THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF THE PSALMISTS AND THE PROPHETIC MIND

by BINYAMIN UFFENHEIMER

Dedicated to Professor Jacques-Raymond Tournay, master of Biblical poetry, on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday.

In this study, I hope to demonstrate that prophecy was not an alien Canaanite-Dionysian phenomenon imposed upon the original Israelite culture, as some have maintained.[1] Nor should we overemphasize the weight of its affinity to the Western-Semitic culture of Mari, which is indeed a rudimentary fact.[2] Rather, prophecy grew organically from the popular religion reflected in the Book of Psalms, in Torah literature, and in the wisdom literature; it is substantively part and parcel of ancient Israel's popular culture.

Binyamin Uffenheimer is Professor of Bible at Tel-Aviv University. This article is an original contribution to *Immanuel*. Translated from the Hebrew by Beth Uval.

1. Gustav Hölscher, *Die Profeten* (Leipzig, 1914); Sigmund Mowinckel, "The 'Spirit' and the 'Word' in the Pre-exilic Reforming Prophets," *JBL* 53 (1934), 199-227; idem., "Postscript," *JBL* 56 (1937), 261-265; idem, "Ecstatic Experience and Rational Elaboration in Old Testament Prophecy," *Acta Orientalia* 13 (1935), 264-291; 14 (1936), 319ff; idem, *Die Erkenntnis Gottes bei den alttestamentlichen Propheten* (Oslo, 1941), p. 13ff. Despite his criticism of Hölscher's approach, Mowinckel ultimately agrees that the spirit of God referred to by the Former Prophets signifies Dionysian ecstasy. The rationalization of the prophetic mind is indicated by the classical prophets' proclamation of the word of God; cf. W.F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore, 1946). For a brief summary of scholarship up to the 1960s, see H.H. Rowley, "The Nature of Old Testament Prophecy in the Light of Modern Research," in *The Servant of God and Other Essays on the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1965).

2. For a summary of scholarship relating to this question, see B. Uffenheimer, *ha-Nevu'ah ha-Qedumah be-Yisra'el* (Jerusalem, 1973), 18-36.

I shall first explain the historical assumptions implicit in this statement, then sketch the religious ideal expressed in the Book of Psalms and, finally, discuss the organic tie between this ideal and prophecy.

I

Regarding the nature of prophecy: from the time of Wellhausen and Hölscher to that of Mowinckel and Albright – that is, during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth – European Bible scholarship saw prophecy primarily as an ecstatic phenomenon, which had its origins in the end of the Israelite settlement period. I Samuel 9:9 is cited as proof of a semantic distinction between "prophet" and "seer". The word "seer" (*ro'eh*), it was maintained, referred to the ancient Semitic man of God who was chiefly a sorcerer or soothsayer, one with magic or mantic powers who could interpret omens, foretell the future, and divine the occult. The seer was thus a man of "science" who relied on ancient traditions and on examination of such phenomena as a sacrificed animal's liver, heavenly signs, the flight of birds, or the patterns of liquid in a goblet, while the prophet was an ecstatic of the Greek Dionysian type. Albright[3] even went so far as to assert that this Dionysian-prophetic ecstasy came to the Land of Israel from Greece via Asia Minor-Syria during the eleventh century B.C.E., following the Dorian migration in Greece. The first Israelite representatives of this supposed religious type were a band of prophets known to us from the Book of Samuel (I Sam. 10:5, 10:10ff and 19:20-24). The Mari documents revealed that the Semitic culture then prevailing in the small kingdom, destroyed by Hammurabi in the sixteenth century B.C.E., did harbor an ecstatic man of god, the emissary of the god Dagan, known as Muḫḫum ("the insane"). Because of the apostolic motif common to both of them, the Muḫḫum is considered the pagan prototype of the Israelite prophet. The Muḫḫum is therefore the predecessor of the Israelite prophet-emissary[4].

The second assumption regards the dating of the Book of Psalms. As late as the beginning of the twentieth century, the prevailing opinion was that the author of the psalms was none other than Jeremiah. According to this view, the Psalms are examples of the individualistic literature that began to germinate only toward the end of the First Temple era under the influence of Jeremiah's personal confessions and lamentations, a literature that reached its zenith during the Second Temple period.[5] Gunkel in fact demonstrated that the Psalms' literary genres were rooted in

---

3. See note 1.
4. See note 2.
5. See, for example, the following commentaries: Franz Delitzch, *Biblischer Kommentar über die Psalmen* (Leipzig, 1867); Friedrich Baethgen, ed., *Die Psalmen* [Handkommentar zum Alten Testament (Göttingen, 1904)]; B. Duhm, *Kurzer Handkommentar zum Alten Testament* (Göttingen, 1922); Charles A. & Emile G. Briggs, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the book of Psalms* [ICC (Edinburgh, 1907)]; Walter Baumgrtneartner, Die Klagegedichte des Jeremia [BZAW. 32. (Giessen, 1917)]; T.K. Cheyne, *The Origin and Religious Contents of the Psalter* (New York, 1891); Shimon Bernfeld, *Mavo le-kitvei ha-Qodesh* (Berlin, 1923-1924), Vol. III:116-117.

the sociological framework ("Sitz im Leben") of the First Temple period, but even he placed the composition of most of the psalms in the Second Temple period,[6] interpreting the Psalter's few historical allusions as referring to events that occured during the Persian and Greek regimes, particularly during the Hellenistic rule and that of the Hasmonean dynasty.

In Gunkel's wake, Mowinckel sought to place the psalms themselves at an earlier date. His efforts, however, required a paganization of the Book of Psalms and an unlikely reduction of its ritual function to association with an hypothetical holiday he termed *Thronbesteigungsfest* – "the festival of God's ascension to the Throne."[7] The question raised by Gunkel's school was: did the literature of the Psalter precede classical prophecy, or was that literature created by the prophets? The currently predominant theory is that the creation of the classical psalms continued until the third century B.C.E., but that its beginnings are to be dated as early as the period of the Judges, some psalms being attributed to prophetic authors.[8]

The third historical problem pertains to the commonly held assumption that popular Israelite religion was pagan, and that it was only the classical prophets, beginning with Amos, who gradually developed monotheism until it reached its final form with the second Isaiah, who ridiculed paganism and denounced the idols as fetishes of wood and stone.

I have already expressed my reservations concerning these three assumptions,[9] which I shall now detail. First, the distinction between prophet and seer. As Kaufmann rightly pointed out, had the seer been a magic or mantic type ousted by the ecstatic prophet, the Bible would have reflected this process; there is, however, no evidence of such a struggle. Indeed, I Samuel 9:9, the verse usually cited as proof of this process, is in fact unequivocal evidence that "prophet" and "seer" are

---

6. Hermann Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (Göttingen, 1926); idem, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (Göttingen, 1933); Karl Budde, *Geschichte der althebräischen Litteratur* (Leipzig, 1909), 261-265. Gunkel's system of form study, an outstanding practitioner of which is Westermann, won a prominent place in modern scholarship. See Klaus Westermann, *Das Loben Gottes in den Psalmen* (Göttingen, 1954); idem, "Struktur und Geschichte der Klage im AT," *ZAW* 66 (1954), 44-80.

