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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## PROPHETS AND PROPHECY IN TALMUD AND MIDRASH

### I. ISRAELITE AND GENTILE PROPHETS

THERE is no one definite or standardised theory about prophecy in Talmud and Midrash; for such we have to wait till a much later period when, influenced by Muslim achievements in erecting systematic theologies, men like Saadia, Judah ha-Levi, and especially Maimonides, set out a reasoned statement of prophecy, its function and aims.

Statements regarding the prophets and their teaching are mainly to be found in the Haggadic portions of the Gemaras, and in the Haggadic Midrashim. *Ze'era* (in P.T. *Maas.* 3.51a) tells us that the Haggada "may be turned hither and thither and we learn nothing for practice therefrom". Samuel ha-Nagid (A.D. 993-1055) in his *Mebo ha-Talmud* (usually printed at end of Tractate *Berakoth*) in effect endorses this view.

And the Haggada is every explanation which occurs in the Talmud on any subject which is not a *Miçwah*. This is Haggada; and you are not to learn from it (anything) except that which occurs to the mind (comes up on the mind). But you are to know all which is established. This is to say Halakah on (any) subject is a *Miçwah* which is from the mouth of Moses our Master (on him be peace), which he received from the mouth of Power. You are not to add to it, nor to take away from it; but (as for) what they have explained in sections, every one according to what came to hand to him and what seemed good in his opinion and according to what comes up on the mind of the Commentators, some may learn them, and others put no reliance on them.

It is not surprising, then, if we find in our sources divergent views as to the function of the prophet and the purpose of prophecy.<sup>1</sup> We have no right to attempt to build a systematic theology out of Haggada. We can, however, note certain broad trends and attitudes to prophecy as seen in our sources. Broadly speaking, two attitudes are apparent, a universalistic as against a nationalistic or particularistic; further, there is an ethical as against a strictly legalistic interpretation of prophecy parallel in a great measure to the two above-mentioned attitudes. Prophecy itself appears to have been held to have two main functions, viz.: foretelling and rebuke.

It is on all hands generally allowed by the Talmudic sources

<sup>1</sup> Against this view of prophecy and presumably Haggada as well, cf. 2 Pet. i. 20: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation."

that there were prophets among the heathen as well as in Israel. According to *Baba Bathra* 15b seven prophets prophesied to the heathen, viz.: Balaam and his father, Job, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, Zophar the Naamathite, and Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite. Not all are agreed that Job was a non-Israelite; so, too, in the case of Elihu. It is apparent from *B.B.* 15b that Job's piety is reckoned in direct proportion to his being regarded as an Israelite or not. There are several parallel passages which show that the Rabbis held that, prior to the erection of the Tabernacle, prophecy existed among non-Jews. Cf. Cant. R. ii. 3 §5. R. Isaac (Tanna, fourth Generation) said :<sup>1</sup> "Before the tent of meeting was set up, prophecy was found among the other nations, but after the tent of meeting was set up, prophecy ceased from them." There is an obvious objection that Balaam prophesied after this; but the Midrash counters this by saying that he prophesied for the good of Israel, not of his own nation. *B.B.* 15b, however, tells us that it was after the death of Moses that the Divine Presence could not rest upon a heathen, because Moses prayed that the Divine Presence should not rest on heathens, and God granted his request; the Scripture proof of this being Exod. xxxiii. 16: "So shall we be separated, I and Thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth." (In Exod. xxxiii. Moses, however, is not asking the withdrawal of the Divine Presence—or gift of prophecy—from the heathen, but that God will go with Israel as a proof that Israel's idolatry has been forgiven.)<sup>2</sup>

The question is asked in connection with Job (regarded, in this case, as an Israelite), *B.B.* 15b: "But did not all the prophets (of Israel) prophesy to the heathen?" The answer given, though strongly qualified, shows that the Amoraim were aware at least to some extent of the universalism of the Prophets: "Their prophecies were addressed primarily to Israel, but these (Job, Elihu, etc.) addressed themselves primarily to the heathen." Even though all the Rabbis regarded Israel as specially chosen by God, there were not wanting those who at the same time felt that it would be irreconcilable with the justice of God, all whose ways are justice, if he poured forth His gifts on Israel and never gave the heathen world such benefits of their own. That the

<sup>1</sup> This Midrash may show how later Rabbis considered prophecy even in Israel after Sinai inextricably linked up with Tabernacle or Temple services.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, Exod. xxxiii. 16 may assume that God's presence is not with the heathen nations; but, and this is the point at issue, it is not a request for this withdrawal from them.

Talmudic Rabbis were aware of this problem, says much for their concern to justify the ways of God to man.<sup>1</sup> Num. R. (Balak) xx. 1 tells us:

The Holy One, blessed be He, did not afford the idolaters an opportunity of saying in the time to come, "It is Thou that has estranged us". What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? In the same way as He raised up Kings, Sages, and Prophets for Israel, so He raised them up for the idolaters.

