p. 125.

⁶ See the divergent views of R. H. Charles, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Oxford, 1929), p. xxvi, and A. Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination* (London, 1938), pp. 111 f. See also H. H. Rowley, *loc. cit.*

lar (Isa. 3:10-11). The exclamation in the name of the Lord, "Wicked men are found among My people!" (Jer. 5:26), betrays, it seems, a more sober appraisal of the situation and may be kept in mind as a modification of the numerous extravagant qualifications uttered by the prophets *in their own names*.⁷

Great orators in Rome had frequently manifested courage in publicly condemning the abuse of power by individuals. But the prophets challenge the whole country: kings, priests, false prophets, and the entire nation. The historical accounts in the books of Kings would certainly have referred to the moral corruption, had it been as grave as the prophets maintain.

In terms of statistics the prophets' statements are grossly inaccurate. Yet their concern is not with facts, but with the meaning of facts. The significance of human deeds, the true image of man's existence, cannot be expressed by statistics. The rabbis were not guilty of exaggeration in asserting, "Whoever destroys a single soul should be considered the same as one who has destroyed a whole world. And whoever saves one single soul is to be considered the same as one who has saved a whole world."

Extremely minute, yet vital entities formerly unknown to the mind were suddenly disclosed by the microscope. What seems to be exaggeration is often only a deeper penetration, for the prophets see the world from the point of view of God, as transcendent, not immanent truth.

Modern thought tends to extenuate personal responsibility. Understanding the complexity of human nature, the interrelationship of individual and society, of consciousness and the subconscious, we find it difficult to isolate the deed from those circumstances in which it was done. But new insights may obscure essential vision, and man's conscience grow scales: excuses, pretense, self-pity. Guilt may disappear; no crime is absolute, no sin devoid of apology. Within the limits of the human mind, relativity is true and merciful. Yet the mind's scope embraces but a fragment of society, a few instants of history; it thinks of what has happened, it is unable to imagine what might have happened.

FEW ARE GUILTY, ALL ARE RESPONSIBLE

What was happening in Israel surpassed its intrinsic significance. Israel's history comprised a drama of God and all men. God's kingship and man's

⁷ Rhetorical exaggeration is a frequent mode of the biblical style of writing. Rabbi Simeon ben Gamliel, who lived in Palestine in the first half of the second century A.D., asserted that

hope were at stake in Jerusalem. God was alone in the world, unknown or discarded. The countries of the world were full of abominations, violence, falsehood. Here was one land, one people, cherished and chosen for the purpose of transforming the world. *This* people's failure was most serious. The Beloved of God worshiped the Baalim (Hos. 11:1-2); the vineyard of the Lord yielded wild grapes (Isa. 5:2); Israel, holy to the Lord, "defiled My land, made My heritage an abomination" (Jer. 2:3, 7).

Defining truth as the conformity of assertion to facts, we may censure the prophets for being inaccurate, incongruous, even absurd; defining truth as reality reflected in a mind, we see prophetic truth as reality reflected in God's mind, the world *sub specie dei*.

Prophetic accusations are perhaps more easily understood in the light of the book of Job's thesis that men might judge a human being just and pure, whom God, Who finds angels imperfect, would not.⁸

*Can mortal man be righteous before God?
Can a man be pure before His Maker?
Even in His servants He puts no trust,
His angels He charges with error;
How much more those who dwell in houses of clay,
Whose foundation is in the dust,
Who are crushed before the moth. . . .
What is man, that he can be clean?
Or he that is born of a woman, that he can be righteous?
Behold God puts no trust in His holy ones,
The heavens are not clean in His sight;
How much less one who is abominable and corrupt,
A man who drinks iniquity like water!*

Job 4:17-19; 15:14-16

"For there is no man who does not sin" (I Kings 8:46). "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins" (Eccles. 7:20).

It is with a bitter sense of the tremendous contrast between God's righteousness and man's failure that the psalmist prays:

*Enter not into judgment with Thy servant;
For no man living is righteous before Thee.*

Psalm 143:2

Scripture employs hyperbolic phrases, citing Deut. 1:28 as an example, *Sifre Deuteronomy*, p. 25. A similar view was expressed by Rabbi Ammi of the third century, *Tamid* 29a. Cf. also E. König, *Stilistik, Rhetorik, Poetik in Bezug auf die Biblische Literatur* (Leipzig, 1900), p. 69; C. Douglas, *Overstatement in the New Testament* (New York, 1931), pp. 3-36.

⁸ Eliphaz' thesis is accepted by Job (9:2); see also 25:4.

Men are greatly praised when worthy of being reproved. Only a strong heart can bear bitter invectives.

