

THE PROPHETS

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I. WHAT MANNER OF MAN IS THE PROPHET?

SENSITIVITY TO EVIL

What manner of man is the prophet? A student of philosophy who turns from the discourses of the great metaphysicians to the orations of the prophets may feel as if he were going from the realm of the sublime to an area of trivialities. Instead of dealing with the timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form, of definitions and demonstrations, he is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place. Instead of showing us a way through the elegant mansions of the mind, the prophets take us to the slums. The world is a proud place, full of beauty, but the prophets are scandalized, and rave as if the whole world were a slum. They make much ado about paltry things, lavishing excessive language upon trifling subjects. What if somewhere in ancient Palestine poor people have not been treated properly by the rich? So what if some old women found pleasure and edification in worshipping "the Queen of Heaven"? Why such immoderate excitement? Why such intense indignation?

The things that horrified the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world. There is no society to which Amos' words would not apply.

*Hear this, you who trample upon the needy,
And bring the poor of the land to an end,
Saying: When will the new moon be over
That we may sell grain?
And the Sabbath,
That we may offer wheat for sale,
That we may make the ephah small and the shekel great,
And deal deceitfully with false balances,
That we may buy the poor for silver,
And the needy for a pair of sandals,
And sell the refuse of the wheat?*

Amos 8:4-6

Indeed, the sort of crimes and even the amount of delinquency that fill the prophets of Israel with dismay do not go beyond that which we regard as normal, as typical ingredients of social dynamics. To us a single act of injustice—cheating in business, exploitation of the poor—is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world.

Their breathless impatience with injustice may strike us as hysteria. We ourselves witness continually acts of injustice, manifestations of hypocrisy, falsehood, outrage, misery, but we rarely grow indignant or overly excited. To the prophets even a minor injustice assumes cosmic proportions.

*The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob:
Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.
Shall not the land tremble on this account,
And every one mourn who dwells in it,
And all of it rise like the Nile,
Be tossed about and sink again, like the Nile of Egypt?
Amos 8:7-8*

*Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
Be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the Lord.
For My people have committed two evils:
They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
And hewed out cisterns for themselves,
Broken cisterns,
That can hold no water.*

Jeremiah 2:12-13

They speak and act as if the sky were about to collapse because Israel has become unfaithful to God.

Is not the vastness of their indignation and the vastness of God's anger in disproportion to its cause? How should one explain such moral and religious excitability, such extreme impetuosity?

It seems incongruous and absurd that because of some minor acts of injustice inflicted on the insignificant, powerless poor, the glorious city of Jerusalem should be destroyed and the whole nation go to exile. Did not the prophet magnify the guilt?

The prophet's words are outbursts of violent emotions. His rebuke is harsh and relentless. But if such deep sensitivity to evil is to be called hys-

terical, what name should be given to the abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails?

*They drink wine in bowls,
And anoint themselves with the finest oils,
But they are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
Amos 6:6*

The niggardliness of our moral comprehension, the incapacity to sense the depth of misery caused by our own failures, is a fact which no subterfuge can elude. Our eyes are witness to the callousness and cruelty of man, but our heart tries to obliterate the memories, to calm the nerves, and to silence our conscience.

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 riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet's words.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRIVIALITIES

"Human affairs are hardly worth considering in earnest, and yet we must be in earnest about them—a sad necessity constrains us," says Plato in a mood of melancholy. He apologizes later for his "low opinion of mankind" which, he explains, emerged from comparing men with the gods. "Let us grant, if you wish, that the human race is not to be despised, but is worthy of some consideration."¹

"The gods attend to great matters; they neglect small ones," Cicero maintains.² According to Aristotle, the gods are not concerned at all with the dispensation of good and bad fortune or external things.³ To the prophet, however, no subject is as worthy of consideration as the plight of man. Indeed, God Himself is described as reflecting over the plight of man rather than as contemplating eternal ideas. His mind is preoccupied with man, with the concrete actualities of history rather than with the timeless issues of thought. In the prophet's message nothing that has bearing upon good and evil is small or trite in the eyes of God (see pp. 363 f.)

