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## PROPHETS AND PROPHECY IN TALMUD AND MIDRASH

### II. ISRAEL AND THE PROPHETS

THE Chosen People, unlike the Gentiles, had many prophets, far more indeed than are recorded in the Bible. "Many prophets arose in Israel whose names have not been specified" (Eccles. R. i. 11 §1). Rabbi (Judah Ha-Nasi) and R. Nathan (Palestinian Tanna of the fifth generation and halakic opponent of Ha-Nasi) are even more definite about the immense multitudes of Israelite prophets (Lam. R. ii. 17). Rabbi maintains (*ibid.*) that God sent one prophet each morning and one at twilight; this he deduces must have been the case, on the basis of 2 Kings xvii. 13: "Yet the Lord testified against Israel and against Judah, by all the prophets and by all the seers." R. Nathan asserted however that God sent not one but two prophets in the morning and two in the evening, the basis for this being Jer. vii. 25: "Unto this day I have even sent unto all my servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them." To Nathan's mind "rising up early" must mean every morning, and "sending them" mean every evening. Even more exaggerated statements as to their immense number are to be found elsewhere, e.g. Cant. R. iv. 11 § 1, where R. Derosa and R. Jeremiah said in the name of R. Samuel b. Isaac (Palestinian Amora of the third generation and a pupil of Hiyya II bar Abba) that in the days of Elijah alone, sixty myriads of prophets arose to admonish Israel. This was an understatement to some, for R. Jacob (bar Idi) (third-generation Palestinian Amora) says in the name of R. Johanan that there were one hundred and twenty myriads. This number Johanan arrived at thus. Are there not sixty myriads of towns from Gibeath to Antipatris? None of these were so corrupt as Bethel and Jericho—Jericho because of Joshua's curse, Bethel because of the two golden bulls. Yet in 2 Kings ii. 3 we hear of "the sons of the prophets which were at Jericho" coming out to Elisha. "Prophets" cannot signify less than two, and two times sixty myriads gives the exact number. There were, of course, the same number

of prophetesses, so R. Berekiah (fourth-century Palestinian Amora) in the name of R. Helbo (Cant. R. iv. 11 § 1).

The same argumentation and proof of the immense numbers of the prophets is also found in Ruth R. (Proem § ii), so obviously the exaggeration of their numbers is done with the express purpose of showing that Israel had ample chance to repent.<sup>1</sup> Despite these large numbers, really few persons in relation to the number of people who have walked the earth have been prophets. R. Tanchuma,<sup>2</sup> son of R. Abba, tells us (Num. R. xv. 25) that God said: "In this world only a few individuals have prophesied, but in the world to come all Israel will be made prophets." His proof text is Joel ii. 28, 29. But even so, had these few left their prophecies recorded, they would have filled a library. Why then have we few prophecies recorded? Were their prophecies ever even made public? No, because their prophecies were not required for posterity. We are told by the Rabbis that every prophecy which had a message not only for the prophet's own time, but for posterity, was made public. If their prophecies had no permanent value, no message for posterity, but merely for the prophet's own time, they were not made public (Cant. R. iv. 11 § 1; Ruth R. Proem § ii; *Meg.* 14a). This may be actually what did happen, though not on so large a scale. A very important factor in the preservation of the extent of prophecies, apart from the high ethical teaching realised as always relevant, would be the hope that some day the predictive passages would be ultimately fulfilled. Above in citing our authorities on the numbers of the prophets, we gave quotations which showed how reproof and rebuke formed part of the prophet's function; but so also was prediction. The Rabbis, Tannaim and Amoraim, very definitely believed in the predictive element in prophecy (cf. *Makk.* 24 end).

The unpublished prophecies were not lost for ever; God would in the future come and bring with Him their lost

<sup>1</sup> *Meg.* 14a limits the number of prophets of Israel to forty-eight and seven prophetesses. Regarding the immense numbers given above it is possible that the numbers were exaggerated for another reason than that of showing that Israel had every chance of repentance, namely, to show the fullness of the gift of the Spirit in earlier times. *Sota* 48b tells us of a Bath Kol declaring (strangely enough in Jericho itself) that Hillel was the one man of the assembled scholars there who deserved that the Holy Spirit (= the gift of prophecy) should rest on him but his generation was unworthy of it. Note Johanan, in Cant. R. iv. 11 § 1, points out that there were prophets even in accursed Jericho and idolatrous Bethel, where if the principle stated in *Sota* 48b held, we should have expected none, as deserving none.

