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The Prophets: An Introduction
By Abraham J. Heschel
A Critical Book Review

Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his book The Prophets: An Introduction, aimed to understand the person of a prophet as a human being. He examined both the inner and outer life of the prophets, rejecting what he saw as the shortcomings of dogmatic theology which rejects the part of the prophet in prophecy, and that of the psychologically minded who see only the mind of the prophet (Heschel ix). He felt that “the prophet is a person, not a microphone” (Heschel x). In his examination of the prophets, therefore, he looked at the messages and the messengers. He did a rather thorough job, concentrating on the human dynamic of the prophets and their message, in what is a rather difficult and dense scholarly work.

His background seems to have a profound influence on his thought. Abraham Joshua Heschel was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1907. He was educated both religiously and secularly in Europe. He came to the United States in 1940, escaping the Nazis. He taught for five years at the Reform run Hebrew Union College, and the remainder of his life in the Conservative run Jewish Theological Seminary. In the latter, he was professor of mysticism and ethics. He had a profound concern with ethics in his own time, even participating in the civil rights movement (Sarason).

Rabbi Heschel organized his book such that he began with the nature of a prophet as a human being, spent the middle of the book on individual literary prophets, and ended with chapters on history, chastisement, and justice. His first and last chapters serve as bookends to the entire volume, something that is not obvious by the chapter title of “justice.” In the course of his study, he draws from many

sources, including the Hebrew Bible, the Talmud, Tosefta, Aggadita, and Midrash, as well as reference to works of other scholars. What is left unknown is what translation he is using, or if he is translating the works himself. This is information which should have been given, in my opinion. It helps the reader know something about the author's approach to the material.

The book has a very Jewish outlook, which is appropriate considering Heschel's background. While Rabbi Heschel drew on many sources, Jewish and non-Jewish, he remained true to a Jewish vision and worldview, with a strong emphasis on social justice. He was not afraid to disagree with the prevailing scholarly viewpoint either. For example, in the chapter on Amos he said, "The majority of scholars and theologians interpret the message of Amos as the application by the Deity of stern, mechanical justice. Such a view disregards the powerful expression of divine inwardness in the message of the prophet" (Heschel 35). He backs up his argument here with concrete support from Biblical sources. In fact, all of his arguments are very well supported, one of the strengths of this book.

One overarching theme of the book is the prophets' interactions with G-d and with the people. To the people, a prophet would speak for G-d, but to G-d the prophet would often speak for the people. Another theme is the sensitivity of a prophet, above and beyond those around him, to the injustices of the society in which he finds himself. What others do not notice, the prophet notices and speaks against, trying to motivate people to change. There are people in society, ancient and modern, that fall between the cracks or who are seen as the lowest of the low.

The prophets, argues Heschel, are exceedingly sensitive to the needs of these people and their treatment by those who have so much. Injustice is part of this, and a theme visited repeatedly during the course of the book. Even if it is just a minority of the people who are unjust, the whole of the people is responsible. Change must be made, or G-d will see that justice is done, that chastisement and correction will be given. The counter balance to justice, however, is G-d's mercy. The last paragraph in this volume is illustrative of this: "A father is disqualified to serve as judge. Yet the judge of all men is also their Father. He would be unjust to His own nature were He to act in justice without compassion" (Heschel 220).

Rabbi Heschel's treatment of Isaiah, within the relatively small amount of space allotted in the single volume, was well done. He, of course, brought in many of the themes mentioned above, which are common to all of the prophets investigated in this work. As with our course text, he divided Isaiah into two parts, the first part dealing with chapter 1-39 and the other with the rest of the book. With each of these chapters on Isaiah, he began by setting the historical stage so that the reader will have a context in which to understand the rest of the chapter. He pulled his history from the Tanakh itself (Chronicles, Kings, Isaiah), as well as other sources. His additional sources were wide ranging, from scholarly works in German to archeological volumes written in English. As with the rest of the chapters in the book, Rabbi Heschel divided the chapter on Isaiah 1-39 with clear headers that let the reader know the main topic of that section. In this chapter, he also connected the text with the works of others who are prophesying at the same time, or in which there is a parallel concept. For

example, he compares Amos and Isaiah where the people are skeptical of the warning of approaching danger (Heschel 91). Isaiah makes a point that G-d is sad about the behavior of his people (Isaiah 5:1-7), for which Rabbi Heschel sees Isaiah as being sympathetic with G-d for His sorrow (Heschel 85).

Overall, Abraham Joshua Heschel's book, The Prophets: An Introduction, is solidly written and well researched. It is, however, somewhat dry and challenging to read. Some sentences are so long, one loses the thought by the end of the sentence. I realize this is not objective, especially considering my learning disabilities, but I had my husband read one chapter and he said it was "somewhat difficult." Despite the difficulties in readability, the book made an excellent analysis of the prophets as people, their times, their mission, and their relationship with G-d and the people. As such, it is a valuable addition to anyone's study of the prophets.

Bibliography

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