Man is rebellious and full of iniquity, and yet so cherished is he that God, the Creator of heaven and earth, is saddened when forsaken by him. Pro-

¹ *Laws*, VII, 803. ² *De Natura Deorum*, II, 167. ³ *Magna Moralia*, II, 8, 1207, 1208, 1209.

found and intimate is God's love for man, and yet harsh and dreadful can be His wrath. Of what paltry worth is human might—yet human compassion is divinely precious. Ugly though the behavior of man is, yet may man's return to God make of his way a highway of God.

LUMINOUS AND EXPLOSIVE

"Really great works," writes Flaubert, "have a serene look. Through small openings one perceives precipices; down at the bottom there is darkness, vertigo; but above the whole soars something singularly sweet. That is the ideal of light, the smiling of the sun; and how calm it is, calm and strong! . . . The highest and hardest thing in art seems to me to be to create a state of reverie."⁴

The very opposite applies to the words of the prophet. They suggest a disquietude sometimes amounting to agony. Yet there are interludes when one perceives an eternity of love hovering over moments of anguish; at the bottom there is light, fascination, but above the whole soar thunder and lightning.

The prophet's use of emotional and imaginative language, concrete in diction, rhythmical in movement, artistic in form, marks his style as poetic. Yet it is not the sort of poetry that takes its origin, to use Wordsworth's phrase, "from emotion recollected in tranquility." Far from reflecting a state of inner harmony or poise, its style is charged with agitation, anguish, and a spirit of nonacceptance. The prophet's concern is not with nature but with history, and history is devoid of poise.

Authentic utterance derives from a moment of identification of a person and a word; its significance depends upon the urgency and magnitude of its theme. The prophet's theme is, first of all, the very life of a whole people, and his identification lasts more than a moment. He is one not only with what he says; he is involved with his people in what his words foreshadow. This is the secret of the prophet's style: his life and soul are at stake in what he says and in what is going to happen to what he says. It is an involvement that echoes on. What is more, both theme and identification are seen in three dimensions. Not only the prophet and the people, but God Himself is involved in what the words convey.

Prophetic utterance is rarely cryptic, suspended between God and man; it is urging, alarming, forcing onward, as if the words gushed forth from the

⁴ Quoted by F. Kaufmann, *Thomas Mann, The World as Will and Representation* (Boston, 1957), p. 272.

heart of God, seeking entrance to the heart and mind of man, carrying a summons as well as an involvement. Grandeur, not dignity, is important. The language is luminous and explosive, firm and contingent, harsh and compassionate, a fusion of contradictions.

The prophet seldom tells a story, but casts events. He rarely sings, but castigates. He does more than translate reality into a poetic key: he is a preacher whose purpose is not self-expression or "the purgation of emotions," but communication. His images must not shine, they must burn.

The prophet is intent on intensifying responsibility, is impatient of excuse, contemptuous of pretense and self-pity. His tone, rarely sweet or caressing, is frequently consoling and disburdening; his words are often slashing, even horrid—designed to shock rather than to edify.

The mouth of the prophet is "a sharp sword." He is "a polished arrow" taken out of the quiver of God (Isa. 49:2).

*Tremble, you women who are at ease,
Shudder, you complacent ones;
Strip, and make yourselves bare,
Gird sackcloth upon your loins.*

Isaiah 32:11

Reading the words of the prophets is a strain on the emotions, wrenching one's conscience from the state of suspended animation.

THE HIGHEST GOOD

Those who have a sense of beauty know that a stone sculptured by an artist's poetic hands has an air of loveliness; that a beam charmingly placed utters a song. The prophet's ear, however, is attuned to a cry imperceptible to others. A clean house or a city architecturally distinguished may yet fill the prophet with distress.

*Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own, . . .
Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, . . .
For the stone cries out from the wall,
And the beam from the woodwork responds.
Woe to him who builds a town with blood,
And founds a city on iniquity!*

Habakkuk 2:6, 9, 11-12

These words contradict most men's conceptions: the builders of great cities have always been envied and acclaimed; neither violence nor exploita-

tion could dim the splendor of the metropolis. "Woe to him . . ."? Human justice will not exact its due, nor will pangs of conscience disturb intoxication with success, for deep in our hearts is the temptation to worship the imposing, the illustrious, the ostentatious. Had a poet come to Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom, he would have written songs exalting its magnificent edifices, its beautiful temples and worldly monuments. But when Amos of Tekoa came to Samaria, he spoke not of the magnificence of palaces, but of moral confusion and oppression. Dismay filled the prophet:

*I abhor the pride of Jacob,
And hate his palaces,*

he cried out in the name of the Lord (Amos 6:8). Was Amos, then, not sensitive to beauty?

What is the highest good? Three things ancient society cherished above all else: wisdom, wealth, and might. To the prophets, such infatuation was ludicrous and idolatrous. Assyria would be punished for her arrogant boasting:

*By the strength of my hand I have done it,
And by my wisdom, for I have understanding; . . .
Isaiah 10:13*

And about their own people, because "their hearts are far from Me, . . . the wisdom of the wise men shall perish" (Isa. 29:13, 14).

*The wise men shall be put to shame,
They shall be dismayed and taken;
Lo, they have rejected the word of the Lord,
What wisdom is in them?*

Jeremiah 8:9

Ephraim has said,

*Ah, but I am rich,
I have gained wealth for myself;
But all his riches can never offset
The guilt he has incurred. . . .
Because you have trusted in your chariots
And in the multitude of your warriors,
Therefore the tumult of war shall arise among your people,
And all your fortresses shall be destroyed. . . .*

Hosea 12:8; 10:13, 14

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-

ished, yet the thriving and boasting man, his triumphs and might, are regarded as frothy, tawdry, devoid of substance.

*Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
And are accounted as the dust on the scales; . . .
All the nations are as nothing before Him,
They are accounted by Him as less than nothing and emptiness.*
Isaiah 40:15, 17

Civilization may come to an end, and the human species disappear. This world, no mere shadow of ideas in an upper sphere, is real, but not absolute; the world's reality is contingent upon compatibility with God. While others are intoxicated with the here and now, the prophet has a vision of an end.

*I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
To the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
All the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and lo, there was no man;
All the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo the fruitful land was a desert;
All its cities were laid in ruins
Before the Lord, before His fierce anger.*
Jeremiah 4:23-26

The prophet is human, yet he employs notes one octave too high for our ears. He experiences moments that defy our understanding. He is neither "a singing saint" nor "a moralizing poet," but an assaulter of the mind. Often his words begin to burn where conscience ends.

AN ICONOCLAST

The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions.

To many a devout believer Jeremiah's words must have sounded blasphemous.

*To what purpose does frankincense come to Me from Sheba,
Or sweet cane from a distant land?
Your burnt offerings are not acceptable,
Nor your sacrifices pleasing to Me.*

Jeremiah 6:20

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.*

SWEEPING ALLEGATIONS

If justice means giving every person what he deserves, the scope and severity of the accusations by the prophets of Israel hardly confirmed that principle. The prophets were unfair to the people of Israel. Their sweeping allegations, overstatements, and generalizations defied standards of accuracy. Some of the exaggerations reach the unbelievable.

*Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem,
Look and take note!
Search her squares to see
If you can find a man,
One who does justice
And seeks truth; . . .
But they all alike had broken the yoke,
They had burst the bonds. . . .
From the least to the greatest of them,
Every one is greedy for unjust gain;
And from prophet to priest,
Every one deals falsely. . . .
There is nothing but oppression within her.*

Jeremiah 5:1, 5; 6:13; 8:10; 6:6

In contrast to Amos, whose main theme is condemnation of the rich for the oppression of the poor, Hosea does not single out a particular section of the community.

