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Heschel's *The Prophets* as an Interreligious Turning Point

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The Making of *The Prophets*: A Thirty-Year Transformation

Heschel's *The Prophets*[1] occupies a pivotal place in his intellectual development. Emerging from his early phenomenological study of prophecy yet extensively reworked in the 1950s, the book reflects a profound transformation in his thought.

This study argues that the extensive rewriting of the 1950s constitutes the textual locus in which theological, methodological, and hermeneutical transformations converge and assume their most coherent articulation.

Heschel himself later reflected on one implication of this development, especially its moral urgency. Shortly before his death, in a statement titled "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement," he identified his study of *The Prophets* as one of the events that reshaped his sense of moral vocation:

> For many years I lived by the conviction that my destiny is to serve in the realm of privacy… The third event that changed my attitude was my study of the prophets of ancient Israel, a study on which I worked for several years until its publication in 1962… The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me what the lives of the prophets sought to convey: that morally speaking there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings.[2]

Indeed, many of Heschel's formulations on prophetic morality later resurfaced in his public speeches on peace and social justice – and one of them even entered

[1] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). Hereafter: *The Prophets*. All citations are from this first edition, as subsequent Perennial Classics editions contain numerous errors.)

[2] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 4 (January 1973): 7–8; repr. in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1996), 224–25 (hereafter: *MGSA*). See also Susannah Heschel's remarks in her introduction, *MGSA*, xxii–xxiii.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" address.[3] Yet the significance of the book extends beyond its ethical and political influence. The rewriting of *The Prophets* also played a decisive role in shaping what may be described as Heschel's emerging theological pluralism and, ultimately, his entry into interreligious dialogue.

In this study, theological pluralism refers to Heschel's developing view that divine truth is refracted through multiple prophetic and religious perspectives, so that no single community exhausts God's word or God's concern. By contrast, interreligious dialogue denotes the concrete institutional and relational engagements through which Jews, Christians, and others meet, cooperate, and learn from one another.

To understand how these theological, methodological, and hermeneutical shifts took shape in *The Prophets*, it is necessary to retrace the chronology of its development. The book did not emerge *ex nihilo* but evolved over nearly thirty years of sustained reworking, which may be divided into four distinct periods.

Heschel's point of departure was his doctoral dissertation, *Das Prophetische Bewusstsein* ("the prophetic consciousness,") submitted to Humboldt University on 9 December 1932 and published in Krakow at the end of 1935 as *Die Prophetie*.[4] This early study offered a phenomenological analysis,[5] supported only by brief biblical proof texts.

Some scholars have suggested that the very phenomenological reading of the Hebrew Bible constituted a significant innovation within biblical scholarship, allowing Heschel to loosen himself from the rigid and often biased presuppositions of Protestant philology in his time.[6] Yet, for all its methodological and substantive originality, the dissertation was submitted by a young scholar who remained careful not to depart too radically from the scholarly norms of his period. Its primary aim was to clarify the nature of its object of study rather than to articulate a comprehensive theological vision.[7]

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[3] Susannah Heschel, "Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.," *Conservative Judaism* 50, no. 2 (1998): 126–43, esp. 131.

[4] Abraham Heschel, *Die Prophetie* (Kraków: Nakładem Polskiej Akademji Umiejętności, 1936). Hereafter: *Die Prophetie*.

[5] As Heschel's advisor already noted, "the author has indeed accomplished a purely phenomenological description". See Edward K. Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 170. For an analysis of the dissertation as a phenomenological work, see Nathan Rotenstreich, "On Prophetic Consciousness," *Journal of Religion* 54 (1974): 185–98.

[6] See Susannah Heschel, "Introduction to the Perennial Classics Edition," in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), xv–xviii; and Jacqueline Vayntrub, "Gehört Heschel auch zu den Philologen? Heschel, die hebräischen Propheten und philologischer Präsentismus," *Zeitschrift für christlich-jüdische Begegnung* 2/3 (2023): 186–197. Both emphasize the ways in which Heschel's early phenomenological method may be read as positioning itself, implicitly or explicitly, over against dominant strands of German Protestant biblical philology.

[7] See Martin Kavka, "What Does a Prophet Know?" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 1 (2018): 181–189, esp. 182. Kavka suggests that in *Die Prophetie* Pinhas functions as Heschel's "the exemplary Prophet," taking the zeal of Num 25 as emblematic of his early view of prophecy. This reading is

A second period began with plans for a Hebrew translation. The idea was first proposed in 1933 by Hayim Nahman Bialik[8] and resurfaced in the early 1950s.[9] As recently uncovered correspondence indicates, in 1951, Avraham Kariv of Am Oved Publication encouraged Heschel to produce a Hebrew edition, and Yosef Burg, then a cabinet minister in the Israeli government, expressed similar support.[10] The project briefly took shape: several translators submitted sample passages, and one chapter appeared in print.[11] The initiative for a Hebrew edition emerged largely from the interest of Israeli interlocutors in Heschel's earlier dissertation and does not in itself mark a new stage in his theological development.

The third period opened in 1953, when Heschel set aside the Hebrew plan and began preparing an English translation.[12] He completed this translation and wrote to his publisher in October 1955 expecting to issue the book the following year—yet ultimately chose not to publish it**.**

The decisive shift occurred in June 1956, a half year after the publication of *God in Search of Man*.[13] In a letter to his publisher, Heschel described what he was now producing as "a completely rewritten work."[14] Although he hoped to finish it in early 1957, the project expanded dramatically, and Heschel repeatedly postponed its publication.

The Prophets grew to nearly three times the length of the German original, adopted a new interpretive structure, and incorporated numerous chapters offering close readings, as well as broader theological and ethical implications. Brief phrases or footnoted verse references in *Die Prophetie* were transformed into extended biblical quotations—drawn primarily from the RSV—often cast in a poetic

overstated. Pinhas appears only once in the dissertation and cannot reasonably be regarded as its representative model. More importantly, the dissertation should not be conflated either with Heschel's later mature theological writings or with the poetry he was publishing concurrently, where he gave more direct expression to his spiritual sensibility. See, for example, the second poem in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Der Shem ha-Meforash: Mensch* (Warsaw: Indzel Verlag, 1933); English trans., *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*, trans. Morton M. Leifman (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 33: "I cannot curse as justly as did Jeremiah. People are poor, weak; and it seems to me that their guilt is Yours."

[8] *Hayim Nahman Bialik Letters*, ed. Fishel Lachover (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1939), vol. 5, 242.

[9] Samuel H. Dresner, "Personal Reminiscences of Heschel," in *Prayer and Politics: The Twin Poles of Abraham Joshua Heschel*, ed. Joshua Stampfer (Portland, OR: Institute for Judaic Studies, 1985): 49–52. Dresner claims to have discovered plagiarism in Heschel's dissertation, which was published in the late 1940s, and suggests that this discovery motivated Heschel to publish its translation. For further discussion, see Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America, 1940–1972* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 141 (hereafter: *Spiritual Radical)*. See also Heschel, *The Prophets*, 308 n. 1 (last sentence).

[10] Abraham Joshua Heschel Papers, Box 273, Duke University Archives.

[11] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "The Israeli Prophet and His Attitude toward God and the People," in *The Worldview of the Bible*, ed. Zvi Adar (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1965): 215–24 (Hebrew).

[12] Translation located by Yehuda Dov Ber Zirkind in the Abraham Joshua Heschel Papers, Duke University Archives.

[13] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1955). Hereafter: *GISM*.

[14] As Heschel wrote to his publisher (Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, p. 420, n. 32).

cadence**.** It is in this extensive rewriting, rather than in the earlier translation initiatives, that the theological, methodological, and hermeneutical transformation examined in this study comes fully into view.

Although Heschel did not formally enter interreligious dialogue until 1961, the conceptual groundwork for that engagement was forged during these years, especially through the rewriting of *The Prophets*. The completed manuscript was submitted in May 1962, yet substantial portions had been composed—and some even published independently—during the second half of the 1950s. When Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee approached him in May 1961 to review a draft report on Catholic teaching, and when Heschel met Cardinal Bea in Rome later that year, *The Prophets* was already far advanced.[15]

Yet the rewriting of *The Prophets* has not been examined as the textual site in which Heschel's developing theological orientation, methodological reconfiguration, and hermeneutical experimentation converge prior to his formal involvement in interreligious dialogue. The transformation that found expression in this work thus preceded, and in significant ways prepared, his later public and institutional engagement, and can be fully appreciated only in relation to his broader theological development in the years immediately before and after it.

At the same time, this transformation did not unfold in isolation. It took place within an expanding interreligious horizon, most notably in Heschel's deepening relationship with Reinhold Niebuhr. The next section therefore turns to the emergence and character of that relationship.

Dialogue and Influence: Niebuhr's Role in Heschel's Rewriting

The years in which *The Prophets* was being extensively rewritten coincided with the emergence of the first sustained and influential interreligious relationship in Heschel's life: his deepening friendship with Reinhold Niebuhr. This relationship, initially personal, gradually developed into a sustained theological exchange that formed part of the broader horizon within which the rewriting unfolded.

As Susannah Heschel has shown on the basis of archival materials, the relationship began with Niebuhr's sympathetic review of *Man Is Not Alone* (1951),[16] and intensified from the mid-1950s onward.[17] It ultimately culminated in Heschel's

[15] Heschel was introduced to Cardinal Bea in Rome on November 26, 1961, and stated in their meeting that "prophetic thinking was a responsibility to history and an alertness to the requirements of the present moment." For further details, see Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, 210, 240–42.

[16] Susannah Heschel, "Abraham Heschel," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021): 199–216 (hereafter: "Abraham Heschel"), wrote that in a private note to Heschel, Niebuhr called the book a 'masterpiece', and in his review he said that Heschel would 'become a commanding and authoritative voice not only in the Jewish community but in the religious life of America' (199). Most of the details that follow are drawn from this article.

[17] Ursula M. Niebuhr, "Notes on a Friendship: Abraham Joshua Heschel and Reinhold Niebuhr," *The On Being Project*, November 10, 2017 (https://onbeing.org/blog/ursula-niebuhr-notes-on-a-friendship-abraham-joshua-heschel-and-reinhold-niebuhr/), noted that in 1952 Heschel presented her husband with a copy of one of his books, accompanied by "a rather formal dedication," yet, as she emphasizes,

eulogy at Niebuhr's funeral, after Niebuhr himself designated his Jewish friend as the sole speaker at the ceremony.

A significant milestone in the strengthening of the relationship appears to have occurred in 1953, when Heschel gave Niebuhr one of the few remaining copies of his doctoral dissertation. Niebuhr praised the work in a letter of response and, two years later, cited it in his own book, noting that it was soon to appear in English translation.[18] Encouraged by this reception, Heschel subsequently approached Niebuhr's publisher, Charles Scribner's Sons, to explore cooperation with the Jewish Publication Society in issuing an English translation of the dissertation.[19] Even at this relatively early stage, Heschel's scholarly work was entering a sphere of reception shaped by interreligious intellectual exchange. This development, however, did not yet translate into a transformation of its theological orientation, methodological configuration, or hermeneutical practice.