If He gave Israel a Solomon, He gave Nebuchadnezzar to the heathen. They had equal power. But the heathen Nebuchadnezzar misused it and destroyed the Temple which the pious Solomon built. Instead of uttering songs and supplications like Solomon, Nebuchadnezzar blasphemed God. And so on. You find that all the distinctions conferred upon Israel were conferred upon the nations. In like manner He raised up Moses for Israel and Balaam<sup>2</sup> for the idolaters. The prophets of Israel caution Israel against transgression. The prophet Balaam who rose from among the nations, however, made a breach in the moral order so as to destroy men from the world.<sup>3</sup> Israel's prophets were compassionately concerned, not only for Israel, but for the idolaters; Jeremiah's concern for Moab, Ezekiel's lament for Tyre, are adduced. Balaam, on the other hand, sought to destroy innocent Israel. It was, in fact, because of Balaam's conduct (contrast with the explanation given above for the withdrawal of prophecy at the request of Moses) and Balaam's misuse of prophecy that the gift of prophecy or the Holy Spirit was taken from the nations.

This theodicy was obviously not convincing to everyone. Some Rabbis knew that some might say: "Oh, but had the nations a fair chance? Even though they had a prophet Balaam, he was not to be compared with the prophets of Israel!" So to forestall or to answer such criticism by others, or maybe to convince themselves, Balaam is magnified till he can be compared with even Moses, a delicate business. The uniqueness of Moses<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> If we think their defence somewhat too complacent in not allowing for other heathen recipients of God's truth, one must admit they share this with other revealed religions.

<sup>2</sup> Balaam, early on, seems to have featured as the type of Gentile prophet *par excellence*; cf. Pirke Aboth v. 19, where we have a comparison of the disciples of Balaam the wicked with those of Abraham our father.

<sup>3</sup> John iii. 19: "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." As to Balaam, cf. 2 Pet. ii. 15: "Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam, the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness."

<sup>4</sup> The only Israelite prophet contrasted with Moses is David, though not in his role of a prophet but King; cf. Midrash, *Shoher Tob Tehillin* i. 1: "Who is the most renowned among the Prophets and who the most renowned among the Kings? The most renowned among the Prophets—this is Moses: the most renowned among the Kings—this is David.

must be safeguarded, but the disparity in prophetic gifts to Israel and the nations must not be too glaring.

It was taught (Num. R. xiv. 20): "And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses" (Deut. xxxiv. 10): "In Israel there had not arisen one like him," but there had arisen one like him among the nations of the world. This was in order that the nations of the world might have no excuse for saying, "Had we possessed a prophet like Moses we should have worshipped the Holy One, blessed be He."

Balaam is a heathen Moses. But in three things Balaam was inferior to Moses. When God spoke to Moses, Moses stood on his feet (on the basis of Deut. v. 31), whereas God only spoke to Balaam when Balaam lay flat on the ground (generalising from the incident in Num. xxiv. 4). Secondly, God spoke to Moses mouth to mouth (Num. xii. 8), but not so with Balaam, for Num. xxiv. 4 speaks of him merely hearing the words of God, which the Midrash takes as teaching that God did not speak to Balaam mouth to mouth. Thirdly, God spoke to Moses face to face. (Exod. xxxiii. 11), but generalising from Num. xxiii. 7 ("And he took up his parable") the Midrash tells us that God spoke to Balaam only in parables.

If this were all, Balaam would certainly not be on a plane with Moses. But the Midrash balances that by informing us that in three things Balaam (or rather his prophecy) actually had an advantage over Moses. This is all the more amazing when we recollect that in *Nedarim* 38a it is stated that of the fifty gates of understanding created in the world, all but one were given to Moses. There, too, Ps. viii. 5 ("For Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels") is applied specifically to Moses. However, our Midrash in giving Balaam the advantage over Moses in three things presumably does so to show that, despite Balaam's special opportunities, he misused his gifts. Firstly, while Moses did not know who was speaking with him, Balaam actually did (this on the basis of Num. xxiv. 4). Secondly, Moses did not know when God would speak to him, but Balaam did (this on the basis of Num. xxiv. 16). Balaam in these points was like, so the Midrash adds possibly as a safeguard, a king's cook (not a friend, or a guest) who knows what meat will be on the royal table, and how much the king spends on it. This is surely an inferior sort of knowledge. Thirdly, Balaam could speak with

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Thou wilt find that all that Moses did David did." Then it proceeds to elaborate on this in detail. Cf., however, *Ass. Mos.* xi. 16: Moses—God's chief prophet throughout the earth.

