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John C. Merkle
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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Classics Revisited Review Essay: *The Prophets* by Abraham Joshua Heschel

John C. Merkle*

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

***The Prophets*. Abraham Joshua Heschel. New York: Harper and Row, and Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962, 518 pp.; later published in two volumes in the Harper Torchbooks series (Vol. I, 1969; Vol. II, 1971). Page references in this review are from the original 1962 edition.**

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) was one of the most influential Jewish religious scholars and social activists of the twentieth century. As this year marks the 60th anniversary of the publication of his monumental book *The Prophets*, it is appropriate that the editors of *The Journal of Social Encounters* have requested a review of this book for the journal's "Classics Revisited" series.

Born and raised in Warsaw, Poland, Heschel was the descendent of a long line of distinguished Hasidic rabbis. By his mid-teens he already had several short commentaries on rabbinic writings published in a Hebrew-language journal. But longing for a secular education to complement his religious one, at age eighteen he moved to Vilna (now Vilnius), known as "the Jerusalem of Lithuania," where for two years he attended a modern Yiddish-language academy, broadening his education and developing his literary skills. At age twenty-one he moved to Berlin and enrolled at both the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Higher Institute of Jewish Studies), a seminary from which he graduated and was ordained a rabbi in 1934, and at the University of Berlin, from which he earned his doctorate in philosophy in 1935. Heschel's first book, a collection of his poems in Yiddish (his first language), had already been published in 1933, followed by the publication of his biography of the great twelfth-century philosopher Maimonides (1138-1204) in 1935, his doctoral dissertation on prophetic consciousness in 1936, and a biography of biblical scholar and theologian Don Isaac Abravanel (1437-1509) in 1938, each written in German. In 1934 Heschel assumed his first teaching position as an instructor in Talmud at the seminary from which he had just graduated and in 1937 he succeeded the renowned philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) at the Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus (Free Jewish House of Learning) in Frankfurt am Maim, where he taught until deported back to Poland by the Nazis in October 1938. Six months later he received a life-saving invitation to join the faculty of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, Ohio. In July 1939, just six weeks before the Nazi invasion of Poland, Heschel left Warsaw for London, where he spent nearly a year learning English before assuming his new academic post in the United States.

Heschel taught from 1940 to 1945 at Hebrew Union College and in the fall of 1945 joined the faculty at Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) in New York, where he subsequently became professor of Jewish ethics and mysticism and taught until his death in December 1972. In 1946 he married Sylvia Straus, a gifted pianist from Cleveland whom he had met while teaching in Cincinnati. Together with their daughter, Susannah, he and Sylvia made their home on Riverside Drive, several blocks from JTS, and during his time there he became known throughout the United States and beyond, authoring numerous influential books and articles, lecturing throughout the world, becoming a leader in interfaith relations, including in negotiations with the Vatican, and

taking a public and passionate stand on a number of social issues. He often appeared with Martin Luther King Jr., including walking by King's side in the great Selma to Montgomery march of 1965. Hailing Heschel as "one of the truly great men of our day and age" and a "truly great prophet," King explained his admiration by saying: "Rabbi Heschel is one of the persons who is relevant at all times, always standing with prophetic insights to guide us through these difficult days. He has been with us in many of our struggles" ("Conversations," 1968, p. 2).

King, who was known to quote from the prophets of ancient Israel more than from the New Testament, spoke of his great appreciation for Heschel's book *The Prophets*, which greatly expanded the work he had done at the University of Berlin on prophetic consciousness for his doctoral dissertation, published as *Die Prophetie* by The Polish Academy of Sciences in 1936. The introduction to *The Prophets* begins with this sentence: "This book is about some of the most disturbing people who have ever lived: the men whose inspiration brought the Bible into being—the men whose image is our refuge in distress, and whose voice and vision sustain our faith" (p. ix). Heschel goes on to describe the aim of his book as "to attain an understanding of the prophet through an analysis and description of his *consciousness*, to relate what came to pass in his life—facing man, being faced by God—as reflected and affirmed in his mind." And he explains that by consciousness he means "not only the perception of particular moments of inspiration, but also the totality of impressions, thoughts, and feelings which make up the prophet's being" (p. ix). A huge task! An impossible one? What follows is not only a thrilling intellectual adventure but a sustained assault on our conscience. "Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. . . . God is raging in the prophet's words" (p. 5).

The main theme of *The Prophets* is divine pathos, which Heschel calls "a central category in prophetic theology" (p. 222) and by which he means that God is "moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly" (p. 224). And as "God is the source of justice," Heschel claims that "God's pathos is ethical" (p. 225); it includes "God's concern for justice" (p. 219). But this does not mean that divine pathos is concerned with strict justice, for "there is a point at which strict justice is unjust" (p. 215). "The concern for justice is an act of love," but "beyond all justice is God's compassion" (p. 201). In short, "God's pathos is compassion" (p. 315).