7. S. Mowinckel, *Psalmenstudien* (Amsterdam, 1961), 6 v.; idem, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (Oxford, 1962); H. Schmidt, *Die Thronfahrt Jahves am Fest der Jahreswende im alten Israel* (Tübingen, 1927).

8. Otto Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Tübingen, 1956), 131-135, 549ff; Hans-Joachim Krauss, *Psalmen 1-59* [BKAT. 15:1 (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1966)], p. xvii; Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Toldot ha-Emunah Ha-Yisra'elit*, vol. 2, (Tel Aviv, 1945), 646-727. Space will not allow the detailing here of the differences between Kaufmann's approach and that of the other scholars; see note 12 below.

9. For my reservations to the above-mentioned assumptions, and fuller development of the four-fold typology of ecstasy presented here, see my paper, "Prophecy and Ecstasy," presented at the Twelfth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of Old Testament, Jerusalem, 1985, which will appear in the forthcoming Proceedings of that congress in *Vetus Testamentum*.

synonymous. Furthermore, the relation between the image of both the ecstatic prophet and the seer to Canaanite culture is problematic, as there is no direct evidence of ecstatic prophecy in the latter, save for the Egyptian Wen-Amon inscription and Elijah's ironic description of the prophets of Baal recorded in I Kings 18.[10]

Comparing the Mari description of the Muḫḫum with the Israelite prophet produces a different picture. The apostolic motif is indeed common to both: the Muḫḫum speaks for the god Dagan, and the prophet for the Lord God of Israel. However, the image of the prophet as emissary would never have been absorbed in Israelite culture had not the popular Israelite faith provided a fertile psychological and sociological medium for its growth. We may say that the Israelite prophet was substantially shaped by internal social and cultural forces, although it is reasonable to assume that the original impetus for this growth in some way came from the Western Semitic culture of Mari that flourished during the time of the patriarchs. In other words, external influence was secondary to the organic growth process firmly rooted in popular Israelite culture – a culture that crystallized in various literary forms, as expressed in the Torah, the psalms, and the wisdom literature. The psalms played a role of paramount importance in the development of prophecy, as I hope to demonstrate presently.

Furthermore, the ancient Israelites were by no means the ignorant masses of wood- and stone-worshippers described by Wellhausen and his school. To the contrary: far from being the relatively late creation of classical prophecy, as commonly held, practical monotheism (or monolatry, if you prefer) in the sense of worship of a single God to the exclusion of others – as distinguished from the ontological contention of the exclusive, singular existence of one God – was known from the people's earliest beginnings.[11] This monotheistic faith was of paramount importance in shaping the culture of Israel from earliest times, although we cannot accept Yehezkel Kaufmann's extreme hypothesis that the Israelite masses were monotheistic from their beginnings.[12] The truth is that idol worship constituted a problem of national scope during the entire First Temple period, as testified by the exhortations of such prophets as Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and of the Book of Deuteronomy. This testimony, however, by no means justifies the sweeping generalization that First Temple period popular religion was essentially pagan.

---

10. See Uffenheimer, *ha-Nevu'ah ha-Qedumah*, 278-281.
11. Ibid., pp. 6ff, 192-206.
12. Ibid., p. 33ff; Kaufmann, *Toldot ha-Emunah ha-Yisra'elit*, I:1-22, 419ff or the abridged English version, *The Religion of Israel*, tr. M. Greenberg (New York, 1972), 1-4, 60ff, 153ff. Cf. B. Uffenheimer, "Yehezkel Kaufmann: The Militant Biblical Scholar," (Heb.), *Molad* 7: no. 37-38 (1976), 415-438.

As for the nature of prophetic experience, it cannot be reduced to any psychological category, including that of ecstasy. This reduction is the primary error of the biblical scholars mentioned above. Their second mistake is the failure to distinguish among various types of ecstasy. These scholars have erroneously identified one type of ecstasy – collective dionysiac frenzy – with a wide range of varied phenomena. Ecstasy of the collective frenzy type, characteristic, inter alia, of Dionysian ritual, does in fact correspond to the etymological meaning of the word "ekstasis," this being derived from the verb ἐξίστημι (to be outside). Implicit in this word are the classical writers' theological and anthropological interpretations of the states of fainting and loss of consciousness that resulted from the mass frenzy, riotous dancing, and imbibing of intoxicating drinks characteristic of certain rituals – chiefly the Dionysian rites recorded in the Euripidean drama *Bacchai*. According to the classical Greek writers, fainting signified the soul's departure from the body of the "possessed" (κατέχεσται) upon entrance of the divine spirit.

This state was termed ἐντουσιασμός (the god within); the moans and utterances emitted by the unconscious worshippers at such times were interpreted by the priests and the πεοδήται of Apollo as the words of the living god. This type of ecstasy clearly did not entail creativity on the part of the "possessed"; on the contrary, it involved the destruction of his personality and the disintegration of his ego.[13]

This ecstatic phenomenon has nothing in common with the behavior of even the earliest Israelite prophets, such as the band mentioned in the Book of Samuel, or of the disciples of the prophets – not to mention that of Samuel, Elijah, or Elisha.

The phenomenology of ecstasy and the semantics of the word are immeasurably broader than its etymology. For example, the verb ἐξίστημι is used in the New Testament to mean "to wonder, to be astonished," while one of the meanings of the noun ἔκστασις is "amazement, astonishment,"[14] sometimes with connotations of fear and trembling. [15] The concept "ecstasy" is thus used to denote radically differing emotional states, ranging from disintegration of the ego to the state of full consciousness. I differentiate among four major types of ecstasy, which appear in many variations. The first two types – the collective frenzy ecstasy characteristic of the Dionysian rites and of many primitive religions, and the individual ecstasy of the mantic (whose classic embodiment was the Pythia, prophetess of Apollo) – are destructive, inasmuch as they entail the disintegration of the

13. W.K.C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and Their Gods* (Boston, 1955), 145-182; E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963), 64-101.

14. Matthew 12:23; Mark 6:51; Luke 2:47; 8:56; 24:22; Acts 2:12; 9:21; 10:45; 12:16 and others. The verbs θαυμάζεω and ἐξίστημι are sometimes parallel (Acts 2:7).

15. Mark 5:42; 16:8; Luke 5:26, and others.

ego. The Bible contains no examples of these types of ecstasy. The two remaining types, however – that of the integrative personality and introspective ecstasy – incorporate creative forces, which form the psychological foundation of various kinds of prophetic, mystic, and artistic experience.