God whenever he wished. This statement also is derived from generalising from Num. xxiv. 16 ("falling into a trance, but having his eyes open"); so all Balaam need do, according to the Midrash, at any time to speak with God was to fall prostrate on his face. Even Moses, says the Midrash, could not speak with God whenever he wished. This was too much for R. Simeon, who maintained that Moses could do so whenever he pleased, for we read of Moses going into the Tabernacle and immediately afterwards the Voice speaking to him (Num. vii. 89).

We do not claim that this Midrash contrasting Moses and Balaam is typical. Simeon's dissent on at least one point is noteworthy, but that the Midrash actually survives does show that it found some agreement. That it ever was composed at all shows concern, if not concern for the heathen, at least concern for the vindication of the justice of God.

Even so, from the above Midrash it is probably a fair deduction that the author does not regard the teaching or knowledge of God received by Balaam as comparable with that received by Moses<sup>1</sup> (cf. the parable of the king's cook cited above). The message, and not the mechanics of prophecy, surely is more important. The precedence of Moses, the great lawgiver and ethical teacher, was really assured in any comparison with Balaam. We have several cases in the Talmud and Midrash where the message of the Israelite prophet and the heathen prophet is contrasted. In this naturally the particularism of the Revelation is necessarily more apparent. Midrash Gen. R. (*Wayera*) lii. 5 contrasts not only the method of divine communication with the prophets of Israel and those of other nations but the content of the prophecies communicated. R. Hama ben R. Hanina (second-generation Palestinian Amora) states that the difference between the prophets of Israel and those of other nations is that God reveals himself to Gentile prophets in half-

<sup>1</sup> Actually, however, if we are to believe *Shoher Tob Tehillin* xc. 1 as to how God speaks even to Israelite prophets, Balaam was not really much worse off than they. "Rabbi Eleazar said in the name of Jose ben Dimra, 'All the prophets prophesied and they did not know what they were prophesying except Moses and Isaiah only. Moses said (Deut. xxxii. 2): *My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew*, etc. Isaiah said: *Behold I and the children which the Lord gave unto me*.' Rabbi Joshua the priest said, 'Even Elihu prophesied and did not know, as it is said (Job xxxiii. 3): *And my lips shall utter knowledge clearly*.' R. Eleazar said in the name of R. Jose: 'Even Samuel, the lord of the prophets, prophesied and did not know what he was saying (1 Sam. xii. 11): *And the Lord sent Jerubbaal, and Bedan, and Jephthah, and Samuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side*, etc. *And Samuel* is mentioned only because he did not know what he was prophesying.'" Even so, a prophet might not know what he was saying, but his prophecy reveals more of the Will of God than one who knew only as much as a king's cook.

speech only, but to the prophets of Israel "He speaks with complete speech in terms of love and sanctity, with language in which the Ministering Angels praise Him". But having said this regarding the comparative content, the Midrash somewhat characteristically allows itself to expatiate on the difference of God's method of communicating with Israelite and heathen prophets. R. Jose (fourth-generation Palestinian Amora, fourth century A.D.) applies Prov. xv. 29, "The Lord is far from the wicked", to the prophets of other nations; "But He heareth the prayer of the righteous" (*ibid.*)—namely, the prophets of Israel. Stress is laid on the almost surreptitious nature of God's communicating with Gentile prophets. R. Jose ben Bibah (also Gen. R. lii. 5) maintained that God appeared to the Gentiles only at night and in visions of the night. R. Leazar ben Menahem held that God appeared to the Gentiles only like one who comes from a far country (based on Isa. xxxix. 3), but to the prophets of Israel near at hand. R. Hanina (d. A.D. 250; spent most of his life in Palestine), in a parable, contrasts God's revelation to the prophets of Israel and of the Gentiles thus. God is like a king sitting in a room separated by a curtain from the anteroom. When his friend is in the anteroom and he wants to speak to him, the king pulls back the dividing curtain, so does God with the prophets of Israel. But with Gentile prophets, God speaks from behind the curtain. The Rabbis (*ibid.*) spoke, too, of God visiting the Gentiles like a king slipping stealthily to his concubine; so when God visits the Gentile prophets it is in dreams of the night, as He did with Balaam (Num. xxii. 20), Laban (Gen. xxxi. 24) and Abimelech (Gen. xx. 3).<sup>1</sup> But just as a king would go to his lawful wife openly, so does God with the prophets of Israel. Vagueness, uncertainty, aloofness are the marks of prophecies to the Gentiles. R. Levi (third-generation Amora) (Esther R. vii. 24) said: "The prophecies given to the other nations are ambiguous and they do not know whether they are to slay or to be slain." The Gentiles are like a weary man who was journeying on foot and exclaimed, "I wish I had an ass." A passing Roman official, seeing him, and whose ass had just foaled, sarcastically says in mockery of his misery: "Here, take this foal and ride it." The man said that his prayer had been heard, but that he ought to have explained that he wanted an ass for riding on, not to