"Pathos, concern for the world, is the very ethos of God," writes Heschel. "This ethical sensitivity of God . . . is reflected in the prophets' declarations" (p.219). Although he does not make the argument that where this sensitivity is contradicted in their declarations the prophets are off message as prophets of the God of pathos, Heschel does imply this when saying that God's "own nature" is expressed in "being compassionate" (p. 220), a theme that runs throughout the book. Indeed, in another of his books (1955), Heschel is explicit about this when he points out that there are "a number of passages [in the prophetic writings] which seem to be incompatible with our certainty of the compassion of God" (p. 268). Thus, keeping in mind that "the standards by which those passages are criticized are impressed upon us by the Bible" (p. 268), Heschel asserts that "in the name of God's mercy, we . . . have the right to challenge the harsh statements of the prophets" (p. 269).

The Prophets is a massive work of twenty-eight chapters, with seven chapters each devoted to an individual prophet (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Second Isaiah) and the

others devoted to a host of topics (including history, chastisement, justice, wrath, ecstasy, and prophetic inspiration). In this essay I will focus on the book's main theme, divine pathos, and on prophetic sympathy in response to divine pathos. But first, a statement from Heschel in his introduction to *The Prophets* about what drove him to examine the thought of Israel's ancient prophets for his doctoral dissertation:

In the academic environment in which I spent my student years philosophy had become an isolated, self-subsisting, self-indulgent entity, a *Ding an sich*, encouraging suspicion instead of love of wisdom. . . . I was slowly led to the realization that some of the terms, motivations, and concerns which dominate our thinking may prove destructive to the roots of human responsibility and treasonable to the ultimate ground of human solidarity. . . . The challenge we are all exposed to, and the dreadful shame that shatters our capacity for inner peace, defy the ways and patterns of our thinking. One is forced to admit that some of the causes and motives of our thinking have led our existence astray, that speculative prosperity is no answer to spiritual bankruptcy. It was the realization that the right coins were not available in the common currency that drove me to study the thought of the prophets. . . . In the face of the tragic failure of the modern mind, incapable of preventing its own destruction, it became clear to me that the most important problem of the twentieth century was to find a new set of presuppositions or premises, a different way of thinking. (pp. xiv-xv)

To explicate the "different way of thinking" that Heschel found in the prophets was to become the "major effort" of his life's work as a scholar. In the course of that work, according to Jewish philosopher Fritz Rothschild (1973, p. 211), "Heschel propounded a truly revolutionary doctrine, challenging the whole venerable tradition of Jewish and Christian metaphysical theology." I agree with Rothschild on this, but I want to emphasize that Heschel's work was revolutionary vis-à-vis traditional Western *metaphysical theology* and that he himself believed his theology of pathos was deeply rooted in biblical and other traditional Jewish theological perspectives. He also was convinced that it rendered a more accurate interpretation of the theology implicit in traditional Jewish piety than did the classical metaphysical doctrine of God's impassibility, the idea that God is incapable of suffering.

"The divine pathos embraces all life, past, present, and future," writes Heschel. "It is a concern that has the attribute of eternity, transcending all history, as well as the attribute of universality, embracing all nations, encompassing animals as well as human beings" (p. 277). Nevertheless, the expressions of divine pathos are historical; otherwise they would not signify God's involvement with historical beings. The very fact that we human beings are historical creatures means that God's involvement with us must be historical, entailing a dynamic relationship in which there is call and response on both sides. Heschel interprets the prophets of Israel as suggesting that "God does not stand outside the range of human suffering and sorrow" (p. 224). Human history is to a large extent a record of human misery, and since God cares for us and is involved in our lives, God must be affected by human suffering. "God's participation in human history . . . finds its deepest expression in the fact that God can actually suffer" (p. 259). Thus, according to Heschel, divine pathos indicates not only that God is involved in history but that there is "history in God" (p. 277). This does not mean he thinks of God's nature or essence as changeable but that God's modes of being in relation to the world and its beings do indeed change.

Thus, for Heschel, God is not the Unmoved Mover of classical metaphysical theology, but is, in Fritz Rothschild's apt expression, the Most Moved Mover of biblical consciousness. It is this consciousness of God as dynamic that forms the foundation of Heschel's religious thought in contrast to the "static view of divinity" steeped in ancient Greek philosophical and psychological presuppositions. According to Heschel, "the static view of divinity is the outcome of two strands of thought: the ontological notion of stability and the psychological view of the emotions as disturbances of the soul" (p. 260). Heschel examines both these strands of thought, shows their incompatibility with the biblical understanding of God, and advances the idea of divine pathos as "a more plausible view of ultimate reality" (p. 247).

Concerning the ontological notion of stability, Heschel points to the formidable influence of Parmenides of Elea on later philosophical theology. According to Parmenides, being is immovable and movement is illusory. Although later Greek philosophy recognized the reality of change, as stressed by Heraclitus, it tended to restrict Heraclitus' theory to the world of sense perception. Classical Christian and Jewish metaphysical theology applied Parmenides' concept of unchangeable being to God, affirming a Greek philosophical assumption that change implies an imperfection that is incompatible with divine being. Heschel responds to the ontology of Parmenides' Eleatic school and to the metaphysical theology based on it as follows: "If we think of being as something beyond and detached from beings, we may well arrive at an Eleatic notion. An ontology, however, concerned with being as involved in all beings or as the source of all beings will find it impossible to separate being from action or movement, and thus postulate a dynamic concept of divine Being" (p. 262.)