By the mid-1950s the relationship had moved beyond collegial appreciation[20] toward explicit theological exchange. In 1955 Niebuhr published a positive review of *GISM* from a Christian perspective, while drawing a distinction between its universal dimensions and its specifically Jewish elements.[21] In 1956, Heschel responded in turn with his essay "A Hebrew Evaluation of Reinhold Niebuhr," in which one can already discern the emerging prophetic discourse shared by the two thinkers. Heschel combined both affirmation and critique: while acknowledging that Niebuhr "succeeds in recovering some of the insights of prophetic thinking," he maintained that, on a particular point, "it is, therefore, difficult from the point of view of Biblical theology to sustain Niebuhr's view, plausible and profound as it is."[22]

These reciprocal reviews thus constitute an early expression of an interreligious exchange—one that reflects both a shared prophetic discourse and significant divergences in its interpretation—yet they do not, at this stage, engage in explicit reflection on the nature of interreligious discourse itself. Rather, they testify to an increasingly direct theological engagement within the broader horizon in which *The Prophets* was being rewritten.

"he and Abraham did not get to know each other well until somewhat later." Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, 181, suggests that Niebuhr's 1957 address "cemented the firm (and mostly undocumented) friendship of Niebuhr and Heschel." However, Susannah Heschel bases her account on documented evidence that was not available to Kaplan, and observes that the friendship took shape through shared walks, to which her father alluded in 1956 when he thanked Niebuhr for "your gracious friendship through the years."

[18] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 99.

[19] Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, 142.

[20] Additional evidences of the deepening relationship during these years are Niebuhr's 1953 letter supporting Heschel's Guggenheim Fellowship application, his 1954 correspondence regarding *Man's Quest for God*, and Heschel's references to Niebuhr in *GISM*, 380-381.

[21] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Mysteries of Faith," *Saturday Review*, April 31, 1956: 18.

[22] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "A Hebrew Evaluation of Reinhold Niebuhr," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall: 391–410 (New York: Macmillan, 1956), The Library of Living Theology 2. Reprinted in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), under the title "Confusion of God and Evil," 127–49. Hereafter: *IF*.

A further intensification occurred in the spring of 1957 at a joint meeting of the faculties of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS), where Heschel taught, and Union Theological Seminary (UTS), where Niebuhr served.[23] During this gathering, Niebuhr delivered a seminal address marked by pronounced Christian self-critique. He called upon Christianity to abandon supersessionism, to recognize Judaism as a monotheistic religion and as a legitimate interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, and even—contrary to the official stance of the Holy See at that time—spoke of "the thrilling emergence of the State of Israel."[24] He further urged both religions to subject their respective claims to exclusivity to critical scrutiny, insisting that covenantal affirmation must not imply an exclusive God and that the only proof of faith must be "witness" directed toward the sovereign God of all humanity.[25]

Heschel cited passages from this 1957 address in *The Prophets* and drew on another section of it in his 1965 lecture "No Religion Is an Island," where he even referred to Niebuhr as "a source of inspiration" for many Jews.[26] Heschel's daughter has testified that her father marked numerous passages in the copies of Niebuhr's works in his personal library, and indeed Heschel quoted Niebuhr in several additional contexts—for example, in his well-known speech "Religion and Race." Heschel also consulted Niebuhr during his involvement in the drafting process that eventually led to *Nostra Aetate*, and the two figures later cooperated in their opposition to the war in Vietnam.

During precisely these years, questions of chosenness, exclusivity, universality, and prophetic responsibility were being debated in lived theological exchange. While no direct textual dependence can be demonstrated, the rewriting years unfolded within a sustained and theologically serious interreligious relationship**.**

This relational history is therefore not merely biographical background. It illuminates the interreligious horizon within which Heschel's chronological development, methodological restructuring, and hermeneutical reorientation in *The Prophets* were taking shape. It is against this horizon that his rearticulation of chosenness and the meaning of "Israel" must now be examined.

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[23] See W. W. Bartley III, "Christians and Jews (Review): Pious and Secular America, by Reinhold Niebuhr," *Commentary* 27, no. 3 (March 1959): 265.

[24] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Relations of Christians and Jews in Western Civilization," in *Pious and Secular America* (New York: Scribner's, 1958): 199. Hereafter: "*Relations*."

[25] Daniel Rice, "Reinhold Niebuhr and Judaism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 45, Supplement (March 1977): 101–46, at 131 argues that Niebuhr's views of Judaism evolved over time under the influence of his Jewish colleagues and friends. While this study does not seek to establish direct influence in either direction, the sustained and theologically substantive character of the Heschel–Niebuhr exchange suggests that the relationship formed part of this broader context of development.

[26] "No Religion Is an Island," in *MGSA*, 243.

Reclaiming and Recasting: "Israel" Beyond Exclusivism

From the outset of his career, Heschel understood God as universal, analyzed religious consciousness as a general human phenomenon, and wrote about Christianity.[27] Yet a close examination of his treatment of "Israel" and the "Chosen People" reveals a significant development that unfolded during the first half of the 1950s. In these years, Heschel gradually reconfigured the meaning of these terms: from formulations that retained residual hierarchical overtones to a rigorously relational and non-comparative understanding. *GISM* marks a turning point in Heschel's writing in several respects,[28] but in what follows I focus solely on the shift it introduces regarding Jewish exclusivism.

A fuller discussion of Heschel's broader transformation concerning the term "Israel" will be offered elsewhere.[29] Here I limit myself to an analysis of the final chapter of *GISM*, "The People Israel," and its evolution from one of its key precursors, the 1951 essay "To Be a Jew,"[30] as a preparatory stage for its fuller reconfiguration in *The Prophets* and in Heschel's subsequent thought. While previous scholarship has noted a certain shift between "To Be a Jew" and *GISM* concerning Jewish exclusivism, a comprehensive examination of the entire essay from this perspective has not yet been undertaken.[31]

Before examining the specific revisions, a minimal framing is required: the original essay's overarching purpose must be sketched, however briefly, in order to situate the subsequent analysis. The primary aim of the essay—and of the later chapter adapted from it—is to reclaim the term "Israel" in a manner that resists the appropriation imposed upon it by the newly established state.[32] In contrast to the national interpretation of the term—rooted in a secular ideology and the Zionist doctrine of "negation of the Diaspora"—Heschel seeks to reclaim its spiritual meaning:

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[27] Susannah Heschel, "Abraham Heschel": 202: "Heschel was well versed in the history of Christian thought, including Protestant theology, but did not directly address Christian–Jewish relations until his engagement in Vatican II."

[28] Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, 166.

[29] This issue forms part of an ongoing larger research project on Heschel's evolving interreligious theology.

[30] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "To Be a Jew: What Is It?" *Zionist Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1951): 78–84. Susannah Heschel recognized the significance of this essay and placed it at the very beginning of *MGSA* (3–11), the collection of her father's writings that she edited. Citations here refer to this republication, which omits the original subtitles and introduces a minor feminist revision: "as we are men *and women*" (10).

[31] See Michael Marmur, "A Word to the Wise Is Sufficient: Hiding, Encrypting, Hinting in A. J. Heschel's Writings," in *Get Thee: Studies in Abraham Joshua Heschel's Oeuvre*, ed. Benjamin Ish-Shalom and Dror Bondi (Tel Aviv: Idra Publishing, 2018): 221–242 [Hebrew]. Hereafter: "A Word." Marmur compares the concluding paragraphs of "To Be a Jew" and *GISM* and identifies a moderation in Heschel's earlier exclusivist formulations (230). Here I extend this insight by examining the entire essay through this lens.

[32] On the complexity of the process of choosing the name of the state, and on the public debate on the subject in those years, see See Rivka Bliboim, *State of Israel: The Public Discourse on the Name of the State* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 2018).

> Why is my belonging to the Jewish people the most sacred relation to me, second only to my relation to God? Israel is a spiritual order in which the human and the ultimate, the natural and the holy enter a lasting covenant… I have faith in God and faith in Israel. Though some of its children have gone astray, Israel remains the mate of God. I cannot hate what God loves… Israel exists not in order to be but in order to dream the dream of God.[33]

For Heschel, "Israel" is not the name of a national state—which he does not mention in his writings until summer 1957[34]—but a spiritual order, even the divine partner of the universal God. Yet in the course of articulating this alternative meaning, Heschel employs formulations that carry exclusivist overtones, implying a certain priority of "Israel" as a path to the universal God. Significantly, Heschel himself became sensitive to such formulations; in adapting the essay into *GISM*, he revised these expressions.

Thus, the first sentence above becomes: "Why is our belonging to the Jewish people *a* sacred relation?"[35] The revision eliminates the original hierarchy, allowing for other sacred relations without assuming their inferiority. Likewise, in the later version "Israel" no longer "dreams the dream of God," but "cherish the vision of God"[36]—it responds to a vision that transcends it with love and faithfulness. The revision thus transformed "Israel" from the co-dreamer of God's purpose into a devoted caretaker of its remembrance.

Even more substantial revisions appear in Heschel's treatment of the "Chosen People". In "To Be a Jew," the term "chosen" is framed in relational rather than hierarchical terms, yet still balanced by phrases that preserve a subtle sense of priority:

> Israel's experience of God has not evolved from search. Israel did not discover God. Israel was discovered by God. Judaism is God's quest for man. The Bible is a record of God's approach to His people. More statements are found in the Bible about God's love for Israel than about Israel's love for God.
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> We have not chosen God; He has chosen us. There is no concept of a chosen God but there is the idea of a chosen people. The idea of a chosen people does not suggest the preference for a people based upon a discrimination among a number of peoples. We do not say that we are a selected people. The "chosen people" means a people approached and chosen by God. The significance of this term is primarily in relation to God rather than in relation to other peoples.

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[33] *MGSA*, 7–10.
[34] On Heschel's critical attitude toward Israel in those years, and the change it underwent in summer 1957, see Dror Bondi, *Where Art Thou* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2008), [Hebrew], Chapter 7 (hereafter: *Ayekah*). It is quite striking that this change occurred after Niebuhr had addressed the issue.
[35] *GISM*, 423.
[36] *GISM*, 424.

> It signifies not a quality inherent in the people but a relationship between the people and God.[37]

In *GISM*, Heschel replaces "selected" with "superior," explicitly rejecting any notion of privilege, and exchanges "primarily" for "genuine," eliminating the residual comparative nuance. The concept of "chosenness" is now defined entirely as a divine–human relationship with no comparative implications whatsoever.

The verb to choose carries two entirely different meanings. When we choose an object for our own use, we select it from among others because its qualities serve our purpose. But when we choose a subject out of love, we transcend ourselves, becoming ready for mutual commitment, and call upon the other to respond in love and enter into relationship. We do not choose those we love because of their attributes—such a choice would instrumentalize and objectify them—nor do we compare them with alternatives. What occurs between me and my beloved is a reciprocal exaltation, and this very occurrence constitutes the act of choosing.