The "integrative personality" refers to one in full sensual integration with his immediate surroundings. Certain objects he encounters arouse in him associations with his mission: the bush that burns but is not consumed (Ex. 3:2ff); the locust in its larval stage (Amos 7:1-3); a basket of figs (Jer. 24:1ff) or of summer fruit (Amos 8:1-3); or the branch of an almond tree (Jer. 1:11-12). The prophet's creative vision intuitively associates these images with his mission: by linguistic similarity, by the allegorical significance of the natural phenomenon, or by the physical or biological characteristics inherent in the natural image of the phenomenon he witnesses.

In other instances, the prophet sees visions combining natural images with elements drawn from the tradition in which he is steeped (Isa. 6, Ezek. 1, I K. 22:19-23). The prophet's creative imagination then invokes inner situations that reflect a reality transcending the concretely visible or audible – but this results from his intimate sensual involvement in his surroundings, his state of heightened sensual awareness. These, then, are expressions of the integrative personality's ecstasy.

A second type of creative ecstasy characteristic of prophecy is that which I have termed introspective. This refers to an emotional state of supreme concentration in which the intensity of introspection temporarily eradicates the external self that is linked to its surroundings through the senses of hearing and vision. These senses cease to function, as the entire personality is immersed in the object of its inward scrutiny. This type of ecstasy is characteristic of various forms of mysticism whose goal is *unio mystica* – complete existential identification with the Divine.[16]

Introspective ecstasy differs radically from the ecstasy of collective frenzy, in which the ecstatic erases his personality through such means as the wild dancing of the maenads in the Dionysian rites. It likewise has nothing in common with the individual ecstasy of the mantic, brought about by intoxicating drinks, vapors, or smoke (as did the Pythia, priestess of the god Apollo; like the collective frenzy, the Apollonian rites aimed at disruption of the personality). In introspective ecstasy, on the other hand, the external self is not erased, but rather recedes before the inner self that engulfs the entire being. This is an emotional state of intense contemplation, of concentration of a personality that has retained full consciousness, as evident from hundreds of descriptions of spiritual adventures, the first extant example of which appears in the Book of Jeremiah. During the Second Temple period, this type of ecstasy incorporated the apocalyptic vision. We find here, not an identification with the divine, but rather a total immersion in the object of the vision, entirely detached from any environmental association. Examples include

16. E. Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York, 1955), 167-379; R. Schatz-Uffenheimer, *ha-Hasidut ke-Mistiqah* (Jerusalem, 1980), 21-31.

Jeremiah's vision of the cup of wrath which the prophet passes among the nations, in order to intoxicate them and cause them to slaughter one another (Jer. 25:15-31)[17] and Ezekiel's spiritual "voyages" from his home in Babylon to Jerusalem and the Temple (Ez. 8-11) and to the future Temple (Ch. 40-48).

These spiritual journeys are to be compared with those of the apocalyptic visionaries, such as those of Enoch, who tours the heavenly realms until he reaches the Divine throne (chapters 14, 71); Daniel's vision of the heavenly retinue (7:9-28); or the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem in the fourth vision of the apocryphal Ezra (IV Ezra 10:25-56).[18] The chief differences between the introspective visions of prophetic literature and those of the apocalyptic visionaries are the following: the Latter Prophets, when experiencing their vision, are immersed in their immediate surroundings only, retaining their steadfast involvement with their social mission; the apocalyptic visions, by contrast, testify to the visionaries' complete detachment from society. Since their goal is spiritual redemption and revelation of world history, they intensify their envelopment in higher spheres, becoming completely alienated from concrete reality.

In sum, the prophetic visions do indeed spring from ecstasy, but not from the destructive Dionysian ecstasy spoken of by the nineteenth and some early twentieth century scholars. They originate, rather, in an ecstasy bearing the creative potential of the integrative or the introspective personality.

The second mistake of these scholars was their very attempt to define prophecy through a psychological category such as ecstasy, including the analytic psychologists' effort to impose their conceptual framework on prophecy.[19] As I have implied, ecstasy is the psychological foundation of prophecy, but it cannot exhaustively define it. The concept of ecstasy applies only to the prophet's emotional state at the time he is commissioned by God, and to the state of his consciousness when he experiences his visions. Israelite prophecy is primarily defined by its contents, being a social and political mission bound to a concrete historical situation. The verb *shalaḥ* ("send") is the leit-motif of the initiatory visions, the prophet assessing himself as merely the emissary of God; his words are God's and are not spoken at his own personal initiative. The ecstatic state is evidence, inter alia, of the inner force through which the prophet's new personality is forged. True prophetic ecstasy

17. B. Uffenheimer, "The Historical Perception of Jeremiah" (Heb.), in *'Iyunim be-Sefer Yirmiyahu*, B. Luria, ed. (Jerusalem, 1973), 23-36; idem, "Jeremiah's Fluctuating Attitudes and Approaches to History" (Heb.), in *Sefer Baruch Kurzweil*, (Ramat Gan, 1975), 49-61.

18. On prophecy and apocalyptic, see B. Uffenheimer, *Hazonot Zekharyah* (Jerusalem, 1968), 135-177. On Ezekiel, see W. Zimmerli, "Ezechiel," *BKAT*, ad loc.

19. Three outstanding examples are: F. Häussermann, *Wortempfang und Symbol in der alttestamentlichen Prophetie*, [BZAW. 59. (Giessen, 1932)]; Ivar P. Seierstadt, *Die Offenbarungserlebnisse der Propheten Amos, Jesaja und Jeremia* (Oslo, 1946, 1965); and Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, 1965). For additional bibliographical information, see B. Uffenheimer, "Prophecy" [Heb.], in *Enẓeqlopedyah Miqra'it* V, pp. 690-732.

does indeed generate a new personality, one that sees itself and the world through new eyes. Again, this is not true of the destructive type of ecstasy whose object is eradication of the self.

A few more comments on the history of prophecy: as I have discussed in my book *Early Israelite Prophecy* and elsewhere,[20] prophecy originated during the period of the Israelites' consolidation as a people, and may be divided into three evolutionary stages:

The period of the prophet-leaders, the judges, the charismatic emissaries who appeared at critical times in order to save Israel from its enemies, constituted the first stage. Moses occupied a special position in this context, as, to an extent, did Samuel, for their leadership was religious and not military (see, e.g., Moses' function as wielder of signs and portents, Ex. 4:20ff, Ch. 7-10, passim.; Ex. 17:8-16; cf. I Sam. 7:5ff.; 9:12-13).[21] In any event, the common denominator of all the prophet-leaders was their social status as emissaries of God.

The second evolutionary stage is that of the militant prophets (such as Elijah and Elisha) who arose with the establishment of the monarchy, and particularly after its division. The third and final stage is that of the classical prophets, who eschewed the militant intervention of such figures as Jehu son of Nimshi as a means of achieving their goals and chose instead the spoken word.