<sup>1</sup> In Gen. R. xvii. 5, R. Hanina ben Isaac states that a dream is but an incomplete form of prophecy.

carry. So, remarks R. Levi, is the prophecy given to other nations that they should be ready against that day; and they do not know whether it means to slay or be slain. "But," he adds, "the prophecy of the Jews is clear: that the Jews should be ready against that day to avenge themselves on their enemies" (Esther viii. 13).<sup>1</sup>

But what is true of prophecy is true of the Law. The Gentiles had their chance of acceptance. The Midrash, like the Pseudepigrapha,<sup>2</sup> reiterates that God did offer the Torah to other nations but they refused it; cf. Exod. R. xvii. 2; also Exod. R. xxvii. 9: "When God revealed Himself on Sinai, there was not a nation at whose doors He did not knock but they would not undertake to keep it." It was Israel's peculiar merit that they did agree. "As soon as He came to Israel they exclaimed (Exod. xxiv. 7): 'All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient'." Elsewhere (Exod. R. xxx. 9) the stress is on God's choice of Israel, to give to them the whole Torah,<sup>3</sup> and nothing is said of the Gentiles' refusal of it; it is stressed, it is true, that they had been given only some precepts. The proof text is Ps. cxlvii. 20: "He hath not dealt so with any nation." God dealt thus "only with Jacob, whom He chose from all heathen people, having given to the latter only part of the Commandments. He gave Adam six commandments, and added one to Noah; Abraham had eight and Jacob nine, but to Israel He gave all" (Exod. R. xxx. 9). R. Simeon ben Abba (third-generation Palestinian Amora), in the name of R. Hanina ben Hama (Palestinian Amora, Halakist and Haggadist, d. A.D. 250), tells a parable of a king with a well-filled table. To various servants he gave single portions of this or that, but to his son he gave all he had. "So," he concludes (Exod. R. xxx. 9), "God gave to the heathen only some odd commandments but when Israel arose He said to them, 'Behold the whole Torah is yours', as it is said, 'He had not dealt so with any nation'."

R. Eleazar (possibly Eleazar II) (third century A.D., second-

<sup>1</sup> We need not take this view of the purpose of prophecy as typical but as the expression torn out of a man by persecution and seeing his people oppressed.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 2 Bar. xlvi. 40: "Because each of the inhabitants of the earth knew when he was transgressing, but My Law they knew not by reason of their pride." But 4 Ezra vii. 72, 73, is much clearer: "For this reason therefore shall the sojourners in the earth suffer torture, because having understanding, they yet wrought iniquity, and receiving precepts they yet kept them not, and having obtained the Law they set at naught that which they received." Cf. also 2 Bar. xv. 5: "Man would not rightly have understood My judgment, unless he had accepted the Law and I had instructed him in understanding."

<sup>3</sup> Cf. 2 Bar. lxxvii. 3: "For to you and to your fathers the Lord gave a Law more excellent than to all peoples."



and third-generation Palestinian Amora) tells (*ibid.*) a similar parable of a king distributing spoils of war, this to one and that to another; to his own son, who asked him what he was to get, the reply was, "Of that which I have prepared for myself". "So," says Eleazar, "God gave to the heathen commandments, as it were, in their raw state, for them to toil over, not making any distinction among them between uncleanness and purity; but as soon as Israel came, He explained each precept separately to them, both its punishment and reward, as it says, 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth' (Cant. i. 2). Hence: 'His statutes and His ordinances unto Israel'."

But against this universalistic attitude there is the more particularistic, both with regard to prophecy and the Law. In *Meg.* 3a this is shown in regard to prophecy. We are told there on the authority of R. Jeremiah (third century A.D.) and, according to some (the Haggada is not certain which authority to accept), also of R. Hiyya (Palestinian Amora, end of third century A.D., a Halakist, and pupil of R. Johanan), that the Targum of the Prophets was translated by Jonathan ben Uzziel, guided and helped by Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.<sup>1</sup> When this was done, Palestine quaked for an area of four hundred square parasangs and a Bath Kol was heard demanding: "Who is this that has revealed My secrets to mankind?" Jonathan ben Uzziel (the most distinguished pupil of Hillel, cf. *Suk.* 28a; *B.B.* 134a) confessed it was he who was responsible, but that he had not done it for his own honour, but for God's honour, that dissension might not increase in Israel. The reason is significant. Strangely enough, no Bath Kol is recorded as issuing when Onkelos made the Targum of the Pentateuch.

(*To be continued.*)

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<sup>1</sup> The chronology here outdoes that of the *Seder Olam*.