So too there are two distinct and even opposite meanings of "the chosen people." According to the first, the group chosen by God—be it Israel or the Church—is preferred because of its racial or theological characteristics, thus implying a racial or religious superiority. According to the second, what occurs between God and a particular people is an act of mutual love,[38] independent of any racial or theological traits, and in fact calling for a commitment to God's universal perspective.[39]

Heschel's growing sensitivity to exclusivist language also helps explain several significant omissions—lines that appeared in the original essay but were deliberately removed in its revised version in *GISM*. As scholarship has shown, Heschel's thought cannot be adequately analyzed on the basis of his explicit statements alone. A proper understanding of his theology therefore requires sustained attention to his revisions, silences, and implicit nuances.[40]

The following omission (occurring right after the paragraphs opening sentence) is particularly significant, for it marks the first stage in Heschel's gradual movement toward an explicit and mature articulation of this theme in his later writings:

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[37] *MGSA*, 11.

[38] Concerning the meaning of God's love, compare Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), Book II, 163–177. Concerning Rosenzweig's understanding of "the chosen people" see Dana Hollander, "The Significance of Franz Rosenzweig's Retrieval of Chosenness," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 16:1 (2009): 146–162.

[39] See Dror Bondi, "The Chosen People – The Alternative Narrative of Abraham Joshua Heschel," *Giluy Daat* 22 (2023): 63–89 [Hebrew].

[40] Michael Marmur, "A Word" and also Harold Stern, "A.J. Heschel, Irenic Polemicist," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America* 45 (1984): 169–177; Moshe Idel, "Abraham J. Heschel on Mysticism and Hasidism," *Modern Judaism* 29, no. 1 (2009): 80–105; Gedalia Haber, "Review: Lost in Translation: Abraham Joshua Heschel's 'Heavenly Torah' – A Review Essay," *Modern Judaism* 29, no. 3 (2009): 405–427; Dror Bondi, *Abraham Joshua Heschel's Hermeneutics* (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2011), especially 57–60 [Hebrew].

> Judaism has allies but no substitute. It is not an analogy of other peoples, creeds, or religions. 'It is a people that shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations' (Num 23:9). We are the only example of a people who has become identified with a religion.[41]

Heschel's deliberate omission of the passage invoking "a people that dwells alone" from *GISM* (though it deals with the very topic of the chapter) marks an important theological turn: he no longer wished to define the uniqueness of "Israel" through separation or incomparability. Moreover, this omission foreshadows the reinterpretation he later offers in "No Religion Is an Island":

> On the other hand, the Community of Israel must always be mindful of the mystery of aloneness and uniqueness of its own being. "There is a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9), says the Gentile prophet Balaam. Is it not safer for us to remain in isolation and to refrain from sharing perplexities and certainties with Christians? Our era marks the end of complacency, the end of evasion, the end of self-reliance. Jews and Christians share the perils and the fears; we stand on the brink of the abyss together… The religions of the world are no more self-sufficient, no more independent, no more isolated than individuals or nations.[42]

In "To Be a Jew", the verse from Numbers 23:9 functions as a declaration of Jewish isolation. By contrast, in *GISM* Heschel excises this entire section, and in 1965 he explicitly revisits Balaam's words as a temptation of this evil prophet, not a truth—a stance of isolation that once seemed "safer," but is now impossible. Thus, the trajectory from citation to omission to reversal traces Heschel's move from exclusivist isolation toward an interreligious theology of interdependence.[43]

Another omission, more interpretively open, concerns Heschel's striking metaphor describing the relationship between "Israel" and "the Jews":

> Judaism is neither an experience nor a creed, neither the possession of psychic traits nor the acceptance of a theological doctrine… Israel is the tree, we are the leaves. It is the clinging to the stem that keeps us alive. Israel has not erred, even though some of its branches have fallen off.[44]

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[41] *MGSA*, 10.
[42] *MGSA*, 237.
[43] Reuven Kimelman, "Rabbis Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Abraham Joshua Heschel on Jewish–Christian Relations," *Modern Judaism* 24, no. 3 (2004): 259–60, notes that in "No Religion Is an Island" Heschel performs a paradoxical move. While affirming Israel's uniqueness, Heschel ascribes the verse "a people that dwells apart" to "the gentile prophet Balaam," implying that isolation is a misreading. Yet Kimelman overlooks that Heschel had already deleted this verse and its exclusivist tone in revising "To Be a Jew" for *GISM*, marking an earlier shift from separateness to interrelatedness.
[44] *MGSA*, 7.

In *GISM*, however, Heschel truncates the metaphor, ending with the words: "Israel is the tree, we are the leaves." The concluding affirmation— "Israel has not erred, even though some of its branches have fallen off"—is omitted.[45]

This omission is significant. In its earlier form, the metaphor not only distinguished Judaism from a doctrinal model of religion but also asserted the unerring continuity of Israel as a collective entity. By removing the final sentence, Heschel relinquishes the language of collective perfection. The image now ends not with an errorless organism sustaining fallen branches, but with a living tree whose vitality depends on attachment rather than infallibility. The revision thus reflects a broader shift in *GISM*: from a rhetoric of collective impeccability toward a more relational and historically conscious account of covenantal life.

Another omitted sentence appears to temper the exclusivist thrust of the earlier text, though it continues to convey a subtle hierarchy that Heschel would only later seek to overcome: "Israel is one of the few healing herbs that have not withered away in the dust-laden winds of history".[46] Though not the only one, Israel is counted among "the few," a phrase that effectively marginalizes entire religious traditions. Thus, even as Heschel abandons absolute exclusivity already here, he still speaks from a stance of spiritual superiority.

Taken together, these revisions and omissions illuminate *GISM* as a decisive turning point in Heschel's theological journey. In "To Be a Jew," traces of indispensability and hierarchy persist; in *GISM*, Israel's uniqueness is redefined in relational terms. This shift prepares the ground for Heschel's later theological pluralism: by the time of "No Religion Is an Island," Israel's distinctiveness is no longer understood as isolation but as participation in a shared divine drama. As I will show, the rewriting of *The Prophets* constitutes the crucial intermediate stage in this development, where the emerging relational theology of the "Chosen People" is woven into a broader theological and hermeneutical reconfiguration.

Reframing the "Chosen People" in *The Prophets*

A few months after Niebuhr's address at the interreligious meeting between the UTS and JTS faculty teams, Heschel delivered a lecture at the conference of

[45] The omitted line appears in a passage that sharply distinguishes Judaism from a doctrinal model of Christianity – "nor a creed… nor the acceptance of a theological doctrine." The arboreal metaphor may invite comparison with Paul's olive tree in Romans 11, later interpreted in supersessionist terms as the replacement of Israel's "natural branches" by Gentile "wild branches." See Bruce W. Longenecker, "On Israel's God and God's Israel: Assessing Supersessionism in Paul," *Journal of Theological Studies* 58, no. 1 (2007): 26–44. The image of the tree was also theologically reinterpreted in Nostra Aetate. At the same time, the metaphor of Israel as a tree with severed branches has biblical antecedents that predate Paul and later developments within Jewish tradition. See, for example, Jeremiah 11:16; and Moses Alshekh (d. 1600), Commentary on Deuteronomy 29: "When some Israelites are righteous while others are wicked… if one of the branches is cut off from its root, the unity of the tree is diminished." Heschel himself employed the image of the tree and branches elsewhere and in different contexts; see, for example, his first Zionist speech (1957), in *God Trusts in Man*, ed. and trans. Dror Bondi (Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2011), 139 [Hebrew]. The immediate literary context of the passage under discussion, however, lends support to the interpretive direction proposed here.

[46] *MGSA*, 8.

the Religious Education Association. He concluded the lecture with a brief interpretation of Isaiah 19, later incorporated with few changes into *The Prophets* and thus likely drawn from its draft manuscript.[47] This interpretation marks a significant turning point in his understanding of the "Chosen People," and it does so within the very process of rewriting *The Prophets*:

> History is not a blind alley, and guilt is not an abyss. There is always a way that leads out of guilt: repentance or turning to God… "In that day Israel shall be a third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth which the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying: Blessed be My People Egypt**,** and Assyria, the work of My hands**,** and Israel, My inheritance"… They will live together when they will worship together. All three will be equally God's chosen people.[48]

Heschel opens with a call to repentance that pointedly refrains from assigning blame. Is he addressing Christianity, or perhaps Judaism—or even himself? In place of the assumption that there is only one "chosen" people—an assumption that still lingered, albeit in a non-exclusivist form, in *GISM*—Heschel concludes the essay with a new insight. Already in *GISM*, he had reformulated chosenness as a covenantal relationship with God rather than as a claim of inherent superiority over other nations. Now he takes a further, and necessary, step toward the emergence of an interreligious discourse: this relationship between God and Israel can—and according to Isaiah, ultimately will—exist simultaneously with "Assyria" and "Egypt."

Heschel's emerging pluralism does not reflect a suspension of truth claims, but his conviction that religion is a continual and partial human response to the divine. No community fully embodies God's word, and revelation exceeds any single historical interpretation. This insight is grounded in Isaiah's vision itself: even in the eschatological future, there will not be a single people of God, but Israel, Assyria, and Egypt worshipping the One God. Thus, multiple traditions may stand in relationship with God without collapsing into relativism or sameness. Pluralism here rests not on denying truth, but on affirming that divine truth exceeds any one people's grasp and therefore demands humility and shared responsibility before God.

Although Heschel did not, at that stage, affirm that other nations were themselves "chosen peoples,"[49] it is clear that in his final decade—most notably in "No

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[47] *The Prophets*, 185–86. The most significant change is the omission of the final sentence, perhaps in order to render the paragraph less explicit and allow readers to draw the conclusion themselves

[48] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Sacred Images of Man," *Religious Education* 53 (January 1958): 97–102.

[49] It is interesting to note that Heschel adapted these paragraphs for his book *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 218. In this adaptation, Heschel made a few changes without referencing the original source. The most prominent change is the substitution of "Syria" for "Assyria": "The God of Israel is also the God of Syria, the God of Egypt" – a clear allusion calling on the State of Israel to strive for interreligious peace with its adversaries, Egypt and Syria.
This book drew upon a Hebrew speech Heschel delivered in Israel shortly after the Six-Day War. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, 315, quoted from this speech: "Another part of this vision is a peaceful Jewish state, which should stand as a model to the Gentiles. This is why we should aspire toward peace.

Religion Is an Island"—he came to regard Christianity, and other religions, as legitimate paths of serving God, and thus as meaningful partners in an interreligious encounter carried out before the presence of God.[50]

Another significant treatment of the notion of the "Chosen People" in *The Prophets* appears in the chapter on Amos. In this chapter, Heschel shows how Amos spoke on God's behalf to all nations; how he criticized his own religion and foretold the destruction of his own nation in the name of justice; and how he "presupposes the conception of a law which was not embodied in a contract."[51] Under the subtitle "Iconoclasm," Heschel offers an example of such a prophetic act by Amos, directed against the very notion of "the people of the Lord":

> [*The prophets*] had to remind the people that chosenness must not be mistaken as divine favoritism or immunity from chastisement, but, on the contrary, that it meant being more seriously exposed to divine judgment and chastisement… Does chosenness mean that God is exclusively concerned with Israel?... "Are you not like the Ethiopians to Me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?"… The God of Israel is the God of all nations, and all men's history is His concern.[52]

Heschel derived here from Amos not only the insight that "chosen people" denotes a people engaged in a relationship with God rather than a people selected in exclusion of others, but also the recognition that all nations are themselves addressed by God and invited into such a relationship.[53]

Another example appears in the chapter devoted to Second Isaiah. In the opening footnote of *The Prophets*, Heschel explains his decision to include this chapter, noting that Second Isaiah's message "illumines many of the enigmas in the words and intentions of his predecessors." Within the chapter itself, Heschel pointedly avoids the key analytical terms "pathos" and "sympathy," which he employs elsewhere, and instead concentrates on the substance of the prophetic proclamations. Second Isaiah thus seems to occupy a distinctive place in Heschel's thought, marked by its universal orientation—its affirmation of God's oath to redeem all

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Now is the time to start negotiating with the Arabs; the God of Israel is the same as the God of the Arabs." Kaplan indicated that he was quoting from a translation provided to him from the Hebrew original. Nevertheless, these specific quoted passages are not present in the Hebrew original.