III

All this raises the question of the historical relation between classical prophecy and the literature of the Psalter: which came first? In our generation, Kaufmann contributed to the solution of this problem by postulating that the Book of Psalms preceded classical prophecy.[22] Even those who reject this radical solution cannot evade the intellectual challenge he posed.

On what did Kaufmann base this challenging position? Most of the psalms offer no historical frame of reference whatsoever; their historical allusions are on the whole so insubstantial that it is impossible to place them chronologically with any degree of precision. Nevertheless, most of the peoples and events explicitly mentioned in the Psalms refer to countries whom Israel fought as early as the time of the Judges, such as Edom (Ps. 60:2, 11, 12; 83:7; 108:11), Sihon king of the Amorites (135:11; 136:19), Aram-Naharaim, Aram-Zoba (60:2), Geval (63:8), the Hagrites (83:7), the Ishmaelities (83:7), Cush (68:32), the kingdoms of Canaan (106:38), the sons of Lot (83:9), the Midianites (83:10, 11), Moab (83:7), Amon, Amalek (83:8), Egypt (68:32; 78:12, 43; 81:6,11; 105:23,38; 106:7,21; 114:1; 135:8,9;

---

20. Uffenheimer, *ha-Nevu'ah ha-Qedumah*, 292-293; cf. idem., "Ancient Hebrew Prophecy; Political Teaching and Practice," *Immanuel* 18 (1984), 7-10.

21. On the historical figure of Samuel, see Uffenheimer, *ha-Nevu'ah ha-Qedumah*, 138-154; bibliography.

22. Kaufmann, *Toldot ha-Emunah ha-Yisra'elit*, vol. II:646-727.

136:10), Philistia, the Philistines (59:1; 83:9; 87:4; 108:10), and Tyre (83:8; 87:4). Asshur is mentioned once (83:9), but this is a reference to an unknown desert tribe who joined the other enemies of Israel, and not to the Assyrian empire. The only explicit references to the Babylonian Exile and the Restoration appear in Psalms 126 and 137.

Taking into account the frequency with which the Temple and its service are mentioned, it is therefore reasonable to suppose that the body of classical psalms in the Bible fall within the chronological boundaries of the First Commonwealth. Moreover, a comparison of the Psalter with the apocryphal psalms discovered at Qumran – either the Psalms of Thanksgiving or the epigraphic psalms found in caves 4 and 11[23] – indicate that the Qumran psalms relate to the biblical psalms as imitations to prototype. The language of these later psalms, which originated during the Hellenistic period, exhibits striking differences from that of the biblical psalms. They embody a particular variation of post-biblical Hebrew, closely related to Mishnaic Hebrew, whose characteristics decisively distinguish it from biblical Hebrew.[24] Indeed, linguistic analysis of several of the biblical psalms reveals a language representing a transitional stage between classical biblical Hebrew and the post-biblical language of the Mishnah.[25] These later biblical psalms, however, are the exceptions that prove the rule, for implicit in this linguistic analysis is the assumption of the relative antiquity of the vast majority of the biblical psalms, written in the style of classical biblical poetry. In any event, this disproves the extreme view of classical biblical research, which places the composition of the biblical psalms much later and pretends to find there historical allusions to the Greek period.

If we compound this with the recent clarification of the close kinship between several psalms and Akkadian literature,[26] the similarity of Psalm 104 to Egyptian literature (particularly the long hymn of Akhenaton to the sun),[27] the striking resemblance of Psalm 29 to Canaanite literature from Ugarit,[28] and the fact that the

---

23. Y. Licht, *Megillat ha-Hodayot* (Jerusalem, 1967); B. Uffenheimer, "Psalm 151 of Qumran" (Heb.), *Molad* 22 (1964), 69-81; idem, "Psalms 152 and 153 of Qumran" (Heb.), *Molad* 22 (1964), 328-342; J.H. Sanders, *The Psalms Scroll of Qumran Cave 11* (Oxford, 1965); idem, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967); idem, *CBQ* 27 (1965), 114-123.

24. A. Hurvitz, "Observations in the Language of the Third Apocryphal Psalm from Qumran," *Revue Qumran* 5 (1965), 225-232.

25. A. Hurvitz, *Bein Lashon le-Lashon* (Jerusalem, 1972).

26. Fr. Stummer, *Sumerisch-akkadische Parallelen zum Aufbau der alttestamentlichen Psalmen* (Paderborn, 1922); idem, *ISOR* 8 (1924), 123-124; H.G. Cumming, *The Assyrian and the Hebrew Hymns of Praise* (New York, 1934); G. Widengren, *The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents* (Uppsala-Stockholm, 1937).

27. G. Nagel, "A propos des rapports du psaume 104 avec les textes égyptiens," *Festschrift Alfred Bertholet* (Tübingen, 1950), 395-403; James B. Pritchard, *ANET* (Princeton, 1950), 369-371.

28. H.A. Ginzberg, *Kitvei Ugarit* (Jerusalem, 1936), 129-131; F.M. Cross, "Notes on a Canaanite Psalm in the Old Testament," *BASOR* 177 (1950), 19-21.

Book of Psalms absorbed numerous stylistic traits known to us from Canaan,[29] where this literary genre also flourished, we are left with no doubt as to the antiquity of the psalm in Israel.

This conclusion is reinforced if we augment these linguistic and stylistic analyses with an examination of the inner world of the psalms. Totally absent from the psalms is the primacy of the ethical element, so characteristic of prophetic literature,[30] that ties the fate of the nation to the fulfillment of its moral obligations. To avoid misunderstanding, we must emphasize that the obligation to behave honorably and mercifully is indeed central to such psalms as 15 and 51, but in the personal-individual sense only. The psalmists do not articulate the prophetic concept of Israel's collective fate being determined by its ethical behavior. Moreover, the eschatological element is nowhere to be found in the psalms. Such concepts as "the day of the Lord", "at that time", and "the end of days" originated with the classical prophets and do not appear in the Psalter.

Another ideological element affecting our historical discussion is the problem of theodicy. The question of "the righteous who suffer and the wicked who prosper" indeed reverberates strongly throughout the psalms, particularly in the plaints and supplications of the ill and persecuted and in the national lamentations.[31] However, the answer offered is based on the ancient concept of retribution that appears in the Torah and the Former Prophets. Job's question, with its radical rejection of this folk concept of recompense that reconciles all difficulties by pointing to human sinfulness, is implicit in only one psalm – 73.[32] Even the author of this psalm, however, does not aspire to a new intellectual approach: its novelty lies rather in the emotional-experiential sphere, as we shall presently discuss. In short, we may safely state that the Book of Psalms generally reflects the popular pre-prophetic worldview, although the prophetic influence is occasionally apparent. The unavoidable conclusion, therefore, is that, generally speaking, it was the prophet who was influenced by the psalm and by the popular tradition reflected therein,

---

29. J.H. Patton, *Canaanite Parallels in the Book of Psalms* (Baltimore, 1944); R. de Langhe, *Les textes de Ras Shamra-Ugarit et leurs Rapports avec le Milieu Biblique de l'Ancien Testament*, vol. 1-2 (Gembloux-Paris, 1945); U. Cassuto, *Biblical and Oriental Studies* I (Jerusalem, 1973), 241-284; II: 16ff, 69ff; N. Sarna, *Fourth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, I (Jerusalem, 1957), 171-175; idem, "Psalms" (Heb.) in *Enẓeqlopedyah Miqra'it* vol. VIII: 437-462 (additional bibliographical information).

