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Hebrew Prophecy: Universality and Particularity

non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere

not to laugh, not to lament, not to curse, but to understand

Baruch Spinoza

- I. Introduction
- II. The Past/ Prophecy as History
- II. The Present/ Prophecy as Poetry
- III. The Future/ Prophecy as Ethics
- IV. Conclusions

* The Hebrew prophets = Writing prophets = Classical Prophets = Ezekiel, Isaiah (746-700 bce), and Jeremiah (626-581 bce).

* 12 so-called Minor Prophets

* *Haftorah*, or chanting from the books of Prophets [*Neviim*], is performed weekly in the synagogue, every Sabbath morning, directly after the Torah reading

1) The Bible is more concerned with time than with space. It sees the world in the dimension of time. It pays more attention to generations, to events, than to countries, to things; it is more concerned with history than with geography. To understand the teaching of the Bible, one must accept its premise that time has a meaning for life which is at least equal to that of space; that time has a significance and sovereignty of its own.... Judaism is a *religion of time* aiming at the *sanctification of time*. *A. J. Heschel*

2) Blood fairly drips from the cuneiform inscriptions. The king, in the tone of dry protocol, reports that he covered the walls of conquered cities with human skins. The Israelite literature preserved from the period, above all, the oracles of classical prophecy, express the mad terror caused by these merciless conquerors. As impending gloom beclouded the political horizon, classical prophecy acquired its characteristic form. *Max Weber*

3) When the spirit overcame them, the prophets experienced facial contortions, their breath failed them, and occasionally they fell to the ground unconscious, for a time deprived of vision and speech, writhing in cramps. After one of his visions, for seven days long Ezekiel was paralyzed. The prophets engaged in strange activities thought to be significant as omens. Ezekiel, like a child, built himself out of tile stones and an iron pan a siege play. Jeremiah publicly smashed a

jug, buried a belt and dug the putrid belt up again, he went around with a yoke around his neck, other prophets went around with iron horns, or like Isaiah for a long time, naked. They screamed their prophecies aloud to the world, partly in indistinguishable words, partly in imprecations, threats, and benedictions with saliva running from their mouths, now murmuring or stammering.
Max Weber

4) It is something that prophets meet with, something eventful, current, present in history as in nature.... it is the real basis of the relation between God and man, of the correlation of Creator and creation, of the dialogue between the Holy One of Israel and his people. The characteristic of the prophets is not foreknowledge of the future, but insight into the present *pathos* of God. *A.J. Heschel*

5) The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensively and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains of and the pleasures of the species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination. *P. B. Shelley*

6) Isaiah does not share Plato's belief that the spirit is a possession of man...Neither does Isaiah share Plato's belief that power is man's possession.. Isaiah does not believe that the spiritual man has the vocation to power.. Plato believed that his soul was perfect. Isaiah did not.... Isaiah beheld the throne and majesty of Him who entrusted him with the message. He did not see the just state which Plato beheld in his mind's eye as something recollected. *Martin Buber*

7) ... we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied, until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream... I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. *Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.*

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Note: Electronic links to Bible and Judaica materials (definitions, chronologies, overviews, maps, interpretations, etc.) can be found on the Hum 110Tech webpage (under "Gateways") and on the Religion Department webpage.