

THE PROPHETS

Those who attended Rabbi Abraham Heschel's talks on his book, *The Prophets* (Harper and Row, 1962), had an unforgettable experience. The deep humility and meekness, the genuine gentleness and sincere concern for others, the strong, personal love for God manifested in the Rabbi's courteous manners and warm humaneness, but above all in his inspiring speech, recalled the biblical references to the meek Moses and to that great friend of God, father Abraham.

Because of the press of work, the Rabbi was not able to prepare a digest of his talks. The following paragraphs, composed almost entirely of passages from *The Prophets*, express what I think is the substance of the Rabbi's remarks at the convention.¹

In his book, Rabbi Heschel seeks to gain some insight into the minds of the pre-exilic prophets and to understand the decisive moments of their existence from their own perspective. What he aims at is an understanding of what it means to think, feel, respond and act as a prophet. He insists that the significance of Israel's prophets lies not only in what they said but also in what they were.

A prophet is a man in sympathy with God—a man responding to the divine pathos. The prophet's task is to convey a divine view, but from the perspective of his own personal situation. Prophecy is not simply the application of timeless standards to particular human situations, but rather an interpretation of a particular moment in history, a divine understanding of a human situation. Prophecy, then, may be described as *exegesis of existence from a divine perspective*.

The prophet's fundamental objective was to reconcile man and God. Why do the two need reconciliation? Perhaps it is due to man's false sense of sovereignty, to his abuse of freedom, to his aggressive, sprawling pride, resenting God's involvement in history.

God has involved Himself in human history. God has a stake in human history. This is the foundation of Rabbi Heschel's theology of

¹ This summary was prepared by Richard Kugelmann, C.P., who acted as chairman at the sessions addressed by Rabbi Heschel.

the divine pathos. By intervening in history, God engages Himself to man. The God of the prophets is not the *wholly other*, a strange, weird, uncanny being, shrouded in unfathomable darkness, but the God of the covenant, whose will they know and are called upon to convey. The God they proclaim is not the Remote One, but the One Who is involved, near, and concerned. Prophecy consists in the inspired communication of divine attitudes to the prophetic consciousness. To the prophet, God does not reveal Himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. He does not simply command and expect obedience. He is not conceived as judging the world in detachment. He reacts in an intimate and subjective manner, and thus determines the value of events. Quite obviously, in the biblical view, man's deeds may move Him, affect Him, grieve Him, or, on the other hand, gladden and please Him. This notion that God can be intimately affected, that He possesses not merely intelligence and will but also pathos, basically defines the prophetic consciousness of God.

Rabbi Heschel makes a sharp distinction between the divine pathos and passion. Passion is an emotional convulsion. Pathos was understood by the prophets not as unreasoned emotion but as an act formed with intention, depending on free will, the result of decision and determination. Even "in the moment of anger" (Jer 18:7) what God intends is not that His anger should be executed but that it should be annulled by the people's repentance. Man's deeds do not necessitate but only occasion the divine pathos. There is no nexus of causality but only one of contingency between human and divine attitudes. The decisive fact is that of divine freedom. Pathos is not an attribute but *a situation*.

Hesed, the loving kindness of God, is an expression of pathos. The amazing thing about the Bible, remarked the Rabbi, is that it is the story not of man's search for God, but of God's search for man! Revelation, in the biblical sense, is really a moment in which God succeeded in reaching man. We are all in the situation of Abraham. God is revealing Himself to us; we must respond by personal commitment to God's engagement. How different the biblical story would be if written from a human viewpoint! In spite of repeated infidelity

and sinful waywardness, God never gave up His search for man. The prophets were men in sympathy with the divine pathos. This sympathy impelled them to say *no* to their society, to condemn its complacency, waywardness and syncretism. It brought them suffering. As the rabbis put it: "The task of man is to co-suffer with the suffering Shekinah."

A Christian cannot refrain from commenting that this theology of the divine pathos seems to call for the Incarnation and the Passion of Christ.

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