30. Y. Kaufmann, *Toldot ha-Emunah ha-Yisra'elit*, vol. II:646-727.

31. H. Schmidt, *Das Gebet des Angeklagten im Alten Testament* BZAW. 49 (Berlin, 1928)]; C. Barth, *Die Errettung vom Tode in den individuellen Klage- und Dankliedern des Alten Testaments* (Basel, 1947); E. Lipinski, *La Liturgie Pénitentielle dans la Bible* (Paris, 1969).

32. M. Buber, "Recht und Unrecht; Deutung einiger Psalmen," in his *Schriften zur Bibel* [Werke. II. (München, 1964)], pp. 951-990; in English; *Right and Wrong – An Interpretation of Some Psalms*, tr. R.G. Smith (London, 1952); E. Würthwein, "Erwägungen zu Ps. 73," in *Festschrift Alfred Bertholet* (Tübingen, 1950), 532-549; H.J. Kraus, *Psalmen I*, 501ff.; M. Weiss, *The Bible from Within* (Jerusalem, 1964), 260-266, 432ff.

and not the other way around, as assumed by nineteenth century scholars. The Book of Psalms, therefore, is the mirror of the ancient folk beliefs that constituted the soil from which prophecy grew.

IV

In light of this background, we may now discuss the religious ideal expressed in the Psalter and its relation to prophecy. The fundamental assumption pervading all the psalms is that any form of suffering, whether illness or persecution by one's enemies or by the wicked, signifies distance from God. The cry of the persecuted and the poverty-stricken that reverberates throughout the psalms is a declaration that man's aloneness with his suffering means that God has abandoned him, while the joy radiating from the hymns of praise and thanksgiving express a sense of God's nearness on the part of one who has been delivered from great distress.

The central motif common to many psalms is the longing for God's nearness. Although the object of these prayers is an awesome God (47:3; 66:3,5; 68:36; 76:8,13; 89:3,4,8; 99:3; 111:9), he is also a holy God (22:4; 99:3,5,9), the "Holy One of Israel" (71:22; 78:41; 89:19). Some psalmists avoid mentioning His holiness and speak rather of His holy name (33:21; 103:1; 106:47; 111:9; 145:21), employing other terms to express the vast distance between the earthly and the heavenly. However, the sense of awe reflected in these terms does not justify Rudolph Otto's assumption[33] of the sense of dread, of the daemonic or numinous which man feels in God's presence, or his assertion that this dread is the identifying mark of every religious experience. True, there are spiritual conditions in which God is sensed as *mysterium tremendum*, as an anonymous entity radically different from human experience – the "Wholly Other" (*das Ganz Andere*). However, such spiritual conditions are typical of the Bible, albeit some fragments of the ancient folk belief that attributes demonic characteristics to God are scattered here and there (Ex. 4:24-26; Lev. 10:1-2; II Sam. 6-8; Job 4:13-20). The God of Israel is a personal God, the God of justice, truth, lovingkindness and mercy; He is the antithesis of the anonymous and the demonic. True, man usually quakes in terror when God is first revealed to him; in this respect, there is no difference between Jacob (Genesis 28:17), Moses (Exodus 3:6), or Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5) and the common people, such as Samson's father (Judges 13:20-23) or the Israelite masses standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:16, 21; 20:15-18; Deut. 5:22-24). Moreover, several prophets complain that God imposes Himself upon them (Jeremiah 20:7-9; Amos 3:8; Ezekiel 3:1-3), burdening them with an unbearably difficult mission (Ex. 3:9; 4:17; Isa. 6:9ff; Jer. 1:4-10; Ez. 2:1-7; 3:4-9), while a few prophets only accept the yoke under duress.

---

33. R. Otto, *Das Heilige* (München, 1963); idem, *Aufsätze das Numinose betreffend* (Stuttgart, 1923).

The prophetic mission demands the whole man and prevents him from fulfilling his personal desires. Hosea is commanded to marry a wanton woman and father her children; Isaiah is ordered to go naked for 20 years (Isaiah 20:3); Jeremiah is forbidden to marry and father children (16:1-4); Ezekiel is ordered to perform strange acts for days on end (Ezekiel 4:1-5:6; 10:12-20) and forbidden to mourn his wife's death (24:15-24). But even during those difficult times, in which God imposes His mission on the prophets against their will, He remains a personal God – the God of justice, lovingkindness and mercy. The sense of dependence upon God and his acts is the basis of every relation between man and God. In this respect there is no difference between the prophets, on the one hand, and the psalmists, the wisdom teachers, and the Torah on the other. Throughout the Bible, the sense of dependence appears intertwined with the sense of God's distance, the apprehension that there is no existential continuity[34] between man and God. The only bridge over this ontological abyss is dialogue – when God addresses man or when man addresses God with a question, request, complain, or even criticism. This longing for dialogue bursts forth in the psalms. God does not inspire fear and terror in the hearts of these poets. On the contrary: the Book of Psalms is a monumental testimony to man's longing for God's nearness.

V

What is the nature of this nearness? In most of the psalms, it is expressed as finding shelter in God's house – that is, the Temple in Jerusalem (Psalms 5:8; 23:6; 27:4; 42:3,5; 84:2ff and others), God's earthly abode. Thus Solomon's prayer, one of the earliest liturgical poems, states explicitly:[35]

> The Lord has set the sun in the heavens
> The Lord has said he would dwell in a thick cloud:
> I have now built for You
> A stately House,
> A place where You
> May dwell forever. (I K. 8:12)

The same concept underlies the narrative prose describing the carrying of the Ark to its place in the Holy of Holies (I Kings 8:2-11). This story is actually a reflection of the ancient tradition that God is "Enthroned on the Cherubim" (I Samuel 4:4; 6:2) and that He spoke to Moses "from above the cover that was on top of the Ark

---

34. B. Uffenheimer, "Biblical Theology and Monotheistic Myth" (Heb.), lecture given at the opening session of the Eighth World Congress of Judaic Studies, published in *Divrei ha-Qongress ha-'Olami le-Mada'ei ha-Yahadut; Mador le-Miqra ve-Lashon 'Ivrit* (Jerusalem, 1983), 79-84; idem, "Biblical Theology and Monotheistic Myth," *Immanuel* 14 (1982), 7-25; idem, "Myth and Reality in Ancient Israel," in S.N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* I (Albany, N.Y., 1986), 135-168.