<sup>2</sup> Tanchuma, fifth-generation Palestinian Amora, was one of the foremost haggadists of his time; he began a systematic compilation of Haggada and distinguished its literary forms. We have also a few halakic decisions from him in P.T.

prophecies; so Eccles. R. i. 11 § 1; Ruth R. Proem § ii; Cant. R. iv. 11 § 1, all on the basis of Zech. xiv. 5: "And the Lord my God shall come, and all the saints with thee."

Not to all prophets was given the distinction of uttering lengthy prophecies which might form a book of its own. Rabbi Simeon<sup>1</sup> (Lev. R. vi. 6) tells us that Beeri (father of Hosea, see *ibid.*, i. 1) prophesied only two verses (viz. Isa. viii. 19 f.), and as they could not in themselves make up a separate book, they were attached to the prophecies of Isaiah. Modern critics, in studying the structure of the prophetic books, do allow for the incorporation of such small independent oracles. Hosea is regarded as the earliest of the four prophets, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, on the basis of Hosea i. 2, interpreted "as God spake first to Hosea" (so R. Johanan, *Pes.* 87a; *B.B.* 14b). Why then is Hosea's prophecy written along with the latest prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, and why should it not be written separately from the other eleven minor prophets and placed first? The answer is that Hosea's book is so small that it might be lost if copied separately apart from the book of the Twelve.

The fact that some prophets prophesied much while others prophesied little was quite outside their personal control. R. Nehemiah (Palestinian Amora of the first generation, third century A.D.) said that just as no man has power over the wind,<sup>2</sup> so no prophet of Israel has power over the Spirit of God to make God withhold prophetic inspiration (Eccles. R. viii. 4 § 1). Jeremiah's struggle (Jer. xx. 9) to suppress his prophetic gift is cited as a case in point. In Eccles. R. xi. 2 § 1, the clouds (cf. Eccles. xi. 3) full of rain which empty themselves on the earth, are interpreted as referring to the fact that if the prophets are "full" of prophecy, they must prophesy concerning Israel. Aquila the Proselyte, we are also told here, renders Isa. v. 6 ("I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it") as: "I will also command the prophets not to prophesy prophecies for them." To prophesy or not to prophesy is therefore recognised as God's prerogative to decide. The

<sup>1</sup> Cf. also Lev. R. xv. 2. R. Aha expresses this another way on the basis of Job xxviii. 25: "to make the weight for the winds" (spirits). He says that "even the Holy Spirit of Job xxviii. 25 (as interpreted by him), resting on the prophets does so by weight. One prophet speaks one book, another speaks two books". [Is it by contrast with this idea that John iii. 34 says: "He giveth not the Spirit by measure" (ἐκ μέτρον) ? ED.]

<sup>2</sup> Cf. John iii. 8, and especially 2 Pet. i. 21: "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

inevitability of prophecy was realised, and that the prophetic gift was a divine gift.

In Lev. R. x. 2, a somewhat different view about the immediate origin of the prophetic gift is taken. God, when He called Isaiah, told him that all the prophets received the prophetic gift from one another, for was it not said of Moses (Num. xi. 25) that God took of the Spirit that was upon him, and gave it unto the seventy elders? They therefore prophesied. Elijah's spirit was transferred to Elisha (2 Kings ii. 15). But Isaiah received the prophetic gift from God's mouth, for it is said (Isa. lxi. 1): "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek." God told Isaiah, too, that, whereas all prophets prophesied single words of comfort, he should give double words of cheer. This of course is based on the fact that Isaiah frequently repeats the verb in his consolatory utterances, cf. li. 9, 12; lxi. 10, and especially xl. 1: "Comfort ye, comfort ye." While it is the case that Isaiah (i, ii and iii) among the prophets is recognised as the most consoling, one should not risk raising to a general proposition the statement that the Rabbis *in toto* regarded Isaiah as specially favoured with the prophetic gift. It is true indeed, that in Hag. 13b Ezekiel is disparagingly contrasted with Isaiah, Ezekiel being compared to a villager who saw the King, while Isaiah is likened to an urbane townsman looking on majesty. This of course casts no reflection on Ezekiel's<sup>1</sup> prophetic gift, but merely remarks on the different reaction of Ezekiel and Isaiah to the Vision of God. In fact so far from imputing that Ezekiel<sup>2</sup> saw less, it attempts to show that Isaiah saw as much.

We may note here that the prophets were not to be condemned for their anthropomorphism or their bold imagery. Cf. Shoher Tob-Tehillin i. 1, according to which Hezekiah bar Hiyya said: "Happy are they, righteous are the prophets who liken the Creator to the creature, the plant to the planter, as it is said, 'For sun and shield is the Lord God'" (cf. Ps. lxxxiv. 11), and he said (cf. Ezek. xl. 4): "They do not

<sup>1</sup> According to Josephus (*Ant.* x. 5, 1) Ezekiel was the first prophet who wrote and left behind him in writing two books, concerning the fall of Jerusalem and exile in Babylon. In Midrash, there is a story regarding Ezekiel and Daniel and their very different reactions to Nebuchadnezzar's demand for idolatrous worship from the Jews. It would almost appear that Ezekiel as there depicted lacked faith somewhat.