[50] *MGSA*, 381: "Are the Jews and Mohammedans unable to pray or address themselves to God?" See also ibid., 247: "The Jews do not maintain that the way of the Torah is the only way of serving God;" and ibid., 248–49, where Heschel cites Maimonides and other rabbinic authorities as sources for his attitude toward other religions.

[51] Ibid., 32.

[52] Ibid., 32-33.

[53] A reference to this verse appears in *Die Prophetie*, 162, n. 1, yet without explicit reflection on its implications for chosenness. Notably, the dissertation does not contain a sustained discussion of chosenness. Yet its stress on divine pathos as relational already anticipates Heschel's later reconfiguration of chosenness, developed more fully in "To Be a Jew."

humanity, its invocation of the divine name addressed to all peoples, and its vision of a future in which all humanity serves God.

Indeed, in *The Prophets* Heschel places new emphasis on the pluralistic scope of the Hebrew Bible. As the added section on "The Unity of History" in the chapter "History" makes clear, the Bible portrays God's concern not merely for every human being as an individual, but for the destinies of all nations. Divine involvement, in Heschel's presentation, encompasses the collective life and historical fate of every people—not Israel alone:

> The prophet may be regarded as the first universal man in history; he is concerned with, and addresses himself to, all men. It was not an emperor, but a prophet, who first conceived of the unity of all men… Amos spoke in the name of Him who decides the destiny of all nations… Isaiah proclaimed God's purpose and design "concerning the whole earth," and actually addressed himself to "all you inhabitants of the world, you who dwell on the earth"… Jeremiah was appointed "a prophet to the nations"… In the words of a later prophet: "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?" (Mal. 2:10)… Thus was born the idea of one history.[54]

Within the rewritten *The Prophets*, this universal horizon is integrated into the theological and literary fabric of the work itself. It is precisely this integrated vision that Heschel would later draw upon in his active engagement in interreligious dialogue.

On May 22, 1962, Heschel sent a memorandum to Cardinal Bea, who had been entrusted by Pope John XXIII with drafting the future declaration on the Jews. The memorandum opened with two pages of excerpts from *The Prophets*, and additional passages from the book were cited throughout the document—texts that would be published, with only minimal changes, later that year.

Preceding these two pages, Heschel added an introductory paragraph in which he articulated his understanding of the relationship between his book (a copy of which he would later present to Pope Paul VI during their meeting on September 14, 1964) and the emerging framework of interreligious dialogue:

> With humility and in the spirit of commitment to the living message of the prophets of Israel, let us consider the grave problems that confront us all as the children of God.[55]

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[54] *The Prophets*, 169-170.

[55] Abraham Joshua Heschel, "On Improving Catholic–Jewish Relations: A Memorandum to His Eminence Agostino Cardinal Bea, President of the Secretariat for Christian Unity," Center for Christian–Jewish Relations, May 1962, https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/second-vatican-council/naprecursors/heschel1962may22

A Change of Involvement

Having considered the substantive themes that emerge in *The Prophets*, it is now necessary to turn to the methodological shift that undergoes Heschel's interpretation, and to examine how it is bound up with his growing interreligious engagement. "Involvement in the Peace Movement"—the term Heschel used to explain the motivation against the Vietnam War—is also the key by which he, in the introduction to *The Prophets*, defined his distinctive interpretive method:

> 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…
>
> 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… 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.[56]

Heschel testifies that the non-judgmental attentiveness he directed toward the words of the prophets enabled those words to confront him with an unexpected demand for commitment. Such involvement may be compared to an attempt to understand another person's cry of distress from a position of neutrality—only to find that neutrality cannot be maintained. The encounter itself demands response, and thus transforms the mode of understanding into one grounded in involvement rather than detachment.

This shift becomes especially clear when one compares the overall structures of the dissertation and the later book. The dissertation is organized according to a strict three-part framework. It begins with a critical survey of earlier scholarship. It then proceeds to a dual analysis: first, a substantive discussion of prophetic examples, divided according to the categories of "pathos" and "sympathy," and second, a formal analysis of the emergence of prophetic consciousness. The work concludes with a systematic account of prophecy, again structured by the same conceptual categories.

In the mature work, by contrast, the organizing principle changes. After a general introductory chapter, the book devotes separate chapters to seven individual prophets. The analytical categories of pathos and sympathy no longer determine the structure of the exposition. Instead, each prophet is presented in his own narrative and theological profile, and only subsequently do broader conceptual patterns

[56] *The Prophets*, xvi–xvii.

emerge. The shift is therefore not merely formal: it marks a movement from a category-driven analysis of prophecy as a general phenomenon to an encounter-driven presentation centered on distinct prophetic personalities.

The significance of this reorganization lies not in the discovery of new distinctions, but in a change in their methodological status. In the dissertation, differences between the prophets function as variations within a unified phenomenological framework; in the mature work, they become the organizing principle of the book itself. This shift marks a movement from analyzing prophecy as a general phenomenon to engaging each prophet as a distinct theological personality.

This methodological transformation, as embodied in the structure of *The Prophets* itself, anticipates the theological pluralism that emerges in the book's content. By insisting that divine truth is refracted through multiple prophetic perspectives, Heschel prepares the ground for a broader interreligious theology in which no single voice exhausts the word of God.

Heschel had already articulated, in *GISM*, the methodological shift toward involved, participatory interpretation,[57] as well as the theological necessity of prophetic diversity.[58] Yet only subsequently, through his work on *The Prophets*, did he set out to realize these insights in practice, integrating them into statements that gesture toward an expanded divine dialogue encompassing additional "chosen peoples."

In his later writings on Hasidism, Heschel retrospectively described this approach in Hasidic terms.[59] This resonates with his earlier dissertation, where he noted that religious sympathy in post-biblical Judaism—especially in Aggadah, Kabbalah, and Hasidism—requires special study.[60] While it is unlikely that Heschel was unaware that his interpretive approach effectively reformulated Hasidic teachings, this does not in itself demonstrate that he employed phenomenology as a "cover" for a concealed Hasidic agenda. Rather, it remains plausible that he genuinely adopted the phenomenological method for the purposes of his dissertation and continued to employ it in his academic writings throughout the 1940s, and only subsequently "returned home."

Shifting focus, Heschel also underscored the importance of an involved reading of the Hebrew Bible in his article "Protestant Renewal: A Jewish View," published in 1963:

> An ultimate decision for Jew or Christian is whether to be involved in the Hebrew Bible or to live away from it. The future of the Western world will depend

[57] *GISM*, 5.
[58] *GISM*, 264–265.
[59] See, in example, Abraham Joshua Heschel, *A Passion for Truth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 63–64: "The Baal Shem sought to add a personality dimension to the study of the Talmud... He urged students to seek communion with the sages as well as comprehension of their ideas... One had to live with them, to enter their minds and souls, not just grasp their thoughts." Hereafter: *PT*.
[60] Heschel, *Die Prophetie*, 170 n. 2. Kaplan and Dresner, *Prophetic Witness*, 168, argued that this comment indicates "Heschel's true sources."

> on the way in which we relate ourselves to the Hebrew Bible… The basic presupposition of much modern Protestant study of Scripture, which has contributed enormously to our historical and theological discernment, is that one should treat the Bible like any other book—with objectivity and detachment. Yet objectivity is not devoid of ambiguities; it claims to be value-free, though the attitude of being value-free is itself a valuational attitude.[61]

Here Heschel's methodological critique becomes explicitly interreligious. His challenge to the ideal of detached objectivity is addressed not only to Jewish interpreters but to Protestant biblical scholarship, situating his call for involvement within a shared theological space. Even in critique, he acknowledges Protestant contributions, signaling that involvement, for him, includes dialogue rather than dismissal.

This methodological shift, in turn, led Heschel to adopt a different mode of writing—one that not only reflects his own involvement but actively seeks to elicit a corresponding involvement from his readers. In his mature work, Heschel aims to create an encounter between the reader and the prophets themselves: to make the prophets present through contemporary English, so that their words might genuinely move the modern reader.[62] This literary strategy represents the practical convergence of his methodological shift and his broader theological reorientation.

From Intended Audience to Interreligious Orientation

Having traced Heschel's emerging interreligious orientation in theological and methodological terms, we may now examine how that orientation becomes inscribed in the very construction of *The Prophets*—specifically in its intended audience and linguistic choices.

Was Heschel addressing the Jewish community, or a broader—indeed predominantly Christian—American readership? And further, was he merely directing his own thought toward this intended audience, or was he in fact entering into a genuine dialogical exchange with it—one that entails attentive engagement with the reader's own religious world and conceptual vocabulary?[63]

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[61] Heschel, *IF*, 171.

[62] Two Israeli scholars have interpreted this methodological and stylistic shift in a negative light, perhaps without fully probing its depth. Both began by praising Heschel's doctoral dissertation yet concluded by dismissing his later work. See Nathan Rotenstreich, "On Prophetic Consciousness," *Journal of Religion* 54 (1974): 185–98, esp. 185–86; and Benjamin Oppenheimer, *Classical Prophecy* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001), 62 (Hebrew). For a particularly severe response to the transformation between Heschel's dissertation and his mature writings, see Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *I Wanted to Ask You, Prof. Leibowitz* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1999), 165 (Hebrew), where he dismisses the development as "American." By contrast, his sister, the Bible scholar Nechama Leibowitz, who had studied alongside Heschel at the *Hochschule* in Berlin, regularly cited *The Prophets* appreciatively. According to testimony by Hillel Seidman, preserved in a letter to Heschel in the Heschel Archive at Duke University (Box 273), she opened her course on the prophets with a quotation from his work.

[63] Jon D. Levenson, "Religious Affirmation and Historical Criticism in Heschel's Biblical Interpretation," AJS Review 25, no. 1 (2000–2001): 25–44 (hereafter: "Religious Affirmation"), at 33, questioned a sentence by Heschel about the Bible with a polemical inquiry. See *GISM*, 241: "Use your imagination

Heschel had previously written for multiple audiences. *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern* ***Man*** (1951), intended for a universal readership, avoided halakhic discourse altogether.[64] Conversely, 1949 Modern Hebrew essay *Pikuach Neshama* (which means Saving the Spiritual Soul,) seems aimed at a more particular audience—perhaps as a polemical response to Zionist readers who had just established a state focused on saving the Jewish body.[65] Yet in both cases, Heschel sought to present his Jewish thought on its own terms, inviting his readers—whether Jewish or not, whether by English or Hebrew—into the inner language and categories of that tradition.