Regarding the other strand of Greek thought that Heschel cites as a source of the static view of divinity, i.e., "the psychological view of the emotions as disturbances of the soul," he points out that the disparagement of emotion is alien to biblical thinking and that, to the contrary, emotion is seen as indispensable to the life of action: "Great deeds are done by those who are filled with *ruah*, with pathos" (p. 258). Accordingly, the "notion that God . . . possesses not merely intelligence and will, but also pathos, basically defines the prophetic consciousness of God" (p. 224). "The grandeur of God implies the capacity to experience emotion. In the biblical outlook, movements of feeling are no less spiritual than acts of thought" (p. 259). And divine pathos, though an emotional response, is "understood not as an unreasoned emotion, but as an act formed with intention, depending on free will, the result of decision and determination" (p. 224). Acts of passion can be devoid of reasoned purpose but they need not be; "emotion can be reasonable just as reason can be emotional" (p.256). The divine pathos is God's reason and will charged with passion, or it is God's passion informed by reason and will.

Clearly, Heschel believes that the idea of divine pathos is both religiously important and philosophically credible, superior to the idea of an impersonal, disengaged deity. A god unaffected by human concerns and cries, unmoved by the plight of creatures, would be religiously irrelevant to us. And such a god would be both ontologically and psychologically inferior to us since we human beings are able to respond to the concerns and cries of each other and to the plight of other creatures. What in this regard we human beings may do humanly, the God of the biblical prophets does divinely, supremely. Such a God alone is worthy of our worship, worthy to be called God. And this is the case even if the God of the prophets isn't viewed primarily in terms of power but

in terms of pathos or concern. “In the interpretation of religion it is generally assumed that God is, above all, ‘the name for some experience of power.’ . . . Such interpretation, valid as it may be for the understanding of other types of religion, hardly applies to the prophets. Here the reality of the divine is sensed as pathos rather than as power, and the most exalted idea applied to God is not infinite wisdom, infinite power, but infinite concern” (p. 241). In the prophetic vision, “the grandeur and majesty of God do not come to expression in the display of ultimate sovereignty and power, but rather in rendering righteousness and mercy” (p. 214). But God needs human cooperation for this righteousness and mercy to be rendered in the world. Out of “sympathetic solidarity with God” (p. 313) as a result of being “moved by the pathos of God” (p. 314), the prophets of Israel exemplified this human cooperation, not relying on some imagined omnipotence but laboring with God in the divine-human cause of redemption.

In speaking of the pathos of God, as in speaking of anything about God, Heschel is painfully aware of the inadequacy of all words, yet he claims that “it is precisely the challenge involved in using inadequate words that drives the mind beyond all words” (p. 276), and “when taken to be allusions rather than descriptions, understatement rather than adequate accounts” (p.277), some words can be helpful in conveying our understanding of God—no matter how inadequate the words and how deficient the understanding. So, like the prophets of old, Heschel speaks, again and again, about God. In doing so, he makes this important point: “There is a difference between anthropomorphic conceptions and anthropomorphic expressions. The use of the latter does not necessarily prove belief in the former” (p. 271). The Bible, for example, is full of anthropomorphic expressions about God, but “the prophets had to use anthropomorphic language in order to convey [God’s] nonanthropomorphic Being” (p. 276). For instance, the prophetic language about the “selfless pathos” of God “consists of human ingredients and a superhuman Gestalt,” writes Heschel. “Absolute selflessness and mysteriously undeserved love are more akin to the divine than to the human. And if these are characteristics of human nature, then man is endowed with attributes of the divine. God’s unconditional concern for justice is not an anthropomorphism. Rather, man’s concern for justice is a theomorphism. . . . The language the prophets employed to describe that supreme concern was an anthropomorphism to end all anthropomorphisms” (pp. 271-272).

Even though God’s pathos transcends whatever pathos we humans may express, it is precisely because God has pathos for us that we human beings may respond with sympathy for God and for God’s concerns, which Heschel regards as at the heart of prophetic religion. “The fundamental feature of divine reality, present in the prophets’ consciousness, we have described as pathos. Their attitude or response to that reality we have found to be sympathy. For the understanding of prophetic religion, sympathy is as fundamental as pathos is for the understanding of prophetic theology” (p. 307). Just as Heschel presents the God of pathos in contrast to the unmoved or apathetic god of classical metaphysical theology, he claims that “in contrast to the Stoic sage who is a *homo apathetikos*, the prophet may be characterized as a *homo sympathetikos* (p. 308). And while the prophets had an especially heightened sensitivity to God’s pathos, Heschel suggests that others too are able to sense the pathos of God and respond with sympathy akin to that of the prophets. Striving for “communion with the prophets” by thinking “as if we were inside their minds, . . . with their concern and their heart” (p. xiii) can be particularly helpful in this regard. And I cannot think of a better book to serve as a guide to that end than Abraham Joshua Heschel’s classic *The Prophets*.

* Dr. Merkle is Professor of Theology and Director of the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning at the College of St. Benedict/St. John's University.

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