

Were ISRAEL'S PROPHETS UNIQUE AND NOT TO BE PARALLELED IN OTHER COUNTRIES?

It seems likely that to the consciousness of the Hebrew prophets the difference between their own experiences and the experiences of the pagan prophets was as absolute as the difference between the God of Israel and the gods of the pagans.

Both have received an insight into the will of a deity they worship. The man of Mari receives the god's appeal for information; the god feels neglected, he is not kept informed about the king's affairs; in the dream the god inquires whether a certain tribe had come to terms with the king of Mari. The prophet of Mari speaks for the god and for the benefit of the god; the prophets of Israel speak for God, but for the benefit of the people. Both claim to be sent, to be messengers, but there is a radical difference between the consciousness of being sent by the god Dagan and the consciousness of being sent by the Holy One of Israel. The man of Mari is sent because of the god's impotence and dependence upon man for food, information, and prestige. The prophet of Israel is sent because of man's sins and total dependence upon God Who demands righteousness. (Heschel, p. 471-2)

Other ancient religions had their shamans and diviners, their priests and oracles, their wise and inspired men, but what have most shamans and diviners left to posterity? Where else has a revelation come with a claim to be the word and the truth for all men? Or to be the voice of Him Who created heaven and earth? Prophecy in Israel was not an episode in the life of an individual, but an illumination in the history of the people. A chain of experiences that held together events extending over centuries was an unparalleled fact in the history of mankind. . . .

Prophetic incidents, revelatory moments, are believed to have happened to many people in many lands. But a line of prophets, stretching over many centuries, from Abraham to Moses, from Samuel to Nathan, from Elijah to Amos, from Hosea to Isaiah, from Jeremiah to Malachi, is a phenomenon for which there is no analogy. Zoroaster was obviously an inspired man, and so was Balam; but it was a spark lost in the darkness. What followed them was superstition or complete oblivion. There were men elsewhere who were inspired and were able to inspire their fellow men. But where else was there a nation which was able to emulate the prophetic history of Israel? (Heschel, p. 472)

Thus it is not accurate to say that biblical inspiration simply followed a conception already found in many earlier religions, or that its difference from the spells used by shamans to force the spirits to do their hehests, the incantations so common with medicine men, is one of degree rather than of kind.

Neither Lao-Tzu nor Buddha, neither Socrates nor Plotinus, neither Confucius nor Ipu-wer spoke in the name of God or felt themselves as sent **By** Him; and the priests and prophets of pagan religions spoke in the name of a particular spirit, not in the name of the Creator of heaven and earth. . . .

It may be true that almost everywhere some sort of revelation is regarded as the primary source of religious truth. Yet the supernatural means by which such truth is communicated are omens, dreams, divination, inferences from strange happenings, utterances of shamans and priests. The biblical prophet is a type sui generis. (Heschel, p. 473)