One of Heschel's most intriguing decisions in this context was to publish another major work in Hebrew just a few months prior to *The Prophets*. *Torah Min HaShamayim* (Heavenly Torah),[66] vol. 1, is an interpretation of the rabbinic sages of the second century, constructed using a method similar to that employed in *The Prophets*—but expressed in a markedly different linguistic register. While *The Prophets* is written in poetic or academic modern English, *TMH* is not only a Hebrew work; it seeks to present the sages in their own rabbinic Hebrew, rather than in contemporary Hebrew.[67] In *TMH*, Heschel retained the linguistic world of the

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and try to conceive of a book that would excel the Bible, and you will admit that the power of the spirit has never gone farther than the Bible." Levenson rejoined: "Who is the 'you' in this sentence? It is obviously not the billions of Christians in the world who believe that they do indeed know a book that excels the Jewish Bible and in which the spirit has revealed itself in greater depth: it is called the New Testament." Indeed, this statement may at first have been directed primarily to the Jewish community (as suggested by the subtitle of *GISM*, "A Philosophy of Judaism"), yet in his later writings Heschel deliberately refrained from speaking of the Bible's superiority, preferring instead to emphasize its distinctiveness. See "Carl Stern's Interview with Dr. Heschel," *MGSA*, 398: "I don't believe in a monopoly. I think God loves all men. He has given many nations, He has given all men an awareness of His greatness and of His love. And God is to be found in many hearts all over the world. Not limited to one nation or to one people, to one religion. But you have to understand, again, to come back to the problem of uniqueness. What has the Hebrew Bible given us in particular that is not to be found anywhere else? I would say the particular appreciation of the greatness of man, of man's tremendous potentiality as a partner of God. This idea, to me, is not to be found anywhere else." Regardless, my question extends beyond a single claim by Heschel to encompass his imagined audience throughout his composition of *The Prophets*.

[64] Consider Soloveitchik's critique of Heschel's *The Sabbath*, as quoted by Jonathan Sacks: "He said, 'you have read Prof. A. J. Heschel's book called The Sabbath?… it's a beautiful book, isn't it?… what does he call Shabbat? – a sanctuary in time… this is an idea of a poet, it's a lovely idea. But what is Shabbat? Shabbat… is *lamed-tet melakhot*, it is the 39 categories of work… and it is out of that *halakhah* and not out of poetry that you have to construct a theory of Shabbat.'" Jonathan Sacks, "A Hesped in Honor of Rav Yosef Soloveitchik," in *Memories of a Giant*, ed. M. A. Bierman (Jerusalem and New York: Urim Publications, 2003), 286–87.

[65] See its English translation, "Pikuach Neshama," trans. Arye Cohen and Samuel Dresner, in *MGSA* 55–60: "The very existence of a Jew is a spiritual act… To be a Jew means to have both a Jewish soul and a Jewish spirit… and the Jewish soul is dependent upon the Jewish spirit... Judaism teaches us that to remain a people we must be more than a people."

[66] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Torah min ha-Shamayim be-Aspaklarya shel ha-Dorot*, vols. 1–2 (London and New York: Soncino Press, 1962–65) [Hebrew]. Hereafter: *TMH*.

[67] Reuven Kimelman, "Abraham Joshua Heschel's Theology of Judaism and the Rewriting of Jewish Intellectual History," *Journal of Jewish Thought & Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 207–38.

sages; in *The Prophets*, he translated the prophets into the linguistic world of his readers.

A similar linguistic division appears in Heschel's final two works, which he submitted to publishers just weeks before his death. *Kotzk* was written in Yiddish —in the precise dialect of Polish Hasidism, complete with its characteristic idiomatic expressions and colorful slang. *A Passion for Truth*, by contrast, was written in modern English, though it addresses the same Hasidic tradition.

However, at this point a significant shift in Heschel's writing becomes apparent. While the two works share several parallel chapters, they also diverge in important ways. The Yiddish volume contains numerous chapters filled with radical Hasidic tales, whereas nearly half of the English version is devoted to constructing an "interreligious dialogue" between the Kotzker Rebbe (d. 1859) and the Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (d. 1855). Here, then, Heschel does not merely present Jewish thought to his Christian readers in their English language; he also addresses them from within their own religious world.

Taken together, these two interpretive works on Hasidism construct a dialogue between the language of the "author" —the Kotzker Rebbe—and a modern Christian readership. These contrasts raise three central questions relevant to *The Prophets*: Who constitutes its intended audience? What accounts for Heschel's decision not to cite the prophets in Hebrew, in contrast to his use of rabbinic Hebrew in *TMH*? And does the work implicitly construct a dialogical space between Jewish and Christian interpretive frameworks?

From several perspectives, *The Prophets* appears to have been directed primarily toward a Christian readership. Only two endorsements appeared on the back cover of the first edition, both from Union Theological Seminary faculty: Reinhold Niebuhr and James Muilenburg, a leading biblical scholar and member of the RSV translation committee.[68] The book's opening sentence—referring to "the men whose image is our refuge in distress"—may similarly echo Martin Luther's A Mighty Fortress Is Our God, offering a subtle gesture of welcome to Christian readers

Another telling indication of Heschel's intended audience lies in the title itself. Originally, the book was to be called *The Prophets of Israel*, but at the last moment Heschel chose to omit the final two words.[69] Of course, this appears to have been primarily a marketing decision, since he continued to use the expression "the prophets of Israel" elsewhere in his writings and did not abandon the vision it implied.

Heschel remained committed to the idea that the prophets of Israel could serve as a shared moral and spiritual heritage for Jews and Christians, and may even have wished to suggest that Christian interpretation could contribute to their understanding. For him, the prophets offered an alternative to Greek moral frameworks and a potential foundation for genuine interreligious encounter. He later articulated this

[68] Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, 181, notes that both figures participated in the 1957 interreligious meeting with JTS and that, according to Wolf Kelman, they praised Heschel's writings at that occasion – praise that does not appear in the version of Niebuhr's address published in his book.
[69] Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical*, 210.

aspiration explicitly in his address "No Religion Is an Island," as part of a broader effort to cultivate interreligious dialogue for the sake of humanity's survival:

> When Paul Tillich, Gustave Weigel, and myself were invited… to speak… on the religious situation in America, we not only found ourselves in deep accord in disclosing what ails us, but above all without prior consultation, the three of us confessed that our guides in this critical age are the prophets of Israel, not Aristotle, not Karl Marx, but Amos and Isaiah… Is it not our duty to help one another in trying to overcome hardness of heart… in seeking to respond to the voice of the prophets?[70]

In any case, this marketing decision aligns with earlier choices – and with one additional, decisive indication of the book's intended audience. On the credit page of *The Prophets*, Heschel included the following note:

> The Revised Standard Version has been used throughout, interspersed occasionally with my own translation.

Heschel chose to rely primarily on a Christian translation—rather than the Jewish Publication Society version—when rendering biblical quotations. Moreover, although in his earlier works of the late 1950s he consistently cited the JPS, in *The Prophets* he replaced those same biblical quotations with the RSV.[71]

This is especially noteworthy given his familiarity with the JPS preface, which states:

> The repeated efforts by Jews in the field of biblical translation show their sentiment toward translations prepared by other denominations. The dominant feature of this sentiment, apart from the thought that the christological interpretations in non-Jewish translations are out of place in a Jewish Bible, is and was that the Jew cannot afford to have his Bible translation prepared for him by others. He cannot have it as a gift, even as he cannot borrow his soul from others. If a new country and a new language metamorphose him into a new man, the duty of this new man is to prepare a new garb and a new method of expression for what is most sacred and most dear to him.

Yet it was the Christian RSV that Heschel ultimately adopted. While it is true that the RSV (1952) was considerably more recent than the 1917 JPS translation,

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[70] "No Religion Is an Island," in *MGSA*, 240–42.

[71] For example, Heschel quoted the JPS translation of Amos 7:14–17 in *GISM* (which was published in 1955), 226, but used the RSV for the same passage in *The Prophets*, 31. Similarly, he cited the JPS of Isaiah 26:9 in *GISM*, 29, but adopted the RSV for the same quote in *The Prophets*, 175. Furthermore, in *GISM*, 52 n. 9, he quoted the JPS translation of Isaiah 25:1–4, whereas *The Prophets*, 173, utilizes the RSV for that same passage. See also "Sacred Image of Man" (1957), where Heschel relied on the manuscripts of *The Prophets* and quoted the JPS version of Psalm 89:6 (*IF*, 151), but used the RSV for the same verse in *The Prophets*, 270.

Heschel's decision appears to have been motivated by more than linguistic or stylistic considerations. Rather, it reflects a deliberate attempt to engage a Christian readership.

Heschel's use of the RSV placed him at a crossroads not fully captured by his modest disclaimer that the text was "interspersed occasionally with my own translation." On one hand, the RSV enabled him to invite Christian readers to engage the Hebrew prophets in their own interpretive idiom. On the other, it rested on a textual tradition different from the Jewish Masoretic Text underlying the JPS version, and at times reflected Christological readings that diverged sharply from the Jewish tradition to which Heschel was deeply committed.

At this stage, the rewritten *The Prophets* can be seen as exhibiting an emerging interreligious hermeneutical orientation in textual practice. This orientation does not yet amount to formal interreligious dialogue but represents a transitional moment in which Heschel's developing theological pluralism begins to take textual shape. It is only against this backdrop that the significance of his adoption of the RSV becomes fully intelligible.

Indeed, a close examination of the biblical quotations in the interpretive section of *The Prophets* (chapters 1–11)[72] reveals Heschel's careful navigation of this interreligious hermeneutical orientation. The analysis that follows therefore examines Heschel's use of the RSV from several perspectives. First, it shows how the adoption of this translation allowed Heschel to incorporate conclusions associated with biblical criticism—both lower criticism concerning the Masoretic Text and higher criticism concerning editorial history—without explicitly declaring his reliance on such methods.[73]

The acceptance of alternative textual traditions reflects the broader movement toward interreligious pluralism traced elsewhere in this study: it suggests Heschel's openness to engagement with multiple religious textual trajectories in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

Moreover, as noted above, Heschel referred to biblical criticism as the "Protestant study of Scripture," acknowledging both its significant contributions and its inherent limits. Viewed in this light, his stance toward biblical criticism may

[72] *The Prophets* exhibits a bipartite structure (chs. 1–11 and 12–28), even though its first edition appeared without any explicit internal division. The second edition, published in 1969–71 during Heschel's lifetime, was issued in two volumes that reflect this division, each with separate pagination and chapter numbering. Heschel subtitled the first volume An Introduction, a designation that carries a double sense—both a prefatory framing and an initial orientation to the prophets themselves. By contrast, the second volume bears only the title *The Prophets* and, strikingly, opens with the same introduction as the first, as though it were intended to function as an independent work. In light of this publication history, it is unclear on what basis Kaplan, in *Spiritual Radical*, 211, proposed an alternative structural division of the book.