*There is no truth, no love, and no knowledge of God in the land;
Swearing and lying, killing and stealing, and committing adultery,
They break all bonds, and blood touches blood.*

Hosea 4:1-2

Isaiah calls Judah a "sinful nation, . . . laden with iniquity" (1:4), "rebellious children" (30:1), "a people of unclean lips" (6:5). Indeed, the prophets have occasionally limited the guilt to the elders, princes, and priests, implying the innocence of those not involved in leadership. The assurance given in the name of the Lord,

*Tell the righteous that all shall be well with them, . . .
Woe to the wicked! It shall be ill with him,
For what his hands have done shall be done to him,*

is emphatically addressed to the righteous men in Israel, spoken of in the plural, as well as to the wicked individual in Israel, spoken of in the singu-

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.*

Psalms 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 reprov'd. 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 (1 Sam. 12:18). Gideon (Judg. 6:36-40) and Elijah (1 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.

affliction. The mission he performs is distasteful to him and repugnant to others; no reward is promised him and no reward could temper its bitterness. The prophet bears scorn and reproach (Jer. 15:15). He is stigmatized as a madman by his contemporaries, and, by some modern scholars, as abnormal.

*They hate him who reproves in the gate,
They abhor him who speaks the truth.*

Amos 5:10

Loneliness and misery were only part of the reward that prophecy brought to Jeremiah: "I sat alone because Thy hand was upon me" (15:17). Mocked, reproached, and persecuted, he would think of casting away his task:

*If I say, I will not mention Him,
Or speak any more in His name,
There is my heart as it were a burning fire
Shut up in my bones,
And I am weary with holding it in,
And I cannot.*

Jeremiah 20:9

Jeremiah, when chosen to become a prophet, was told by the Lord: "And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land" (Jer. 1:18). And later he was reassured: "They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you" (Jer. 15:20).

The prophet is a lonely man. He alienates the wicked as well as the pious, the cynics as well as the believers, the priests and the princes, the judges and the false prophets. But to be a prophet means to challenge and to defy and to cast out fear.

The life of a prophet is not futile. People may remain deaf to a prophet's admonitions; they cannot remain callous to a prophet's existence. At the very beginning of his career, Ezekiel was told not to entertain any illusions about the effectiveness of his mission:

And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, nor be afraid of their words, though briars and thorns are with you and you sit upon scorpions; be not afraid of their words, nor be dismayed at their looks, . . . Behold, I have made your face hard against their faces, and your forehead hard against their foreheads. Like adamant harder than flint have I made your forehead; fear them not, nor be dismayed at their looks, . . . The people also are impu-

dent and stubborn: I send you to them; and you shall say to them, Thus says the Lord God. And whether they hear or refuse to hear . . . they will know that there has been a prophet among them.

Ezekiel 2:6; 3:8-9; 2:4-5; cf. 3:27

The prophet's duty is to speak to the people, "whether they hear or refuse to hear." A grave responsibility rests upon the prophet:

If the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, so that the people are not warned, and the sword comes, and takes any one of them; that man is taken away in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand. So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from My mouth, you shall give them warning from Me.

Ezekiel 33:6-7; cf. 3:16-21

The main vocation of a prophet is "to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin" (Mic. 3:8), to let the people know "that it is evil and bitter . . . to forsake . . . God" (Jer. 2:19), and to call upon them to return. But do they attain their end? Publicly Jeremiah declared to the people:

For twenty-three years . . . the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. You have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear, although the Lord persistently sent to you all his servants the prophets, saying, Turn now, every one of you, from his evil way and wrong doings. . . . Yet you have not listened to Me, says the Lord.

Jeremiah 25:3-7

Yet being a prophet is also joy, elation, delight:

*Thy words were found, and I ate them,
Thy words became to me a joy
The delight of my heart;
For I am called by Thy name,
O Lord, God of hosts.*

Jeremiah 15:16

THE PEOPLE'S TOLERANCE

The striking surprise is that prophets of Israel were tolerated at all by their people. To the patriots, they seemed pernicious; to the pious multitude, blasphemous; to the men in authority, seditious.