Above all, the prophets remind us of the moral state of a people: Few are guilty, but all are responsible. If we admit that the individual is in some measure conditioned or affected by the spirit of society, an individual's crime discloses society's corruption. In a community not indifferent to suffering, uncompromisingly impatient with cruelty and falsehood, continually concerned for God and every man, crime would be infrequent rather than common.

THE BLAST FROM HEAVEN

To a person endowed with prophetic sight, everyone else appears blind; to a person whose ear perceives God's voice, everyone else appears deaf. No one is just; no knowing is strong enough, no trust complete enough. The prophet hates the approximate, he shuns the middle of the road. Man must live on the summit to avoid the abyss. There is nothing to hold to except God. Carried away by the challenge, the demand to straighten out man's ways, the prophet is strange, one-sided, an unbearable extremist.

Others may suffer from the terror of cosmic aloneness, the prophet is overwhelmed by the grandeur of divine presence. He is incapable of isolating the world. There is an interaction between man and God which to disregard is an act of insolence. Isolation is a fairy tale.

Where an idea is the father of faith, faith must conform to the ideas of the given system. In the Bible the realness of God came first, and the task was how to live in a way compatible with His presence. Man's coexistence with God determines the course of history.

The prophet disdains those for whom God's presence is comfort and security; to him it is a challenge, an incessant demand. God is compassion, not compromise; justice, though not inclemency. The prophet's predictions can always be proved wrong by a change in man's conduct, but never the certainty that God is full of compassion.

The prophet's word is a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven.

THE COALITION OF CALLOUSNESS AND AUTHORITY

The prophet faces a coalition of callousness and established authority, and undertakes to stop a mighty stream with mere words. Had the purpose

been to express great ideas, prophecy would have had to be acclaimed as a triumph. Yet the purpose of prophecy is to conquer callousness, to change the inner man as well as to revolutionize history.

It is embarrassing to be a prophet. There are so many pretenders, predicting peace and prosperity, offering cheerful words, adding strength to self-reliance, while the prophet predicts disaster, pestilence, agony, and destruction. People need exhortations to courage, endurance, confidence, fighting spirit, but Jeremiah proclaims: You are about to die if you do not have a change of heart and cease being callous to the word of God. He sends shudders over the whole city, at a time when the will to fight is most important.

By the standards of ancient religions, the great prophets were rather unimpressive. The paraphernalia of nimbus and evidence, such as miracles, were not at their disposal.⁹

LONELINESS AND MISERY

None of the prophets seems enamored with being a prophet nor proud of his attainment. What drove Jeremiah, for instance, to being a prophet?

*Cursed be the day
On which I was born! . . .
Because He did not kill me in the womb;
So my mother would have been my grave, . . .
Why did I come forth out of the womb
To see toil and sorrow,
And spend my days in shame?*

Jeremiah 20:14, 17, 18

Over the life of a prophet words are invisibly inscribed: All flattery abandon, ye who enter here. To be a prophet is both a distinction and an

⁹ Very few miracles are ascribed to the prophets; see Isa. 38:7-8. Miracles have no probative value; see Deut. 13:1-3. What is offered to Ahaz (Isa. 7:11) is a sign rather than a miracle. On the meaning of this passage, see M. Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York, 1949), p. 138.

Of Samuel it is reported that he called upon the Lord, and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel (I Sam. 12:18). Gideon (Judg. 6:36-40) and Elijah (I Kings 18:36-38) implored God for miraculous signs. The miracle of the sundial (Isa. 38:1-8) was not performed for the purpose of verification. Miracles did not always have the power to put an end to uncertainty, since the magicians were able to duplicate them (see Exod. 8:7 [H. 7:11, 22]). The only medium of the prophet was the word or the symbolic act to illustrate its content. Even predictions of things to come did not always serve to verify the prophet's word.

people's ways (Jer. 6:27, RSV); "whenever you hear a word from My mouth, you shall give them warning from Me" (Ezek. 3:17). The prophet's eye is directed to the contemporary scene; the society and its conduct are the main theme of his speeches. Yet his ear is inclined to God. He is a person struck by the glory and presence of God, overpowered by the hand of God. Yet his true greatness is his ability to hold God and man in a single thought.