<sup>2</sup> There may be a possible implied criticism of Ezekiel because of the importance given in some quarters to the study of the "Chariot" vision which was plainly studied as early as Ben Sira's time; cf. Sir. xlix. 8.

announce to the ear other than what it is able to hear, and they do not cause the eye to see other than what it is able to see."

What were the qualifications for prophecy in Israel? This has been answered in *Shab.* 92a: "The Shekinah rests only on a wise man, a strong man, a wealthy man and a tall man." *Eccles. R.* i. 1 § 2, however, regards the prophet Amos as a stammerer. R. Johanan in *Ned.* 38a stresses that all the prophets were wealthy. He proves this by citing the cases of Moses, Samuel, Amos and Jonah. Moses must have been wealthy because he could say (*Num.* xvi. 15): "I have not taken one ass from them." The primary meaning is overlooked. Says Johanan, it could not mean that Moses took it without hiring fee. That would be unthinkable. He must have had so many of his own that he did not require theirs. Johanan admits that of course it may have been because he was so poor that he did not require an ass. But if Moses' case is not conclusive, there was the case of Samuel. He could say (*1 Sam.* xii. 3): "Whose ox have I taken? or whose ass have I taken?" It is just as unthinkable as in the case of Moses that Samuel is merely defending himself against taking it for nothing, despite the next clause in the verse cited "or whom have I defrauded?" Samuel must have meant even for payment. Of course it might be objected, Johanan admits, that Samuel was so poor that he did not need an ox or ass. But in *1 Sam.* vii. 17 we are told: "And his return was to Ramah; for there was his house." To Raba (fourth-generation Babylonian Amora, A.D. 299-352)<sup>1</sup> this showed clearly that wherever he went, his house went with him, presumably meaning that his retinue, and household baggage, travelled about with him; only a wealthy man could afford this. Raba thought that the Scripture showed more clearly in Samuel's case even than in Moses' that he was a wealthy man, "for in the case of Moses it is stated, 'I have not taken one ass from them', implying even for a fee: but in the case of Samuel he did not have it even with their consent, for it is written (*1 Sam.* xii. 4): 'And they said, Thou hast not defrauded us, nor oppressed us, neither hast thou taken ought of any man's hand'." Amos too was no exception, for he was wealthy, for so R. Joseph interpreted *Amos* vii. 14, conferring on the poor Tekoan herdsman ownership of flocks and plantations of

<sup>1</sup> A great dialectician, who disputed much with Abaye. His Halakah almost always followed Raba and not Abaye.

sycamore trees. As a final example to prove that all the prophets were wealthy, Jonah is cited. Did he not pay his fare to Tarshish (Jonah i. 3)?—and R. Johanan can tell us that he not only paid his own fare, but hired the complete ship. And R. Romanus can tell us that the cost to Jonah of hiring the ship was 4,000 gold denarii!

The Rabbis noted that different expressions were used to introduce prophetic oracles. Actually they list ten expressions denoting prophecy (cf. Gen. R. xlv. 6 and Cant. R. iii. 4 § 2), viz. prophecy, vision, preaching, speech, saying, command, burden, parable, metaphor and enigma. These different terms must, they feel, point to a different content. Discussion is recorded as to what formula introduced the severest and sternest message. R. Eliezer (Cant. R. iii. 4 § 2)—the R. Leazar of Gen. R. xlv. 6—supports “vision” on the basis of Isa. xxi. 2: “a grievous vision”. R. Johanan maintains that the honour should go to “speech” (or the kindred terms from the root *dbr*). His proof is Gen. xlii. 30: “The man spake roughly to us.” The Rabbis of the Midrash in general favour “burden” as denoting the sternest message, for there is mention in Ps. xxxviii. 4 of a “heavy burden”. While the Rabbis may have read too much into introductory formulas, just as into the proof texts which they furnish for the meaning of the aforesaid formulas, nevertheless it is obvious that prophecy assumed somewhat different forms and modes of expression.