*Cry aloud, spare not,
Lift up your voice like a trumpet;
Declare to My people their transgression,
To the house of Jacob their sins.*

Isaiah 58:1

In the language of Jeremiah, the prophet's word is fire, and the people wood, "and the fire shall devour them" (Jer. 5:14; cf. Hos. 6:5).

How could the people endure men who proclaimed in the name of God,

*I will send a fire upon Judah,
And it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem!*

Amos 2:5

*Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
And the mountain of the house a wooded height!*
Jeremiah 26:18; cf. Micah 3:12

It must have sounded like treason when Amos called upon the enemies of Israel to witness the wickedness of Samaria.

*Proclaim to the strongholds in Assyria,
And to the strongholds in the land of Egypt,
And say: "Assemble yourselves upon the mountains of Samaria,
And see the great tumults within her,
And the oppressions in her midst!"*

Amos 3:9

It is strange, indeed, that a people to whom the names of Sodom and Gomorrah were charged with extreme insult would brook a prophet who did not hesitate to address his audience as "you rulers of Sodom . . . you people of Gomorrah" (Isa. 1:10).

*And on that day, says the Lord God,
I will make the sun go down at noon,
And darken the earth in broad daylight.
I will turn your feasts into mourning,
And all your songs into lamentation; I will bring sackcloth
upon all loins,
And baldness on every head; I will make it like the mourning
for an only son,
And the end of it like a bitter day.*

Amos 8:9-10

AN ASSAYER, MESSENGER, WITNESS

The prophet is a watchman (Hos. 9:8), a servant (Amos 3:7; Jer. 25:4; 26:5), a messenger of God (Hag. 1:13), "an assayer and tester" of the

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-

cance when applied, for example, to Jeremiah. "A religious experience," "communion with God," "a perception of His voice"—such terms hardly convey what happened to his soul: the overwhelming impact of the divine pathos upon his mind and heart, completely involving and gripping his personality in its depths, and the unrelieved distress which sprang from his intimate involvement. The task of the prophet is to convey the word of God. Yet the word is aglow with the pathos. One cannot understand the word without sensing the pathos. And one could not impassion others and remain unstirred. The prophet should not be regarded as an ambassador who must be dispassionate in order to be effective.

An analysis of prophetic utterances shows that the fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a *sympathy with the divine pathos*, a communion with the divine consciousness which comes about through the prophet's reflection of, or participation in, the divine pathos. The typical prophetic state of mind is one of being taken up into the heart of the divine pathos. Sympathy is the prophet's answer to inspiration, the correlative to revelation.

Prophetic sympathy is a response to transcendent sensibility. It is not, like love, an attraction to the divine Being, but the assimilation of the prophet's emotional life to the divine, an assimilation of function, not of being. The emotional experience of the prophet becomes the focal point for the prophet's understanding of God. He lives not only his personal life, but also the life of God. The prophet hears God's voice and feels His heart. He tries to impart the pathos of the message together with its logos. As an imparter his soul overflows, speaking as he does out of the fullness of his sympathy.

2. AMOS

AMOS AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

Under the long and brilliant reign of Jeroboam II (ca. 786-746 B.C.E.), the Northern Kingdom, also called the Kingdom of Israel, reached the summit of its material power and prosperity, expanding its territory northward at the expense of Hamath and Damascus, and southward at the expense of Judah. During this entire period Assyria was weak, and Syria on the decline; Jeroboam took advantage of the weakness of both to extend his dominion, foster commerce, and accumulate wealth.

When Amos appeared in the North there was pride (6:13-14), plenty, and splendor in the land, elegance in the cities, and might in the palaces. The rich had their summer and winter palaces adorned with costly ivory (3:15), gorgeous couches with damask pillows (3:12), on which they reclined at their sumptuous feasts. They planted pleasant vineyards, anointed themselves with precious oils (6:4-6; 5:11); their women, compared by Amos to the fat cows of Bashan, were addicted to wine (4:1). At the same time there was no justice in the land (3:10), the poor were afflicted, exploited, even

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