The spiritual status of a diviner, not to be confused with a prophet, is higher than that of his fellow man; the diviner is regarded as more exalted than other members of his society. However, the measure of such superiority is that of individuality. In contrast, the prophet feels himself placed not only above other members of his own society; he is placed in a relationship transcending his own total community, and even the realm of other nations and kingdoms. The measure of his superiority is that of universality. This is why the essence of his eminence is not adequately described by the term *charisma*. Not the fact of his having been affected, but the fact of his having received a power to affect others is supreme in his existence. His sense of election and personal endowment is overshadowed by his sense of a history-shaping power. Jeremiah, for example, was appointed "a prophet to the nations" (1:5). He was told:

*See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms,
To pluck up and to break down,
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant.*

Jeremiah 1:10

It is common to characterize the prophet as a messenger of God, thus to differentiate him from the tellers of fortune, givers of oracles, seers, and ecstasies. Such a characterization expresses only one aspect of his consciousness. The prophet claims to be far more than a messenger. He is a person who stands in the presence of God (Jer. 15:19), who stands "in the council of the Lord" (Jer. 23:18), who is a participant, as it were, in the council of God, not a bearer of dispatches whose function is limited to being sent on errands. He is a counselor as well as a messenger.

*Surely the Lord God does nothing
Without revealing His secret
To His servants the prophets,
Amos 3:7*

When the secret revealed is one of woe, the prophet does not hesitate to challenge the intention of the Lord:

*O Lord God, forgive, I beseech Thee!
How can Jacob stand?
He is so small!*

Amos 7:2

When the lives of others are at stake, the prophet does not say, "Thy will be done!" but rather, "Thy will be changed."

*The Lord repented concerning this;
It shall not be, said the Lord.*

Amos 7:3

It is impossible for us to intuit the grandeur of the prophetic consciousness. A person to whom the spirit of God comes, becomes radically transformed; he is "turned into another man" (I Sam. 10:6). The vastness and gravity of the power bestowed upon the prophet seem to burst the normal confines of human consciousness. The gift he is blessed with is not a skill, but rather the gift of being guided and restrained, of being moved and curbed. His mission is to speak, yet in the vision of consecration Ezekiel, for example, was forewarned of the inability to speak. "Cords will be placed upon you . . . and I will make your tongue cleave to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be dumb and unable to reprove them; . . . But when I speak with you, I will open your mouth, and you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord God" (Ezek. 3:25-27).

As a witness, the prophet is more than a messenger. As a messenger, his task is to deliver the word; as a witness, he must bear testimony that the word is divine.

The words the prophet utters are not offered as souvenirs. His speech to the people is not a reminiscence, a report, hearsay. The prophet not only conveys; he reveals. He almost does unto others what God does unto him. In speaking, the prophet reveals God. This is the marvel of a prophet's work: in his words, *the invisible God becomes audible*. He does not prove or argue. The thought he has to convey is more than language can contain. Divine power bursts in the words. The authority of the prophet is in the Presence his words reveal.

There are no proofs for the existence of the God of Abraham. There are only witnesses. The greatness of the prophet lies not only in the ideas he expressed, but also in the moments he experienced. The prophet is a witness, and his words a testimony—to *His* power and judgment, to *His* justice and mercy.

The contradictions in the prophetic message seem perplexing. The book

of Amos, out of which come the words, "The end has come upon My people Israel" (8:2) and "Fallen no more to rise is the virgin Israel" (5:2), concludes with the prediction:

*I will restore the fortunes of My people Israel,
And they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;
They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
And they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant them upon their land,
And they shall never again be plucked up
Out of the land which I have given them,
Says the Lord your God.*

Amos 9:14-15

What hidden bond exists between the word of wrath and the word of compassion, between "consuming fire" and "everlasting love"?

Does the apparent contradiction within the assertions of a prophet destroy the validity of his message? It would if prophecy dealt only with laws or principles. But the prophet deals with relations between God and man, where contradiction is inevitable. Escape from God and return to Him are inextricable parts of man's existence. Conformity to logical standards is not characteristic of man's conduct, which is why contradiction is inherent in prophecy.

We will have to look for prophetic coherence, not *in what* the prophet says but of *Whom* he speaks. Indeed, not even the word of God is the ultimate object and theme of his consciousness. The ultimate object and theme of his consciousness is God, of Whom the prophet knows that above His judgment and above His anger stands His mercy.

The prophetic utterance has, therefore, no finality. It does not set forth a comprehensive law, but a single perspective. It is expressed *ad hoc*, often *ad hominem*, and must not be generalized.

THE PRIMARY CONTENT OF EXPERIENCE

What is the primary content of prophetic experience, the thought immediately felt, the motive directly present to the prophet's mind? What are the facts of consciousness that stirred him so deeply? Is it a sense of anxiety about the fate and future of the people or of the state? An impulse of patriotism? Is it personal irritation at the violation of moral laws and standards, a spontaneous reaction of the conscience against what is wrong or evil? Moral indignation?

In a stricken hour comes the word of the prophet. There is tension be-

"The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man's fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of man; no human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned rules of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet's words."

—from the Introduction to
THE PROPHETS

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