The prophetic function likewise was manifold. The prophet was a seer, and foresaw the future. This is not the only aspect of prophecy known to the Rabbis, but it is to be found most often in Talmud and Midrash. Although R. Johanan in *B.B.* 12b could say that, since the Temple was destroyed, prophecy has been taken away from prophets and given to fools and children, the Amoraim commenting on this do not understand it as a derogatory remark, but give examples of how fools and children did, in specific cases, prophesy and their prophecies came true. The Rabbis did look on the canonical prophets as foretelling the future. It is not my purpose to dwell on this side of prophecy which is the most apparent throughout the Talmud and Midrash. Suffice it to point out what R. Samuel b. Nahman said (Lev. R. xiii. 5): “All the prophets foresaw the empires engaged in their subsequent activities.”<sup>1</sup> Not only

<sup>1</sup> He mentions Abraham, Moses and Jeremiah as well as Daniel.

was the predictive element in the canonical prophets dwelt on by the Amoraim, but by the earlier Tannaim; cf. Akiba's clear attitude in favour of prediction (*Makk.* 24b). He had seen Mic. iii. 12 fulfilled in A.D. 70 because the threatening prophecies of doom had been fulfilled, he now looked to the fulfilment of prophecies of restoration such as Zech. viii. 4. Because of this he could be merry when others were downcast.

The prophet not only gives warning in the individual and national interest, but he is also vouchsafed visions of future happiness of Israel and the repentant. Occasionally scepticism is voiced regarding the promised blessings; cf. Midrash *Hallel*, p. 14 (Traklin edition):

The congregation of Israel say before the Holy One, blessed be He: Lord of the World, good prophecies were prophesied by the early prophets, each one of them, and look, we see none of them. Jeremiah (xxxi. 13) said: "Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, both young men and old together." Hosea said (i. 10): "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea." Joel said (iv. 18): "And it shall come to pass in that day that the mountains shall drop down new wine." Amos said (ix. 13): "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that the plowman shall overtake the reaper." Isaiah said (ii. 2): "The mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains." And I said (Zech. viii. 4) "There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem." And testimonies we see not even one of them. Therefore Asaph ben Karah says (Ps. lxxiv. 9): "We see not our signs: there is no more any prophet: neither, is there among us any that knoweth how long." And the spirit of the Holy One returned to them and said to them: When I revealed Myself to Abraham, your father, I said to him, "And they shall afflict them [i.e. Israel in Egypt] four hundred years" (Gen. xv. 13). I did not say to him that I would send down the manna to them. And lo! things which I promised not, I gave them, things [lit. words] which I have promised, how very much more [shall they be done].

Even the prophetic descriptions of their visions of a happy hereafter are but a very poor approximation to actual fact for they saw as one peeps through a crack in the door (Midrash *Hallel*).<sup>1</sup>

Seeing visions, however, is not the only function of a prophet. In fact in *Meg.* 3a it is stated that to see visions does not mean one is a prophet. The text (Dan. x. 7), "And I Daniel alone saw the vision: for the men that were with me saw not the vision", is made the basis of this statement, for R. Jeremiah or R. Hiyya b. Abba<sup>2</sup> can tell us that "the men" were Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. Though Daniel was superior to them in seeing the vision, they were superior to him in being prophets,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Cor. xiii. 9, 12.

<sup>2</sup> Third-generation Palestinian Amora, pupil of Johanan.



for he was not a prophet in that he did not admonish or exhort the people.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere Daniel is considered a prophet.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, too, vision is an integral part of prophecy; cf. Lam. R. Proem § xxiv. where R. Johanan, speaking of "the burden of the Valley of Vision" (Isa. xxii. 1), says it is a valley from which all the seers originated. Any prophet whose place of origin is not specified was born in Jerusalem—the Valley of Vision. Lam. R. ii. 18 tells us that the prophets place veils upon their faces for Israel's sake, pretending not to see their nation's sins so as not to need reprove them. This is not said in any tone of censure of their lenience, though elsewhere in Lam. R. ii. 18 the prophets are condemned for having prophesied to Israel vain and delusive visions. However the general complaint against and condemnation of the prophets, from the standpoint of the Rabbis in Talmud and Midrash, is that the prophets were too severe in their moral judgments and not loyal enough to Israel. In short, prophetic ethical standards were above being swayed by patriotism. That this was indeed the case can be seen from a plain reading of, say, Isaiah, Hosea, or Jeremiah; the Rabbis recognised this, and found it distasteful. Again it is universalism versus nationalism. Sometimes the Rabbis can hardly believe that prophetic condemnation is divine revelation. Eccles. R. i. 1 § 2 says: "There were three prophets to whom, because it consisted of words of reproach, their prophecy was attributed personally," viz: "The words of Koheleth," "The words of Amos" (Amos i. 1) and "The Words of Jeremiah" (Jer. i. 1). Actually even if we were to take this literally it would not be so surprising as what is said of Moses (Cant. R. i. 6 § 1): "No one rejoiced more in my sons than Moses, yet because he said, 'Hear now, ye rebels' (Num. xx. 10), it was decreed that he should not enter the promised land." On "Look not upon me that I am swarthy" (Cant. i. 6), R. Simon opened with the text: "Accuse not a servant unto his Master" (Prov. xxx. 10). Israel are called servants (cf. Lev. xxv. 55). This condemnation of Moses is developed much more fully in Midrash *Petirath Mosheh Rabbenu*. Before citing its condemnation of Moses we must point out that fully to appreciate such criticism as its of Moses (or for that matter in Cant. R. i. 6), we must remember that the canonicity of the Torah is, and was, much

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Josephus (*Ant.* viii. 15, 6).