[73] Compare Levenson's assessment in "Religious Affirmation": 41. Levenson argues that Heschel's "handling of the prophets gives us a good sense of how his theology affects his reading of specific texts. The book with that title is organized in the form of glosses and paraphrases to scriptural passages in the Masoretic recension. Almost completely absent is a concern for the meat and potatoes of modern biblical scholarship."

itself be understood as a form of interreligious exchange, situated at the intersection of Jewish interpretation and Protestant scholarly practice.[74]

At the same time, genuine dialogue entails both reception and resistance; attentiveness alongside the preservation of distinct identity. Accordingly, the analysis will then demonstrate how Heschel occasionally altered RSV renderings—sometimes to reject embedded Christological readings, sometimes to replace neutral phrasing with Jewish theological interpretation, and sometimes to embed his own interpretive position directly within the biblical citation.

These changes, together with the textual emendations he introduced, reveal a consistent hermeneutical strategy. Even when reproducing the RSV verbatim, this should not be understood as passive adoption: every biblical quotation in *The Prophets* constitutes a deliberate interpretive choice.

Before examining this hermeneutical positioning operates in detail, it is necessary to distinguish this strategy from his explicit stance toward biblical criticism, as articulated both in his theological writings and within *The Prophets* itself.

Heschel's Overt Position on Biblical Criticism

Although Heschel received rigorous academic training in biblical criticism in Berlin and was deeply familiar with its methods,[75] the question here is not his scholarly competence but how he positioned biblical criticism within the rewriting of *The Prophets*.

In *GISM*, he reframed the "heresy question"[76] raised by biblical criticism as a matter of religious meaning rather than textual origins.[77] His later work, *TMH*, further explored the human dimension of revelation through the rabbinic debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael, presenting revelation as both divine and historically refracted.[78] In this sense, Heschel appears to have regarded critical

[74] See Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Protestant Renewal: A Jewish View," in *IF*, 71–72: "A pianist should study musicology but remain an artist. The words of the Bible are not made of paper. In order to know them I must submit them to my judgment; in order to understand them I must stand under their judgment." The article was originally published in *The Christian Century* in 1963, one year after *The Prophets*.

[75] Heschel's dissertation should also be situated within the intellectual context of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, particularly in relation to Abraham Geiger's seminal work *Urschrift und Übersetzungen der Bibel in ihrer Abhängigkeit von der inneren Entwicklung des Judentums* (1857). See Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 9: "Geiger was a household name in my childhood." Notably, although Heschel cited Geiger's *Urschrift* once in his dissertation (59, n. 1), that reference was subsequently omitted in *The Prophets*.

[76] According to the eighth of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Faith, the entirety of the Torah, transmitted through Moses, was dictated to him directly by God. In this conception, Moses functions as a scribe, faithfully recording all events, narratives, and commandments exactly as dictated. Maimonides further maintains that "anyone who says that these verses or narratives were written by Moses on his own initiative is considered, by our sages and prophets, a heretic."

[77] *GISM*, 258.

[78] Heschel did not content himself with merely presenting the dispute; in the third volume of *TMH*, he offered a kind of "halakhic ruling" on this theological question, tailored to the needs of his own generation: "There never arose in Israel any Sage who so imprinted his characteristic stamp on Judaism as did Rabbi Akiva… And yet it seems to me that the hour demands the teachings of Rabbi Ishmael, the

scholarship as a legitimate—though limited—interpretive resource, one he selectively engaged during the years he was rewriting *The Prophets*, without granting it definitive authority.[79]

There are several explicit references in *The Prophets* to claims made by biblical criticism—almost all of which Heschel sought to refute. He called upon his readers to respond to the prophets' own perspectives, and accordingly rejected assertions rooted in Western, and especially Greek, philosophical assumptions.[80]

Moreover, Heschel sought to preserve the unity of the biblical books, opposing the divisions proposed by scholars to resolve internal contradictions or historical discontinuities. [81] Indeed, he explicitly clarified his tendency:

> 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.[82]

However, one major division commonly associated with biblical criticism is already apparent in the *Table of Contents* of *The Prophets*: the Book of Isaiah is divided between Chapter 4, "Isaiah (Isa. 1–39)," and Chapter 8, "Second Isaiah."[83]

Though this division was already suggested by Ibn Ezra, the medieval Jewish biblical commentator,[84] Heschel's decision to adopt it should not be taken for granted. Even today, many Modern Orthodox Jewish scholars and educators tend

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minimalist teaching regarding the principle of 'Torah from Heaven'" [*Heavenly Torah: As Refracted Through the Generations*, ed. and trans. Gordon Tucker with Leonard Levin (New York: Continuum, 2005), 707.] This English edition is an abridged and edited translation. A new critical Hebrew edition of vol. 3, based on recently uncovered manuscripts and correcting the original publication, was issued as part of a revised edition of the original Hebrew work. See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Torah min ha-Shamayim be-Aspaklarya shel ha-Dorot* [Heavenly Torah as Refracted Through the Generations], ed. Dror Bondi (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2021).

[79] For a detailed and critical review of Heschel's attitude, see Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), chap. 3. Cf. Dror Bondi, *Ayekah*, chap. 5, for an analysis of the structure of *GISM*, part 2, addressing many of the problems identified by Held.

[80] See, for example, *The Prophets*, 391: "Embarrassment over the emotional features of the biblical account of God induced the so-called 'historical school' of Bible criticism to assume an evolutionary development… This view, which is neither true to fact nor in line with the fundamental biblical outlook, arises from the failure to understand the meaning of the God of pathos." See also 604: "It is not within the power or concern of critical scholarship to suggest and to prove who is to be called a prophet."

[81] For instance, Heschel treated the books of Amos and Hosea as coherent works, despite scholarly consensus suggesting that these texts were compiled from multiple sources. This raises the question of whether he explicitly rejected the argument for source separation, or if he merely chose to focus on the redactor's approach, which unified disparate sources into a singular work. Heschel does not explicitly address this methodological question.

[82] *The Prophets*, 23.

[83] In *Die Prophetie*, Heschel's analysis is confined solely to Isaiah 1–39.

[84] In the opening of his exegesis of Isaiah 40.

to avoid making such explicit claims about the Book of Isaiah.[85] Heschel's choice reflects a moment of intellectual honesty: when he believed that a historical-critical claim had been convincingly established, he was not afraid to give it clear expression—even in the Table of Contents.

This nuanced positioning toward biblical criticism anticipates the broader interpretive strategy that will become clearer in the analysis that follows—one embodied above all in Heschel's handling of the biblical text. Although explicit references to critical scholarship appear in several footnotes of *The Prophets*, the more consequential evidence lies in his use of the RSV. The discussion therefore begins with examples of his acceptance of alternative textual traditions.

Quiet Acceptance of Alternative Textual Traditions

The RSV frequently prefers readings preserved in ancient versions over those of the Masoretic Text. In adopting the RSV as his primary biblical source, Heschel at times incorporated such variant readings without polemic or methodological explanation. In some cases, this reflects textual openness without significant exegetical consequence; in others, however, the variant reading enables a substantive theological move within his interpretation.[86]

More significantly, Heschel's readiness to draw upon textual traditions outside the Masoretic lineage reveals not a departure from his involved mode of interpretation, but a selective engagement with the broader textual history of Scripture. His use of alternative traditions does not signal deference to critical authority; rather, it reflects a willingness to integrate philological insight into a theological exposition centered on divine–human encounter.

One example appears in his treatment of Jeremiah 5:1. In *The Prophets* (108), Heschel cites the verse with the concluding words "says the Lord," following the Septuagint. The Masoretic Text lacks this phrase, and Jewish commentators such as Rabbi David Kimhi accordingly read the verse as Jeremiah's own speech. By adopting the Septuagintal reading, Heschel renders the passage explicitly divine

[85] See, for example, Yoel Bin-Nun and Binyamin Lau, Isaiah, trans. Sara Daniel (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2019). In his introduction, Bin-Nun writes: "Isaiah created a school of thought – a prophetic study house – like no other. This is the key to understanding chapters 40–66" (xxviii).

[86] For example, in *The Prophets*, 164, Heschel cites Isa 33:8 following the RSV's preference for the Qumranic reading עדים ("witnesses") rather than the Masoretic ערים ("cities"), a variant attested in the Great Isaiah Scroll (1QIsaa). Whereas most earlier Jewish translations followed the Masoretic reading, the RSV adopted the Qumran form, which creates a tighter parallel with "covenants." Heschel also employed this version in the opening of his remarks to Cardinal Bea in New York on April 1, 1963 (*IF*, 179), indicating that this textual preference entered not only his scholarly exposition but also his interreligious address. Likewise, in *The Prophets*, 97, he renders Isa 8:9 as "Take note, you peoples," aligning with the Septuagint (γνῶτε ἔθνη), likely reflecting the underlying Hebrew text דעו rather than the Masoretic רעו ("Be broken"), thereby favoring a reading preserved in an alternative textual tradition.

speech, thereby reinforcing his emphasis on God's "inner tension" and the dramatic immediacy of the prophetic encounter.[87]

A related case occurs in his citation of Jeremiah 15:11 (*The Prophets*, 124). Heschel follows the Septuagintal tradition, which likely presupposes the Hebrew **אמן** ("Amen"), attributing the subsequent words to Jeremiah himself. The Masoretic Text, by contrast, reads **אמר** ("The Lord said"), presenting the words as divine speech. The Septuagintal reading allows Heschel to present the words as Jeremiah's own cry, thereby intensifying the polarity within the prophet himself.

Ellipsis as Tacit Criticism and Hermeneutical Strategy

At times Heschel's engagement with biblical criticism is evident not in explicit argument but in his handling of the biblical text itself. Through selective omission, he occasionally signals tacit agreement with critical claims about editorial layering;[88] at other times, ellipsis functions primarily as a theological and literary strategy.

A particularly interesting example can be found in his treatment of the Book of Habakkuk. In the chapter devoted to this prophet, Heschel largely disregards most of Habakkuk 2[89]—which constitutes about a third of the book. Yet he does cite verses from that very chapter elsewhere in *The Prophets*, including two instances where he attributes the quote simply to "a prophet."[90]

Nevertheless, these examples remain marginal in the context of such a substantial work—until one undertakes a careful examination of the biblical quotations themselves. In these numerous citations, even prior to analyzing their content, a subtle and revealing pattern emerges: Heschel's use of ellipses. Rather than entering into explicit discussions about later additions or editorial interventions—debates that might shift attention from the prophetic voice—Heschel simply omits select words, verses, or phrases, marking the omission with ellipses and usually without explanatory comment.[91] These are not instances of his use of the RSV, yet

[87] See also *The Prophets*, 111, where Heschel cites Jeremiah 6:22 – "Thus says the Lord" – and then employs an ellipsis to present 6:26 as spoken by God. The basis for such a reading appears already in the Midrash; see Rashi *ad loc*.

[88] For example, Heschel rarely quotes from the final third of the Book of Jeremiah, a section where scholars have identified numerous later additions. His historical overview of Jeremiah's life similarly concludes with the destruction of the Temple, disregarding subsequent events mentioned in the book, particularly Jeremiah's implied presence during the murder of Gedaliah son of Ahikam, which scholars often regard as a later accretion.

