

ASHLAND THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A REFLECTION PAPER ON
THE PROPHETS
BY ABRAHAM J. HESCHEL

SUBMITTED TO
DR. PAUL OVERLAND
OLD TESTAMENT 2: THE PROPHETS

BY
DON BROMLEY

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

APRIL 17, 2000

GOD'S WRATH

One of the greatest difficulties I've had with the Old Testament has been the message of overwhelming wrath and judgment that comes through the mouths of the prophets. As a pastor, I'm often the spokesman for God and Christianity to people who have never darkened the door of a church. My conversations with non-believers inevitably turn to God, and the nature of God. I usually describe God as compassionate, loving, forgiving, and tender. Once in a while, I'm asked about the parts of the Old Testament that seem to depict God as vindictive, angry, wrathful, and violent. It's at this point that I have the greatest difficulty being the spokesperson for God, because I myself have struggled greatly with the wrath of God. If God is so loving, forgiving, and compassionate, why does he seem so wrathful and angry when I read the Old Testament prophets?

Part of the mystery of God's wrath for me is that I discover his love and tenderness amidst the anger and wrath. It's as if God is truly sorry that things have come to such a state that he must be as angry and wrathful as he is. As Heschel writes, it is as if the anger of the Lord is "suspended love", or "suspended mercy" (Heschel vol. 2, 75). It's true that God is not the gentle giant that we come to think of and romanticize in our modern-day Christianity. His anger is awesome and frightful. But it's not for nothing that God is angry; Isaiah writes, "Yet they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned and became their enemy and he himself fought against them" (Isa 63:10 NIV). God is angry because people are evil and wicked, and do horrendously evil things. But God is not angry forever, and turns from his wrath: "I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me-- the breath of man that I have created" (Isa 57:16 NIV). God is compassionate and merciful, and does not wish to destroy mankind from the face of the earth.

My favorite point that Heschel makes is that it would be truly wrong if God were not wrathful and angry in response to evil and sin. As Heschel writes, “All prophecy is one great exclamation; God is not indifferent to evil! He is always concerned” (Heschel vol. 2, 64). It’s a point that I haven’t always realized, but have come to appreciate. What kind of God could be aware of all the evil and crimes that are committed every day and not be incensed, wrathful, and angry? When I read stories of the brutal crimes that are committed in our society, I become angry and want justice, even though I myself am not always a good person. But God, who is morally perfect, sees every wrong that is done, everywhere! How could he not be angry and full of wrath? It’s helped me to see one thing through the strong language in the prophets: God cares a lot about justice!

THE PROPHETS VS. THE ECSTATIC

As a kid, I used to watch National Geographic documentaries about the mystics and medicine men from tribal cultures, and I was always amazed and awe-struck at what I saw. Ordinary people, like myself, went into convulsions and trances, and received mystical powers and visions. When the tribe needed guidance about a matter, the mystics performed strange rituals to determine the will of the gods. It was as if the mystics had a special connection to and understanding of the spiritual powers that be. It’s easy to view the Old Testament prophets as simply mystics of another ancient culture, but Heschel shows how very different the Hebrew prophets were. The prophets were not mystics prone to psychotic episodes, but were rational and clear-headed people who were given a profound awareness and concern for their people by God.

Prophets were not people who lost their consciousness and went into zombie-like trances, like the mystics were prone to do. Unlike the mystics, they received their messages from God while fully

conscious and aware of themselves (Heschel vol. 2, 132). The prophet Amos, when he received a vision from the LORD concerning Israel's destruction, was fully conscious and aware of himself and his nation as he cried out, "Sovereign LORD, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small!" (Amos 7:2 NIV). He is representative of all the prophets, in that they did not lose their personalities or concerns as they interacted with God, but brought these into the conversations and disputes with the LORD.

Unlike the philosophers or "spiritual" gurus of today, the prophets expressed a God who is very concerned about the mundane things of everyday life. Most pop-psychology experts and new-age mystics deal with and write about transcendent spiritual issues, such as personal fulfillment and emotional healing. Refreshingly, the prophets spoke the word of the LORD about issues that affect ordinary people; "the prophet's field of concern is not the mysteries of heaven, but the affairs of the market place; not the spiritual realities of the Beyond, but the life of the people; not the glories of eternity, but the blights of society" (Heschel vol. 2, 144). It's wonderful that God is concerned with the nitty-gritty details of our lives, like how we treat one another, and not simply about the transcendental.

THE PROPHETS UNLIKE ANY OTHERS

When I was an atheist, not too many years ago, I believed that Christianity was false if for no other reason than that there were many other religions which also claimed to be true. Also, each religion seemed so similar on the surface: they had their founding figures, their sacred texts, and their mystics. However, as a Christian I've learned that not all religions were created equal! Heschel

makes a convincing case, however, that the biblical prophets were unique in both their method and their message, and were in fact unparalleled in history.

The holy men of many ancient cultures were essentially diviners, or people who practiced divination. Divination is basically “the effort to obtain information about future happenings or things otherwise removed from ordinary perception by consulting informants other than human” (Heschel vol. 2, 234). In contrast to the diviners, the biblical prophets did not initiate communication with God in order to obtain information about future happenings, but God initiated communication to reveal his will and his plans. As Heschel puts it, “The diviner seeks to obtain God’s answer to man’s questions; the prophet seeks man’s answer to God’s question” (Heschel vol. 2, 239). Because as Christians we worship a God who completely sovereign, it isn’t surprising that God does not sit passively waiting for diviners to ask him questions. He questions us!