<sup>2</sup> Josephus (*Ant.* x. 11, 7) accounts Daniel as one of the greatest of the prophets, because of the esteem in which he was held in his lifetime as well as afterwards.

higher than that of the Prophets (cf. T.B., *B.B.* 15a). Said R. Simeon: "Can (we imagine the) scroll of the Law being short of one word?" In *Petirath Mosheh Rabbenu*, Moses, in protesting to God that he ought not to die, says, "Reveal to me one iniquity which Thou dost not forgive me".

The Holy One (Blessed be He) said to him: "Moses, six iniquities are in My hand which I have not revealed to thee at all. Firstly thou saidest to Me 'Send, by the hand of him whom Thou wilt send' (Exod. iv. 13). Secondly, 'For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Thy Name, he hath done evil to this people' (Exod. v. 23). Thirdly, 'The Lord hath not sent me' (Num. xvi. 29). Fourthly, 'And if the Lord make a new thing' (Num. xvi. 30). Fifthly, 'Hear now, ye rebels' (Num. xx. 10). Sixthly, 'And behold, ye are risen up in your fathers' stead, an increase of sinful people, to augment yet the fierce anger of the Lord toward Israel' (Num. xxxii. 14). And were then Abraham, Isaac and Jacob sinners that thou hast spoken thus to their children?" He [Moses] said before Him: "Lord of the World, from Thee I learnt what Thou saidest." He [God] said: "As for me, do I not remember their fathers?" He said, "Lord of the World, how often has Israel sinned before Thee and pleaded for mercy and prayed for them before Thee, and Thou sparedst them, yet me Thou sparest not?" He said, "The decree against a community is not similar to the decree against an individual".<sup>1</sup>

Moses had to condemn and yet be condemned for condemning. This dilemma is not apparent in the Bible, in fact it does not exist there, but it is the creation of the nationalism of the Rabbis superimposed on their reverence for the inspiration of the letter of the Law. That they were aware of the dilemma is seen in the answer Moses gives to God: "From Thee I learnt it."

Elsewhere God is depicted as the accuser of Israel, and it is freely admitted that it is thanks to Moses' eloquent pleading of their merits that God's anger was averted; cf. Exod. R. xlii. 11 and Deut. R. ii. 4. In Exod. R. xlii. 11 R. Johanan comments on the sinister significance of the word *dibbur* in the verse, and tells us it was then that Moses saw the angels ready to destroy all Israel. He realised that if he left Israel to their fate and descended they would never survive. He determined not to move from the mountain till he besought mercy for them. He pled for them, saying to God: "I have some things to say in their favour, O Lord of the Universe." He asks God to remember to their credit that the sons of Esau refused the Torah when God sought to give it to them, but Israel accepted immediately. God pointed out, however, that Israel quickly went astray and had made the molten calf. Moses undaunted urged that when he went as bearer of God's message to Egypt

<sup>1</sup> *Midrashim Qetanim* (ed. Rabnitzki and Bialik), vol. i, p. 101.

the Israelites on hearing God's name immediately believed and bowed their heads and worshipped. God retorted that they had now desecrated their worship. Moses asked God to remember the young men who had sacrificed before Him. God pointed out that they had desecrated their sacrifices by sacrificing to a calf. Moses pled once again asking God to remember what He had said: "I am the Lord thy God." God replied that they had broken their covenant by saying: "This (calf) is thy God, O Israel, which brought thee up out of Egypt" (Exod. xxxii. 8). "This," says the Midrash, "is an illustration of 'clouds and wind, but no rain'" (Prov. xxv. 15). Yet Moses was successful in averting the punishment, a proof that "by long forbearing is a prince persuaded, and a soft tongue breaketh the bone" (Prov. xxv. 15).

