

## Heschel's *The Prophets*, "Introduction"

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... 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 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...

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. 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...

To comprehend what phenomena are, it is important to suspend judgment 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...

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.

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*.