

HIGHLIGHTS FROM “WHAT MANNER OF MAN IS THE PROPHET?”

THE PROPHET’S PURPOSE:

“The main vocation of a prophet is “to declare to Jacob his transgression and Israel his sin” (Micah 3:8), to let the people know “that it is evil and bitter ... to forsake ... God” (Jeremiah 2:19), and to call upon them to return.” (19)

“Indeed, the main task of prophetic thinking is to bring the world into divine focus.” (24)

“The purpose of prophecy is to conquer callousness, to change the inner man as well as to revolutionize history.” (17) [He says that 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.]

“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), “a **tester**” of the people’s ways (Jer. 6:27).” (20-21)

“**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, 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.” (12)

He quotes Jeremiah 9:23-24 on p. 9: “Thus says the LORD: ‘Let not the wiseman glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory and his riches; but let him who glories, glory in this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who practices kindness, Justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the LORD.’”

“To us a single active 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 death blow to existence: to us an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world.” (4)

“In terms of statistics, the prophet’s 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 a man’s existence, cannot be expressed by statistics.” (14)

“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* [from God’s perspective].” (15)

“... 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.” (21)

“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, who stands “in the council of the LORD”, 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 messenger.” (21 ... see also p. 25 and the idea of a prophet as “a mere mouthpiece of God” ... “The prophet is not a mouthpiece, but a person; not an instrument, but a partner, an associate of God.” ... see also the last two paragraphs on p. 26)

“In speaking, the prophet reveals God. This is the marvel of a prophet’s work: in his words, *the invisible God becomes audible.*” (22)

CHARACTERISTICS AND IDENTITY:

“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.**” (16)

“**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.” (10)

“The words of the prophet are stern, sour, stinging. But **behind his austerity is love and compassion for humanity**.... He begins with *a message of doom*; he concludes with *a message of hope.*” (12)

“To the patriots, they seemed pernicious; to the pious multitude, blasphemous; to the men in authority, seditious.” (19)

“The prophet’s ear is attuned to a cry imperceptible to others.” (7)

THEIR EXTREME LANGUAGE & EMOTION:

“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.” (10)

“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**.” (16)

“They speak and act **as if the sky were about to collapse** because Israel has become unfaithful to God.” (4)

“The prophet’s words are **outbursts of violent emotions**. His rebuke is harsh and relentless. But if such deep sensitivity the evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to the abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails?” (5)

“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 men; 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 profane 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**.” (5)

“Prophetic utterance is rarely cryptic, suspended between God and man; **it is urging, alarming, forcing onward, as if the words gushed forth from the 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.” (6-7)

“**His images must not shine, they must burn**.” (7)

“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.” (7)

“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.” (9)

THE PROPHET STANDS IN CONTRAST TO OTHER MANY OTHER PERSPECTIVES:

He quotes **Flaubert** as extolling works of art that “have a serene look” and “create a state of reverie.” Heschel argues that “the very opposite applies to the words of the prophet. They suggest a disquietude sometimes amounting to agony. ... 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.” (6)

After quoting from **Plato** and **Cicero**, about how each are concerned with rather grandiose thoughts, he contends, “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.” (5)

“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.” (8)

“In **the Upanishads**, the physical world is devoid of value—unreal, a shame, an illusion, a dream—but in the Bible, the physical world is real, the creation of God.” (9)

“In **the pagan world**, the greatness, power, and survival of a god depended upon the greatness, power, and survival of the people ... A god who would let enemies destroy his shrine or conquer the people who worshiped him would commit suicide.” (11) Yet, this is the God we find in the prophets!

RELATED TO ISAIAH 58:

He quotes Jeremiah 7:21-23: “This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat yourselves! ²²For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, ²³but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in obedience to all I command you, that it may go well with you.”

Then, he writes this: “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 (Jeremiah 7:8). **Worship preceded or followed by evil acts becomes an absurdity.** The holy place is doomed when people indulge in unholy deeds.” (11)