Deut. R. ii. 4 also stresses Moses' pleading with God for Israel: "And I besought the Lord." The Midrash comments that this bears out what Scripture says: "The poor useth entreaties; but the rich answereth harshly" (Prov. xviii. 23). According to R. Tanchuma, "the poor useth entreaties" refers to Moses, who approached his Creator with entreaties. "But the rich answereth harshly" refers to the richest Being in the World, God, who answered him harshly: "speak no more unto Me" (Deut. iii. 26). R. Johanan had another explanation which is worth quoting as reflecting this important Amora's ideas of the contrast between the prophets of Israel and those of the nations. "The poor useth entreaties," he held, refers to the prophets of Israel; "but the rich answereth impudently" refers to the prophets of the other nations. R. Johanan in fact says that while there was no more righteous man among the Gentiles than Job, yet he addressed God with reproaches, viz.: "I would order my cause before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments" (Job xxiii. 4); but the greatest prophets of Israel, Moses and Isaiah, approached God with supplications. Isaiah said: "O Lord, be gracious unto us; we have waited for Thee" (Isa. xxxiii. 2); and Moses said: "And I besought the Lord" (Exod. xxxii. 11).

Before passing to a discussion of the faults of even Isaiah in slandering a servant (Israel) before his Master, we ought to mention Elijah (may his name be for a blessing) who, according to the rather representative Amora R. Johanan, was regarded as guilty of just this very fault. We are told in Cant. R. i. 6,

presumably on the evidence of R. Samuel, that when Elijah said: "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant" (1 Kings xix. 14), God said to Elijah: "Is it My covenant or thy covenant?" Elijah, doubtless taken aback at this, said: "They have thrown down Thine altars." God again asked: "Are they My altars or thy altars?" Elijah persisted: "And slain Thy prophets with the sword." God retorted: "They are My prophets: what concern is it of thine?" Elijah then said: "And I, even I only am left, and they seek my life to take it away." God in reply commanded him to look: "And he looked, and, behold, there was at his head a cake baked on the hot stones" —*rezaphim* (1 Kings xix. 6). God's tender consideration for the overtried Elijah is turned by the Midrash into a symbolical act conveying a scarcely-veiled reproof. What is meant by *rezaphim*? R. Samuel b. Nahman (third-generation Palestinian Amora, eminent Haggadic pupil of Jonathan ben Eleazar) said: "*Ruz peh* (break the mouth): break the mouth of all who calumniate My sons." R. Johanan, an Amora who did much to formulate orthodoxy of interpretations, derived the same lesson from "The burden of Damascus. Behold, Damascus . . . the cities of Aroer are forsaken" (Isa. xvii. 1, 2). Since the prophet is speaking of Damascus why does he mention Aroer which is in the territory of Moab? Johanan tells us that there were three hundred and sixty-five heathen temples in Damascus corresponding to the days of the year and one day was assigned for the worship of each idol, and also one day on which all were worshipped together. Israel however made them all into a single body and worshipped them. Plain proof not only of that, but of the prophet's mention of a city of Moab, is in Judges x. 6: "And the children of Israel again did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baalim, etc., and the Ashtaroth, and the gods of Aram, and the gods of Zidon and the gods of Moab." And, says Johanan, "when Elijah spoke evil of Israel God said to him, 'While you are accusing these, come and accuse these others'," as it says, "Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus" (1 Kings xix. 15). This is in accord with Num. R. ix. 18. The neighbours of the Land of Israel were the first to begin sinning, for it says: "Thus saith the Lord: As for all Mine evil neighbours" (Jer. xii. 14); they therefore were the first to be punished as

it says, "Behold, I will pluck them up from off their land" (*ibid.*).

The Midrash Cant. R. appends an interesting note to the effect that R. Abbahu (third-generation Palestinian Amora, pupil of Johanan, also of Jose ben Hanina, and disputed with Christians), and Resh Lakish (second-generation Palestinian Amora) were once on the point of entering the city of Caesarea when R. Abbahu said to Resh Lakish, "Why should we go into a city of cursing and blaspheming?" Resh Lakish got down from his ass and scraped up some sand and put it in R. Abbahu's mouth. He said to him: "Why do you do this?" He replied: "God is not pleased with one who caluminates Israel." It is quite likely that with national disasters and ever weightier oppression by the Romans national feeling was exacerbated and about this time, if indeed not earlier, the strictures of the prophets against Israel became to be regarded by some at least as almost treasonable. Then it was surely that the Community of Israel (and not God) said to the prophets: "Look not upon me because of my swarthisness" (Cant. i. 6).

Isaiah, as we have seen above, pled with God on behalf of Israel; cf. Deut. R. ii. 4. While admitting that no one rejoiced more in My (God's) sons than Isaiah, yet Cant. R. i. 6 shows that he undid it all by saying, when God wished to commission him: "And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa. vi. 5). God in reproof said to him: "Isaiah, of thyself thou art at liberty to say, 'Because I am a man of unclean lips'. This can pass, but mayest thou say, 'And in the midst of a people of unclean lips I dwell'?" The Midrash obviously thought not, for is it not written: "Then flew unto me one of the seraphim with a glowing stone (*rizpah*) in his hand" (verse 6)? R. Samuel, as in the case of Elijah's *rezaphim*, tells us that "the word *rizpah* means *ruz peh* (break the mouth), i.e. of him who has caluminated My (God's) Sons" (cf. *Mart. Isa.* ii. 7, 8, 9).