35. This is according to the Septuagint's translation, which probably reflects an ancient Hebrew version broader than the one included in the Masoretic text, which lacks the words: "the Lord has set the sun in the heavens." The Greek text reads:Ηλιον ἐγνώρισεν[Read: ἔστησεν] ἐν οὐρανῷ κύριος

of the Covenant between the two cherubim" (Numbers 7:89). Moreover, the statement that "the priests were not able to remain and perform the service because of the cloud, for the Presence of the Lord filled the House of the Lord" (I Kings 8:11) is also based on an ancient priestly tradition relating to the cloud that covered the Tent of Meeting: "Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle" (Exodus 40:35). These two traditions converge in I Kings 8:1-11: the Ark with the cherubim here termed "the Ark of the Lord" (verse 4) or "the Ark of the Lord's covenant" (verse 6) is God's dwelling place, while the cloud signifies His unmediated presence.

The second half of this chapter (8:22-66), added by the author of the Book of Kings who lived in exile in Babylon, reflects a rather different religious perception of the Temple. Following the Book of Deuteronomy, which speaks of the place which God "will choose to establish His name there"[36] (Deut. 12:5,11,14,21; 14:23; 16:6,11,15 and others), the prose poem of I Kings 8:15-21 contains the verses:

> Ever since I brought my people Israel out of Egypt, I have not chosen a city among all the tribes of Israel for building a House where My name might abide; but I have chosen David to rule My people Israel... and I have set a place there for the Ark, containing the covenant which the Lord made with our fathers when He brought them out from the land of Egypt (v. 16,21).

---

36. Literally: "the place the Lord chose to cause His name to dwell there": המקום אשר בחר ה' לשכן שמו שם or "to put His name there": לשום שמו שם. The meaning of both expressions should not be pressed by interpreting them in the sense of I Kings 8:27 or Isa. 66:21, as the legislation of Deuteronomy also contains the commandment that "all the males shall see (according to the Masoretic punctuation: be seen before) the Lord three times a year" (Deut. 16:16ff.; cf. Ex. 23:17; 34:23). The Deuteronomist even adds: "they shall not appear before the Lord empty-handed; every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the Lord your God which he has given you" (v. 17). Moreover, the commandment to build an alter on Mount Ebal and to sacrifice there offerings, adding: "and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God" (Deut. 27:5-8) – all these suggest that the book of Deuteronomy reflects indeed a feeling of uneasiness towards the ancient religious concept of the tent as being the habitation of the Lord. But it was only as late as the Babylonian exile that the breakthrough was made towards the spiritualized conception of the Temple as a house of prayer.
Indeed, the phrase שכן שם seems to be derived from the royal style of the ancient Near East, as may be gained from one of the Jerusalemite letters of Tel El Amarna, where we read: *šarri šakan šumšu ina māt Urusalim ana dāriš* ("the king has established his name in the country of Jerusalem for ever") – J.A. Knudtzon, *Die El Amarna Tafeln* (Leipzig, 1915), § 287:60-61; compare also ibid, § 288:5-7; cf. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford, 1972), 193, n. 3.
Elsewhere, this phrase is connected with erecting a stele; e.g., *narâja alṭur u šumi ana dāriš altakam* ("I inscribed my stele and established my name for ever"), *Keilsschrifttexte aus Assur, II* (Leipzig, 1922), § 26:10; cf. F.R. Kraus, "Altmesopotamisches Lebensgefühl," *JNES* 19 (1960), 128ff. The original meaning of these phrases seems to be that the king has established his rule, his suzerainty; building a stele and inscribing his name is an act which symbolizes this fact. Compare I Sam. 15:12; II Sam. 8:3,13; Isa. 56:5, where the Hebrew nouns *yad, shem* and *maẓevah* are synonyms for stele.

In other words, the choice is threefold: Jerusalem, the House of David, and the Temple, with the Temple chosen as the place "where My name might abide" (verse 16). This terminology is a counterweight to the ancient prayer that calls the Temple "a stately House" (*Bet Zebul*), that is, the royal abode where God resides. The phrase "where My name might abide," on the other hand, signifies that the Temple is merely a place where His name is uttered – a house of prayer to He who dwells on high. Verse 27, moreover, contains keen and explicit theological criticism of what was said in the first part of the chapter, particularly in verse 12. Verse 27 exclaims: "But will God really dwell on earth? Even the heavens to their uttermost reaches cannot contain You, how much less this house that I have built!" This theological position is consistent with the words of the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile:

> Thus said the Lord: The heaven is My throne and the earth is my footstool: Where could you build a house for Me, what place could serve as my abode? (Isaiah 66:1)

The anonymous prophet who says that "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Isaiah 56:7) has reached the same conclusion as the I Kings narrator who says "Turn, O Lord my God, to the prayer and supplication of Your servant... May Your eyes be open day and night toward this House, toward the place of which You have said, 'My name shall abide there' " (8:28-29), and "...give heed in your heavenly abode..." (8:30) or "...hear in your heavenly abode..." (8:32,34,36,39, and others). These and similar utterances indicate that the Temple *per se* is a place of prayer directed toward He who dwells in heaven.

The religious perception of the Temple evident in I Kings 8, from verse 12 on (and particularly from verse 22 on), is therefore consistent with that of the Second Isaiah. But we must emphasize that most of the utterances of the classical prophets, and all of the psalms, express the ancient belief embedded in Solomon's poetic prayer – that God dwells in Zion, the Temple being his earthly abode. To cite only a few of the many examples found in the Psalter: "Sing a hymn to the Lord who dwells in Zion" (9:12); "Lord, who may sojourn in Your tent, who may dwell on Your holy mountain" (15:1); "May He send you help from the sanctuary, and sustain you from Zion" (20:3); "Salem became His abode, Zion, His den" (76:3); "Blessed is the Lord from Zion, He who dwells in Jerusalem, Hallelujah" (135:21). This partial list may be considerably extended: see also, for example, 11:4; 14:7; 24:7-10; 32:13; 50:2; 74:2; 78:68; 80:2; 84:3.

This belief in the religious significance of the Temple is the basis of the psalmists' longing to find shelter in God's house, that is, to be close to God: for example, "...and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long years" (23:6). He who enters the "courts of the Lord" experiences "the living God" (84:3). However, the foregoing verses do not represent merely a private experience, the personal prayer of one who pours his heart out before God, as did those of Samuel's mother Hannah at Shiloh (I Samuel 2:1ff) or of King Hezekiah, who went up to God's house at a time of great national distress (Isaiah 37:1ff). Some psalms, such as 122, were composed expressly for the pilgrims to Jerusalem, who prayed as a

congregation. See, for example, "My soul thirsts for God, the living God; O when will I come to appear before God... move with the crowd, with the festive throng, to the House of God, with joyous shouts of praise" (42:2,5).