[89] One instance illustrates this: Heschel cited a verse from Habakkuk 2 within the sequence of Habakkuk 1, thereby suggesting that its words had been mistakenly transposed from their original position. This also offers a solution to scholarly arguments that the first part of this verse is disconnected from its second part.

[90] *The Prophets*, 7, 161–62; though see also 164, where Heschel does attribute the quote to Habakkuk.

[91] For example, the Masoretic text of Micah is marked by linguistic ambiguities and structural difficulties, and modern scholarship has frequently proposed textual and redactional solutions. Heschel does not engage these debates explicitly; yet at points his omissions appear to reflect a tacit awareness of them. A notable example occurs in *The Prophets*, 99, where he cites Micah 6:14–16 in abbreviated form (the ellipses appear in the original): "You shall eat, but not be satisfied… You shall sow, but not reap… That I may make you a desolation… And you shall bear the reproach of My people" (Mic. 6:14–

they further illuminate his interpretive stance and prepare the ground for the analysis that follows. The following examples illustrate this approach.

An editorial strategy appears in *The Prophets*, p. 109, where Heschel presents a poetic excerpt from Jeremiah that features a recurring refrain: "Shall I not punish them for these things?" However, the multiple ellipses within the passage – as well as the citation beneath it (Jeremiah 5:7–9, 28–29; 9:8–9) – reveal that Heschel reassembled the poem. This reconstruction suggests an implicit critical judgment: that a later biblical redactor fragmented an original poetic structure by inserting intervening material between its verses. At the same time, by restoring the refrain into a concentrated poetic sequence, Heschel sharpens the sense of recurring divine address and intensifies the presentation of God's pathos in the book of Jeremiah. The editorial move thus serves both a tacit critical claim and a theological purpose central to his interpretation.

Similarly, in *The Prophets*, p. 38, Heschel omits Amos 3:4–6 in order to read verses 3 and 7 as a continuous unit. This editorial choice supports his interpretation that these verses depict the intimacy between God and the prophet, rather than the relationship between God and the people. Notably, this stands in contrast to Heschel's earlier interpretation in *Die Prophetie* (71–72), where he read verse 3 in the broader context of its surrounding verses – as describing the relationship between God and the people. There, he explicitly notes (note 1) that most scholars regard the entire passage as a unified prophecy. Notably, even though Heschel cites no scholarly authority here, the omission implicitly presupposes that the intervening verses may represent later accretions that obscure an earlier prophetic unit. In this respect, his silence functions as a tacit critical judgment rather than a merely literary abbreviation.

Finally, see *The Prophets*, p. 140, where Heschel omits a single word from Habakkuk 1:5— "Look… see." By skipping over this word, he avoids both the Masoretic reading ("among the nations" – **בגוים**) and the Septuagint's divergent version ("you despisers" – οἱ καταφρονηταί, likely translating a Hebrew word such as **בזוים** or **בּגדים**). This omission enables Heschel to interpret the following verses not as a new prophetic address to the people, but as God's direct response to the prophet's preceding question.

Taken together, these omissions do not amount to a systematic adoption of critical scholarship. Rather, they reveal a consistent interpretive strategy: Heschel incorporates critical insights when they serve his theological and literary aims, while deliberately refraining from foregrounding critical debate itself.

Concealed Dispute with Christian Interpretations

> Interfaith may become a substitute for faith, suppressing authenticity for the sake of compromise. In a world of conformity, religions can easily be levelled

16). The ellipses streamline the sequence and heighten its poetic force, allowing the prophetic rebuke to stand without intervening material that might disrupt its cadence. Compare Hans W. Wolff, *The Prophet Micah*, trans. Ralph D. Gehrke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981).

> down to the lowest common denominator. Both communication and separation are necessary. We must preserve our individuality as well as foster care for one another, reverence, understanding, cooperation.[92]

This tension between communication and separation also shapes Heschel's handling of biblical translation in *The Prophets*. Although Heschel repeatedly criticized Jewish Ultra-Orthodox approaches that placed the Torah above God,[93] he was deeply committed to the Torah,[94] rabbinic interpretation, and the Hasidic tradition.[95]

Schlimm has argued that Heschel's interpretations reflect a distinctly Jewish theological orientation, particularly in his explanation of divine wrath as emerging from God's concern and love.[96] A close examination of the changes Heschel made to the RSV quotations clearly demonstrates his deep commitment to the Jewish tradition.

As mentioned above, Heschel paid a price for his reliance on the RSV—namely, theological inflections shaped within a Christian translation tradition. He adopted this translation to reach out to Christian readers in their own terms, without embracing all of its interpretive tendencies. At the same time, Heschel avoided turning *The Prophets* into a polemical work or a site of overt interreligious controversy. Thus, he opted for a more subtle approach: a concealed dispute. Rather than engaging in explicit critique, even in footnotes, Heschel frequently introduced slight modifications to RSV quotations or juxtaposed two different biblical sources in a way that allowed one to reinterpret the other. The following examples illustrate how these quiet editorial choices functioned to resist and reframe certain Christian readings.

In his treatment of the "Servant of the Lord" in Second Isaiah, Heschel consistently identifies the figure with the people of Israel, explicitly rejecting Christological interpretations.[97] Within this framework, Heschel translates Isaiah 62:1 (*The Prophets*, 146) as: "Until her triumph goes forth as brightness, and her rescue as a burning torch," diverging from the RSV's rendering, "until her vindication goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch." By substituting triumph for vindication and rescue for salvation, Heschel distances the

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[92] "No Religion is an Island", *MGSA*, 241.

[93] *MGSA*, 51, 192.

[94] See *GISM*, 167: "The Jew is never alone in the face of God; the Torah is always with him. A Jew without the Torah is obsolete."

[95] For a rebuttal of Eliezer Berkovits's claim that *The Prophets* reflects a Christian theological orientation – particularly because of its emphasis on the divine "personhood" – see Steven T. Katz, "Eliezer Berkovits and Modern Jewish Philosophy," *Tradition* 17, no. 1 (1977): 92–138.

[96] Matthew R. Schlimm, "Different Perspectives on Divine Pathos: An Examination of Hermeneutics in Biblical Theology," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 69, no. 4 (2007): 673–94.

[97] Compare Niebuhr, "*Relations*": 192: "The offence… does not follow with logical necessity from anything predicted in Messianic hopes, though the Christian community (rightly, I believe) saw it as a fulfillment of the quasi-Messianic conception in the Second Isaiah of the 'suffering servant.' If it was actually Israel which the Second Isaiah envisaged in the concept, the appropriation by the church will be the more offensive to the Jew, while being plausible to Christians on the ground that no people, but only a single individual, could possibly correspond to the conception of the suffering servant."

verse from spiritualized theological vocabulary and reasserts a concrete, historical understanding of Jerusalem's restoration. Notably, the term triumph appears in the JPS translation, and Heschel's discomfort with the Christian theological overtones of "salvation" is reflected elsewhere in his writings.[98]

A striking example appears in Heschel's creative rendering of Hosea 3:1 (*The Prophets*, 53): "Bring Gomer back to your home, renew your love for her." This stands in sharp contrast to the RSV's more literal translation: "Go again, love a woman who is beloved of a paramour and is an adulteress." Although the biblical verse does not name Gomer explicitly, Heschel inserts her name, thereby aligning the passage with the narrative of chapter 1, where she is identified as Hosea's wife. This interpretive choice is hardly incidental. By emphasizing the continuity of the relationship, Heschel distances the passage from Christian allegorical readings that identify the woman with a new covenantal community and instead reinforces the enduring bond between God and Israel. In doing so, he reaffirms the continuity of the covenant and resists readings that detach the passage from Israel's historical identity.[99]

A particularly revealing example can be found in *The Prophets*, pp. 43–44, where Heschel constructs a striking composite quotation: Hosea 14:1–3; 3:5; 14:5–6. In doing so, he effectively presents most of chapter 14, but notably replaces verse 4 with a verse from chapter 3. The passage begins with Hosea's call to Israel, formatted in poetic indentation. It then shifts to a prose-indented citation of Hosea 3:5, portraying Israel's return as a realized fact. Finally, the format returns to poetic structure, now as God's own words of forgiveness.

This layered structure reflects Heschel's interpretive agency. By omitting Hosea 14:4— "I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely…"—and inserting a verse from chapter 3 instead, Heschel reframes the moment of divine response as conditioned by Israel's repentance, rather than as an unconditional act of divine initiative detached from Israel's return.[100] This reading resonates with Rashi's traditional commentary, which sees divine forgiveness as conditional on sincere return.

Furthermore, Heschel opens the selection with Hosea 14:1, following the Jewish liturgical division of the Haftarah "Shuvah," rather than the Christian (Vulgate)

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[98] See, for example, *MGSA*, 278, 382. Interestingly, at the beginning of his book *Israel* (1969), Heschel initially cited the verse using the RSV translation.

[99] Compare *Coffman's Commentaries on the Bible*, Introduction to Hosea 3, https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/bcc/hosea-3.html: "The reason why some cannot understand Hosea 3 is that they missed the point in Hosea 2, which was the divorce, depicting God's repudiation of Israel as 'the chosen people.' No, that was not the end of God's relationship with Israel, that being depicted in the events of this chapter as the status, not of a wife, but as that of a slave without any conjugal relationship whatever with God whom Israel had rejected, a status that would continue until the times (in the latter days) of the new marriage, not with the old and discredited whore, but with the new bride, the church of Jesus Christ!"

[100] Compare Abraham Joshua Heschel. "The Concept of Man in Jewish Thought." In *The Concept of Man*, edited by S. Radhakrishnan and P. T. Raju, 108–57. London: Allen and Unwin, 1960, 129: "God loves Israel notwithstanding its backslidings… His love is a gift rather than an earning (Hosea 14:5 [in the numbering of JPS, 14:4 in the numbering of RSV])."

division, which begins the chapter a verse earlier. The Christian division appears to shift the emphasis toward guilt and unmerited atonement; Heschel's arrangement, by contrast, foregrounds *teshuvah* and reaffirms a covenantal theology rooted in responsibility and response.[101]

In a striking example on pp. 167–168 of *The Prophets*, Heschel quotes passages from both Isaiah and Second Isaiah as though they form a unified source—a departure from his own structural division. He brings together Isaiah 66:2 ("He who is humble and contrite in spirit") and 57:15 ("…with him who has a contrite and humble spirit"), verses that have often been read in Christian tradition in Messianic terms about Jesus. To counter that reading, Heschel strategically appends Isaiah 1:27 ("Zion shall be redeemed by justice"), thereby reorienting the interpretation: for Heschel, these verses point to the redemption of the Jewish people by a future human messiah.[102]

In these cases, Heschel's modifications do not amount to overt polemic. Rather, they demonstrate how his interreligious orientation operates at the level of textual nuance: engaging Christian readers in their own idiom while quietly reasserting a Jewish theological framework.

The Influence of Midrash and Jewish Commentary

Another aspect of the question concerning the Jewish orientation of *The Prophets* relates to Heschel's direct interpretation of the prophetic texts themselves. Jon Levenson has argued that *The Prophets* is "virtually devoid of connections to the exegeses of the prophetic literature recorded in classical rabbinic midrash or in medieval Jewish commentary."[103] However, a closer examination suggests that Heschel's relationship to rabbinic tradition is more nuanced than this formulation implies.