In T.B. *Yeb.* 49b we have the story of the manner of Isaiah's death supposed to be derived from a roll of genealogical records (Yuhassin) found in Jerusalem and given on Raba's authority: Manasseh put Isaiah on trial and said to him: "Your teacher Moses said, 'For men shall not see Me and live' (Exod. xxxiii. 20), and you said, 'I saw the Lord sitting on a throne high and lifted up'" (Isa. vi. 1). (Actually,

as the Gemara a little further on tells us, all the prophets, Isaiah included, looked merely through a glass darkly—according to Rashi they only imagined they saw God—but Moses looked through a clear glass and knew God could not be seen.) Manasseh continued: “Your teacher Moses said, ‘For what nation is there, has God so near them as the Lord our God is whenever we call on Him?’ (Deut. iv. 7)—implying that God is at hand always—and you said: ‘Seek ye the Lord while He may be found’ (Isa. lv. 6)—implying not always. Your teacher Moses said, ‘The number of thy days I will fulfil’ (Exod. xxiii. 26); but you said, ‘And I will add unto thy days fifteen years’” (2 Kings xx. 6). Isaiah realised that whatever he said in reply would be unacceptable to Manasseh and would merely make him determine to murder him. So Isaiah pronounced the Sacred Name and was swallowed up by a cedar. The cedar, however, was brought to Manasseh who had it sawn asunder. When the saw reached Isaiah’s mouth Isaiah died, this being his punishment for having said “And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isa. vi. 5). Not all took this unfavourable view of Isaiah (compare, e.g., the story in Lev. R. x. 2). But it is to be noted that R. Azariah (Palestinian Amora of fifth generation) speaking in the name of R. Judah b. Simeon (fourth-generation Palestinian Amora) would have agreed that some such punishment be meted out to Isaiah had he slandered Israel to God: only he believed Isaiah not to be guilty of that. According to R. Azariah, Isaiah said:

I was at leisure in my house of study (*sic*), and I heard the voice of the Holy One, Blessed be He, saying: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? (Isa. vi. 8.) I have sent Micah, and they smote him on the cheek—as it is written (Mic. v. 1): ‘They shall smite the judge of Israel with a rod upon the cheek’ (Pesik. R. ch. xxxiii, ed. Friedmann, p. 150 b). I sent Amos, and they called him ‘stammerer’. [As R. Phinehas b. Hama (fifth-generation Amora, pupil of Jeremiah) has said: “Why was he called Amos?—because he was heavy (*amus*) of tongue.”] Now, whom shall I send, and who will go for us? ” Then I said: “Here am I: send me.” Said the Holy One, Blessed be He: “Isaiah, My children are troublesome, they are stubborn. If thou takest it upon thyself to be degraded and to be beaten by My children, thou art fit to go on My mission, if not, thou art not fit to go on My mission.” Isaiah replied: “(I am willing to go) on these conditions, I gave my back to the smiters and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair (I. 6). Am I not then fit to go on a mission to Thy children?” Then said the Holy One, Blessed be He: “Isaiah, thou hast loved righteousness (meaning, thou hast loved to make My children righteous), and thou hast hated wickedness (meaning, thou hast hated condemning them as wicked). Therefore God, thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.”

God in this view is like a parent very conscious of his children's faults, but loth to punish them; a parent too who does not like his children's faults pointed out, for then, as we shall see from the rabbinic story of Hosea, he is forced to punish them. The Rabbis seem to have believed in the potency of the prophetic word, which when once uttered, must, if the prophet were a true prophet, come to pass. In fact it would almost appear that prophetic condemnation actually forced God, however loth He might be to do so, to decree decrees against Israel. This is all the more interesting when one bears in mind what has been said above regarding the immediate Divine source of prophecy. Here we have a paradox which we must not elevate to a dogma, but note as existing in the Rabbis' minds. The paradox did not exist in the minds of the prophets, but probably did in that of their immediate hearers. The Rabbis waver between two standpoints: (1) God condemns even the sin of Israel and (2) the prophets themselves condemn. Yet this latter standpoint is inconsistent because prophets can only prophesy by God's will. Inconsistent it may be, but swayed emotionally by their nationalism they feel God could not wish it; the prophet is the cause of it. In *Hagigah* 14a R. Dimi (of Nehardea, fifth-generation Babylonian Amora, head of Pumbeditha, A.D. 385-8) says: "Eighteen curses did Isaiah pronounce upon Israel, yet he was not pacified until he pronounced upon them this verse" (Isa. iii. 5). The eighteen curses referred to, we are told, are to be found in Isaiah iii. 1-4, yet they are the words of God as part of the sacred canon.