The chief object of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem is, indeed, to "see God's face", as is written: "Three times a year all your males shall see the face of the Sovereign, the Lord" (Exodus 23:17; 34:23; Deuteronomy 16:16; Psalms 84:8). The poets' description of this experience is highly anthropomorphic:

> Then I, justified, will behold Your face;
> awake, I am filled with the vision of You. (Ps. 17:15)
> One thing I ask of the Lord,
> only that do I seek:
> to live in the house of the Lord
> all the days of my life,
> to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord,
> and frequent His temple. (Ps. 27:4)

Several psalmists state explicitly that this experience of "beholding God's face" involves collective prayer. On such festive occasions (see, inter alia, 42:3,5; 43:3,4; 55:14; 57:10; 63:2,3; 65:5; 84:2,5,11), the group praying together is termed "servants of the Lord":

> Now bless the Lord,
> all you servants of the Lord
> who stand nightly
> in the house of the Lord. (Ps. 134:1)
> Praise the name of the Lord;
> give praise, you servants of the Lord
> who stand in the house of the Lord,
> in the courts of the house of our God. (Ps. 135:1-2)

Collective and individual salvation was thus forthcoming from Zion. The Ark itself was carried into war, that God might fight Israel's battles (Numbers 10:35-36). The biblical narrative highlights the carrying forth of the "Ark of the Covenant of the Lord of Hosts Enthroned on the Cherubim" into the battle of Eben-ha-Ezer (I Samuel 4:4,5). The people cheered the Ark as if cheering a king: "All Israel burst into a great shout, so that the earth resounded" (ibid. verse 5). Indeed, "From Zion, perfect in beauty, God appeared" (Psalms 50:2).

The ethical aspect of this experience is of special interest to us. Psalm 15 enumerates the qualities and behavior that confer the right to sojourn in God's tent and dwell on His holy mountain. The portrait painted is of a righteous man of the people, a person of clemency and integrity. This ideal of the pious man of the people is undoubtedly associated with the practice of pilgrimage. One psalmist who was privileged to perform this commandment declared "My feet are on level ground. In assemblies I will bless the Lord" (Psalms 26:12). One who felt God's nearness, whether upon deliverance from an enemy or illness or during prayer in the Temple, felt obligated to proclaim this sense in public, to spread the tidings of

God's salvation (Psalms 22:23,24,26,27-32; 30:12-13; 31:11; 33:1; 34:2-4; 35:18, 28; 40:8-11; 43:4; 57:10-11; 73:28; 92:15-16; 118:17-18).

The author of Psalm 73 provides some insight into the origin of this sense of obligation: The psalm, whose subject is the problem of theodicy, opens with an anticipation of its conclusion: "God is truly good to Israel, to those whose heart is pure" (verse 1). However, the poet's spiritual point of origin, the feeling that impelled him, is entirely different:

> As for me, my feet had almost strayed,
> my steps were nearly led off course,
> for I envied the wanton;
> I saw the wicked at ease.
> They suffer no pangs;
> Their bodies are strong and flawless.[37] (Ps. 73:2-4)

The poet goes on to describe the dominance of evil in the world and the cynicism of the prideful prosperous who stop at no means, including betrayal, to achieve their selfish ends. He speaks of his torment upon seeing the evil thrive and the honest and pure suffer. In his despair, he had considered betrayal: "Had I decided to say these things, I should have been false to the circle of Your disciples" (73:15). Verse 17 records a striking reversal of attitude, a sudden insight: "until I entered God's sanctuaries and understood their fate." This verse has been the subject of much exegesis through the ages, as well as of modern research. Some (R. David Kimhi, Ibn Ezra) see the verse as an allusion to the questioning of the oracular Urim and Tummim, to the seeking of the divine purpose through the Temple priests. Buber interprets the phrase "God's sanctuaries" as a metaphor for divine secrets.[38] All these interpretations, however, stray far from the simple meaning of the text, which refers to the poet's participation in collective prayer and ritual in the Temple. The plural form of "God's sanctuaries" alludes to the several buildings on the Temple Mount, as do the words of the people quoted by Jeremiah: "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are these!" (Jer. 7:4).

Thus, when the poet enters the Temple and participates in communal prayer, ritual, and processions, when the spiritual exaltation of the impassioned throng engulfs him, he then experiences an epiphanic understanding of the true meaning of life. The author of Psalm 42 also writes of the exaltation and profundity of this experience:

> When I think of this, I pour out my soul:
> how I walked with the crowd, moved with them,
> the festive throng, to the House of God
> with joyous shouts of praise.

It is this spiritual elevation for which the author of Psalm 84 yearns so intensely:

---

37. Masoretic reading: "Death has no pangs for them, their body is healthy."
38. See note 32 above.

I long, I yearn for the courts of the Lord;
my body and soul shout for joy to the living God...
Better one day in Your courts than a thousand
[elsewhere];
Better stand at the threshold of God's house
than dwell in the tents of the wicked. (84:3,11)

Moreover, in accordance with the above-mentioned ancient commandment, "Three times a year all your males shall see [Masoretic punctuation: "be seen before"] the face of the Sovereign, the Lord," this experience is described in terms of seeing God: "In Your behalf my heart says 'Seek My face!'; O Lord, I seek Your face" (27:8); or "Then I, justified, will behold Your face; awake, I am filled with the vision of You" (17:15). The phrases "the face of God" or "the vision of God" (תמונת ה') are simply anthropomorphic expressions of the poet's sense of the unmediated presence of the divine. These phrases parallel those such as "God's glory" or "God's might", which refer to the martial aspect of the God of Israel as "Lord, the Warrior" (Exodus 15:3). We may thus infer that Psalm 24:7-10 constitutes a liturgy recited when the Ark was returned from the battlefield to the Holy of Holies. The words "O gates, lift up your heads! Up high, your everlasting doors" (24:7,9) are a call to the Temple gates to rise and admit the Ark, the lofty royal throne that reaches the heavens, as envisioned by Isaiah (6:1).

The experience of the pilgrims who participate in the Temple processions and worship entails more than the spiritual sensations described in the documents of the mystics, encompassing man's most fleshly aspects as well. Says the poet, "I long, I yearn for the courts of the Lord; *my body and soul* shout for joy to the living God" (84:3). Just as God is not perceived as an abstract spiritual entity but rather as a living personality that can be seen, one that is frequently described in strikingly corporal language, thus man's experience of the divine comprehends both his body and his spirit in their entirety.

This existential totality of the divine, as well as the comprehensiveness of human experience of the divine, are characteristic of the Bible and to a great extent of the sages as well. This totality distinguishes the view of the Bible and sages from later religious conceptions which – influenced by Greek philosophy, whether Aristotelian or Platonic – differentiated between body and soul, matter and spirit.

Furthermore, the fulfillment of man's longing for the divine is not perceived as the individual achievement of one who withdraws from society in order to cleave to his God. This realization is, rather, a communal achievement, or let us say that of an individual who belongs to a community, who identifies with its longings and its prayers, as we learn from psalms 42:5; 43:4; 55:14; 84:5,11; 134:1; 135:1-2, and others.