One section of *The Prophets* explicitly engages with Midrashic interpretation, and a detailed comparison between Heschel's modifications to the RSV and traditional Jewish exegesis uncovers additional traces of Midrashic and medieval influence throughout the work.

At the outset of the chapter on Jeremiah, Heschel seeks to illustrate the prophet's witness to the emotional tension within God, employing a variety of exegetical tools to this end. A recurring feature in the Book of Jeremiah is the presence of verses that can be read either as the words of the prophet or as the words of God. Unlike many commentators who attribute such verses to Jeremiah's own voice, Heschel consistently reads them as divine speech.

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[101] According to Heschel, this distinction reflects a characteristic divergence between Jewish and Christian theological outlooks. See *PT*, 242, where he identifies repentance as the key difference between the Jewish approach of the Kotzker and the Christian thought of Kierkegaard.

[102] See *MGSA*, 280-283, where Heschel interprets Acts 1:6–7 as a discussion between Jesus and his disciples about the redemption of Jerusalem. This contrasts with standard Christian readings (e.g., Augustine, Calvin) which understand it as a discussion about Jesus himself. Heschel concludes his claim with a reading of Isaiah 11:1 as a passage concerning the messianic redemption of Jerusalem.

[103] Levenson, "Religious Affirmation": 41.

Subsequently (109ff.), he devotes an entire unit to a radical rabbinic interpretation of the prophet. Here, Heschel's interpretive boldness emerges in its religious intensity, as he follows the Midrash in attributing expressions of lament not to Jeremiah, but to God Himself. This reading does not appear in Heschel's original dissertation and likely reflects a development in his mature theological thinking. Heschel explicitly acknowledges that his interpretation is not demanded by the plain sense of the text ("A sense of delicacy prevented the prophet from spelling out the meaning of the word") and notes his reliance on midrashic tradition (see p. 111, note 4)—a tradition he was simultaneously exploring in *TMH* (vol. 1, ch. 5).[104]

Additional examples of such engagement appear in Heschel's modifications of specific RSV renderings. See *The Prophets*, p. 73, where Heschel alters the RSV translation of Isaiah 26:13— "other lords besides thee have ruled over us"—into a bold and distinctive version: "other lords besides Thee have imposed themselves upon us." This interpretive move closely parallels *Midrash Tehillim* (Buber edition), Psalm 80:2: "Rabbi Yehudah bar Rabbi Simai said: They demanded of us to worship their idolatry, like a husband who demands of his wife marital relations."

See *The Prophets*, p. 184, where Heschel alters the RSV translation of Isaiah 11:3. The Hebrew word *vaharicho* (**והריחו**) has elicited a range of interpretations in rabbinic literature, revolving around whether it connotes "smell" (**ריח**) or "spirit" (**רוח**).[105] The RSV—following the Jewish scholar Luzzatto (d. 1865)—renders it as "And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord," emphasizing the pleasantness of reverence.[106] Heschel rejects this and other conventional readings, opting instead for a unique translation: "Through the fear of the Lord he will have supreme sensitivity." This interpretation draws from Rava's explanation in *Sanhedrin* 93b— "he judges by smell"—which later became a Hasidic motif.[107] By drawing on this rabbinic motif, Heschel integrates aggadic imagination into his exegesis, allowing traditional Jewish interpretation to shape the semantic range of the prophetic text.

Taken together, these examples complicate the claim that *The Prophets* is detached from rabbinic tradition. While Heschel does not foreground midrash as an explicit source of authority, he integrates it into the texture of his exegesis, thereby

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[104] Heschel also quotes – without explicit commentary – the verses concerning "Rachel weeping for her children" (*The Prophets*, 112), thereby invoking a motif that later assumes central significance in kabbalistic literature, where "Rachel" is identified with a sefirah. He further alludes to the idea that the origin of the liturgical cry "Hosha Na" (O Save Us) – interpreted in Midrash and piyyut as a plea concerning the Shekhinah's exile or "homelessness" – may be traced to the book of Jeremiah. A related interpretive move appears in his chapter on Second Isaiah, where Heschel writes: "It is God's involvement in the suffering of man… that explains this particular concern for the downtrodden and contrite… 'For soon My salvation will come, and My deliverance be revealed'" (*The Prophets*, 151–52). This midrashic reading of the verse is likewise cited by Heschel in *TMH*, vol. 1, chap. 5.

[105] Arie Shifman, "'A Scent' of the Spirit: Exegesis of an Enigmatic Verse (Isaiah 11:3)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131, no. 2 (2012): 241–49.

[106] Cf. the Peshitta (in Glenn David Bauscher's translation): "And he shall shine with the awesomeness of LORD," which may reflect a rendering of the Hebrew vahizriḥo (והזריחו).

[107] Heschel himself cited the Kotzker's reading of this verse: "By the smell he will know who has awe." See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Kotzk: In gerangl far emesdikeyt* (Tel Aviv: HaMenorah, 1973), 494 (Yiddish).

weaving classical Jewish interpretation into a work addressed to a broad modern readership.

Heschel's Creative Translations

As noted above, an examination of Heschel's modifications to the RSV quotations also reveals his creative involvement in the interpretive process. There are several creative verse translations in *The Prophets*, yet only two are accompanied by extended discussion. These two cases illuminate central features of Heschel's approach to prophetic interpretation.

The first appears at the outset of the semi-chapter titled *Emotional Solidarity*, within the larger chapter on Hosea (p. 49). Immediately following this subtitle—and without providing any further commentary—Heschel cites Hosea 4:1 in a strikingly original rendering:

> Hear the word of the Lord, O people of Israel;
> For the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.
> There is no truth or love, and no **understanding for** God in the land.

The RSV, along with nearly all other translations, renders the phrase as "no **knowledge of** God."[108] In fact, Heschel himself adopts this very RSV formulation twice in *The Prophets*—one of them within this same chapter (pp. 13 and 60). Even if the attentive reader were to notice the deviation, they must wait twelve more pages for Heschel's clarification: an extended discussion about *Daath Elohim*, the original Hebrew expression. As Heschel explains there, citing numerous biblical examples:

> In most Semitic languages it signifies sexual union as well as mental and spiritual activity. In Hebrew *yada* means more than the possession of abstract concepts. Knowledge compasses inner appropriation, feeling, a reception into the soul… it often, though not always, denotes an act involving concern, inner engagement, dedication, or attachment to a person. It also means to have sympathy, pity, or affection for someone.[109]

Why did Heschel bring this wonderful explanation twelve pages after the quote? Moreover, only the professional reader would recognize the Hebrew original behind "understanding for God," while the average reader must wait two more pages for Heschel's clarification of his unique translation of Hosea:

> In the light of his own complete emotional solidarity with God, Hosea seems to have seized upon the idea of sympathy as the essential religious requirement.

[108] Heschel performs a similar interpretive move regarding Hosea 6:6 in *GISM*, where he writes: "Burnt offerings, sacrifices are an important part of biblical piety. And yet, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, understanding (knowledge) of God, rather than burnt offerings'" (*GISM*, 27).
[109] *The Prophets*, 57.

> The words *daath elohim* mean sympathy for God, attachment of the whole person, his love as well as his knowledge; an act of involvement, attachment or commitment to God.[110]

Thus "sympathy," a pivotal concept in *The Prophets*, is embedded directly into the biblical quotation itself, without annotation.

The second instance of a creatively translated quote emerges within the chapter concerning Jeremiah (p. 113). Abruptly, and without an introductory subtitle for the ensuing discussion, Heschel presents a highly distinctive translation. He initiates this discussion by providing the RSV translation, followed by two sentences before introducing his own rendition:

> O Lord, Thou hast deceived me,
> And I was deceived;
> Thou art stronger than I,
> And Thou hast prevailed.
> Jeremiah 20:7

> This standard rendition misses completely the meaning of the text and ascribes to Jeremiah a pitiful platitude ("Thou art stronger than I"). The proper rendition of Jeremiah's exclamation would be:

> O Lord, Thou hast seduced me,
> And I am seduced;
> Thou hast raped me
> And I am overcome.

According to Heschel's translation, Jeremiah here bears witness to both the seductive and compelling pathos, and the responsive and submissive sympathy. As further evidence of the range of these images within Jeremiah's self-consciousness, Heschel provides a singular interpretation of another verse (15:16) as the prophet's testimony to his experience of being a type of bride of God (p. 114).

Across all these creative translations, Heschel endeavored to remain attuned to the spirit of the Hebrew Bible, as he understood it by his response to the prophets. In the biblical experience, God is not merely an object of knowledge, nor solely "stronger than I"; rather, He is the ultimate Subject, who unveiled His concern and love to every human being, to His beloved Israel, and to the entire world.

Conclusion

This article has traced the rewriting of *The Prophets* as a decisive turning point in Abraham Joshua Heschel's intellectual and religious development. Rewritten in the second half of the 1950s, the work emerged at a moment of theological ferment

[110] Ibid., 59.

for Heschel, when he was rethinking Israel, chosenness, revelation, and the nature of prophecy in ways that anticipated his later engagement in interreligious dialogue**.**

The study first demonstrated how Heschel's evolving theological pluralism – already visible in *God in Search of Man*—was further articulated and expanded in *The Prophets*. Here, Heschel refined the categories of chosenness, stripping them of exclusive formulations and articulating the possibility that more than one group may stand in a chosen relationship with God. This development unfolded in sustained dialogue with his deepening friendship with Reinhold Niebuhr, which provided a concrete relational matrix for Heschel's emerging interreligious horizon.

Methodologically, the rewriting of *The Prophets* reflects Heschel's shift from abstract phenomenology to an involved attentiveness – first to the distinct voices and theological nuances of individual prophets, and, as a natural extension, to the plurality of contemporary readers. This hermeneutical posture of listening rather than classifying made Heschel newly responsive not only to the diversity within the prophetic corpus but also to the diverse idioms in which modern readers encounter Scripture. In this light, his choice to write in contemporary English and to adopt the Christian RSV as his primary translation expresses not merely a desire to reach Christian readers but a methodological commitment to rendering the prophetic word intelligible across communal boundaries. Plurality here is thus the consequence—and hallmark—of Heschel's involved hermeneutic.

Finally, the article examined Heschel's use of the RSV. His adoption of this Christian translation—together with his subtle modifications, creative renderings, and strategic omissions—reveals a complex interreligious hermeneutical orientation. On one hand, he showed openness to learning from Christian textual traditions and from biblical criticism; on the other, he resisted Christological readings and embedded Jewish theological commitments within the quoted text. In this way, *The Prophets* enacts—textually and silently—an early form of interreligious exchange**.**

By tracing theological revisions, methodological restructuring, and textual strategies within a single sustained work, this study has argued that the rewriting of *The Prophets* was not a peripheral stage but a foundational moment in Heschel's development. It was here that theological pluralism, methodological innovation, and interreligious aspiration became inseparably intertwined. The book thus stands as a bridge between his scholarly beginnings and his later role as a major Jewish voice in the Jewish–Christian encounter that culminated in *Nostra Aetate*.