In *Pes.* 87a Hosea is made the scapegoat of God and man. There is no attempt made to deny the greatness of Hosea: "Four prophets prophesied in one age and the greatest of all of them was Hosea", asserts R. Johanan; oddly enough, his proof-text is Hos. i. 2a.

More interesting is what R. Johanan conceived as what God said to Hosea: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Hosea: 'Thy children have sinned', to which he should have replied: 'They are Thy children, they are the children of Thy favoured ones, they are the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; extend Thy mercy to them.' Hosea did not do that, however: not enough that he did not say thus, but he said to Him: 'Sovereign of the Universe, the whole world is Thine; exchange them for a different nation'." (Where authority for

that is to be found in the written prophecies of Hosea is hard to see.) "The Holy One, Blessed be He, was exasperated and said: 'What shall I do with this old man?'" Assuming Hosea suggested the easy way out of exchanging Israel for a different nation, it is hard to see consistency in the rabbinic account of God's converse with Hosea. After all, God's opening remarks, "Thy children have sinned", might be interpreted as tantamount to repudiation of Israel on God's part. Is it that the Rabbis thought of God as drawing Hosea on to defend Israel, or if He did not, He at least had passed on the responsibility for their rejection to the prophet? What is striking is the underlying belief in the mediatory function of the prophet, who shares the secret council of the Most High. God determines to teach Hosea a lesson for his presumption. This is not so much, as in the Book of Hosea, a type of God's relations with Israel as a punishment of the prophet. God says in the Talmud: "I will order him, 'Go and marry a harlot and beget thee children of harlotry', and when I will order him, 'Send her away from thy presence', if he will be able to send (her) away so will I send Israel away." Here too God's act is determined by the prophet's reaction. We may omit the various rabbinic interpretations of the name Gomer the daughter of Diblaim, all designed to bring out her ill-fame. "After two sons and one daughter were born to him, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Hosea: 'Shouldst thou have not learned from thy teacher Moses, for as soon as I spoke with him he parted from his wife; so do thou too part from her'." Presumably God is genuinely commanding the separation by His reference to Moses' conduct and not merely trying Hosea. "Sovereign of the Universe," pleaded Hosea, "I have children by her and I can neither expel her nor divorce her." Said the Holy One, Blessed be He, to him: "Then if thou whose wife is a harlot and thy children are the children of harlotry and thou knowest not whether they are thine or they belong to others, yet thou hast smitten Israel who are My children and the children of My tried ones, the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, one of the four possessions which I have acquired in this world—the Torah is one possession, Heaven and earth is one possession (cf. 2 Bar. lxxxv. 3), the Temple is one possession, Israel one possession—yet thou sayest, 'Exchange them for a different people!'" Something of the original authentic note of Hosea



is here, the unwillingness of God to give up sinful Israel, but the high ethical note of the book of Hosea is not in evidence. There, unwilling as God is to give up Israel, He sees and is ready to allow the possibility of her death rather than her continued dishonour. Israel must be worthy of His love. But here Hosea takes the blame on himself: "As soon as he perceived that he had sinned he arose to supplicate mercy for himself." But God has to prompt him to fulfil his mediatory office. "Instead of supplicating mercy for thyself, supplicate mercy for Israel. Against them I have decreed three decrees because of thee." The three decrees were Jezreel (symbolising evil), Loammi ("not my people"), Lo-Ruhamah ("no mercy"). Here plainly the prophet is conceived as the cause of the trouble. It is allowed that Israel's sin had caused God to say: "Thy children have sinned." So Israel had actually sinned. This is almost lost sight of: one has the impression that Hosea was to blame in failing to mediate. The decrees were not passed, despite the sinfulness of Israel, until Hosea condemned them. There may be profound truth in this pointing to the cross of the prophet, and the prophet as the suffering servant. T.B. *Sanh.* 39a actually tells us: "God chastised Ezekiel in order to wipe away the sins of Israel." It is at the risk of apparent inconsistency on the part of God. Clear however is the potency of the prophetic word: "Thereupon Hosea arose and begged for mercy and He annulled the decrees. Then He began to bless them, as it is said" (in Hos. xiv. 4 ff.). The prophet's word could even, as we shall see, annul directly decrees of the Law. But before dealing with this, we must study the relation conceived by the Rabbis as existing between Torah and prophecy.

*(To be concluded.)*

JOHN BOWMAN.

*University of Leeds.*