It is clear from the psalms of the poor and persecuted that isolation from the community was considered neither a virtue nor a condition for religious creativity,

as it was in Christian mysticism. On the contrary, one who is separated from the community is also distanced from God – in other words, one who is alone, ill, or persecuted feels abandoned by God. Integration within society and within the praying congregation signifies proximity to God. The author of Psalm 73 therefore speaks of the despair he experienced "until I entered God's sanctuary" – until he felt spiritual exaltation as one of the praying Temple congregation.

Scholars and commentators have tried to fathom the nature of the spiritual transformation this poet experienced. Did he find an answer to the question of divine justice that had so tormented him? The truth is that the psalm provides no intellectual answer, no fruit of analytic reasoning. Read as a rational "solution" to the problem, verses 18-20 sound exceedingly banal:

> You surround them with flattery;
> You make them fall through blandishments.
> How suddenly are they ruined,
> wholly swept away by terrors.
> When You are aroused You despise their image,
> as one does a dream after waking, O Lord. (73:18-20)

The wicked do indeed disappear suddenly, as if they have slipped and fallen into a divine trap; they vanish like a nightmare forgotten with morning. But this is in itself insufficient consolation. The eclipse of the wicked is only half the truth. What matters more is the existential feeling of the righteous man, the import and profundity of his experience of God's nearness as compared to the worthlessness of the wicked's prosperity. When the poet finds God he senses for the first time the true meaning of life, a meaning that is not transient but permanent. His bitterness dissolves and his despair evaporates, for one who has attained the pinnacle of mortal bliss by experiencing God's nearness knows that the prosperity of the wicked is illusory and their well-being evanescent. Even the question of divine justice that had so tormented the poet loses its urgency, for he now knows that the good fortune of the wicked is superficial only. He continues:

> Yet I was always with you,
> You held my right hand;
> You guided me by Your counsel
> and led me toward honor.
> Whom else have I in heaven?
> And having You, I want no one on earth.
> My mind and body fail;
> but God is the stronghold of my mind, my portion
> forever. (73:23-26)

The poet feels that God holds his hand and guides him. As man he is mortal and will one day cease to be, but God is with him as the rock of his spirit. These verses do not indicate belief in revival of the dead or an afterlife. The poet rather senses intuitively that God's nearness is not confined to earthly existence: God is the rock of his soul, and fear of death will not overcome him. Other psalmists have expressed similar conviction: "Your faithfulness is better than life" (63:4); "The source of

life is with You; we are enlightened by Your light" (36:10). From the moment one attains nearness to God, nothing else is wanting in either heaven or earth: "Whom else have I in heaven? And having You, I want no one on earth" (73:25).

The psalmist closes with the conclusion his epiphany has made inevitable:

> Those who keep far from you perish;
> You annihilate all who are untrue to You.
> As for me, nearness to God is good;
> I have made the Lord God my refuge,
> that I may recount all Your works. (73:27-28)

Remoteness from God and infidelity to His ways bring annihilation; antithetically, nearness to God is a refuge, a source of security mightier than death. It is only in the last line of the psalm that the poet speaks of the practical implication of his enlightenment: "that I may recount all Your works". He feels obligated to publicize the works of God that he has seen and experienced. Embodied in this line is the internalization of a ritual-liturgical experience that, when removed from the circumstances of its origin, becomes part of the poet's sensibility, shaping his entire personality anew. This new sensibility, furthermore, evolves beyond its rudimentary stage and is translated into act: the poet feels an inner committment to share his awareness of God's greatness, and takes upon himself the social mission of telling the world of His works.

This theme pervades a great many of the psalms. For example:

> The Lord is my allotted share and portion;
> You control my fate...
> I am ever mindful of the Lord's presence;
> He is at my right hand; I shall never be shaken.
> So my heart rejoices, my whole being exults,
> and my body rests secure...
> In Your presence is perfect joy;
> delights are ever in your right hand. (Ps. 16:5,8,11)

In this psalm, the poet's sense of God's proximity is expressed as one side of a dialogue informed by the confidence that He will not abandon His faithful one to Sheol or to the pit.[39]

In Psalm 40, this same committment animates the confession of one facing a new danger after having been saved from death. He invokes God, stressing that he had proclaimed His righteousness, beneficence and steadfast love before "the great congregation" (v. 10), knowing that God does not want sacrifices. The Psalmist speaks of a "scroll of a book written on me" (v. 8) and of "the Law which is in my inmost parts" (v. 9) – metaphorical expressions taken from Ezekiel (2:9-10; 3:1-3), where they have a literal meaning, the contents of that scroll being the living word

39. See commentaries, as well as Barth, op. cit. and Buber, op. cit. (note 32).

of God, while here the Psalmist refers to the written law, the Torah.
Another psalmist, broken-heartedly asking God for forgiveness for his sins, makes a vow: "I will teach transgressors Your ways, that sinners may return to You" (51:15). Yet another seeks to: "...praise You in a great congregation, acclaim You in a mighty throng..." (35:18; cf. 34:2-4; 118:17-18).

One who has experienced God's salvation or sensed his closeness in a ritual-liturgical experience, then, seems to feel spiritually obligated to reform sinners or proclaim God's works to the multitudes. Social activism as an expression of feelings of gratitude [to God] is rooted in ancient tradition. Abraham experienced God's righteousness in order that he teach his children to follow His ways: "For I have singled him out [or: "known him"], that he may instruct his children and his posterity to keep the way of the Lord, by doing what is just and right..." (Gen. 18:19). This theme is also rooted in the ancient commandment to "reprove your neighbor" (Lev. 19:17).

The avowed obligation to praise God as expressed in the psalms breaks the bounds of the poet's narrow social group. In his fervor he appeals to the "families of the peoples" (96:7); the "many islands" (97:1); the heavens and the earth (96:11) and the "sea and all within it" (98:7). He calls upon the rivers to clap their hands and the mountains to sing joyously together (98:7), and invokes the sun, moon, and stars, those who dwell above and those who dwell below, that they may join in extolling God (Ps. 148). Geographical distance vanishes and barriers of time and space crumble before his ardor. The entire cosmos takes on a personal aspect as seas and rivers, hills and mountains, beast and fowl, are all addressed as "you".

VI

The all-encompassing sense of mission that imbues these devoted psalmists shows them the world in a new light. It is here that the psalms converge with prophecy: as the psalmist's fervent engaging of nature in God's glorification ifuses the world with humanity and erases borders of time and space, so the prophet's ecstasy creates a new inner world in which ordinary objects are transformed and invested with traditional elements, thereby becoming props for the prophetic message. Just as the prophet's vision shows him his immediate surroundings in the light of his mission, the ecstatic ardor of the psalmist's prayer overcomes his alienation from the inanimate world, enlisting it as a partner in his task. The poet's prayer and praise of God generate an endless state of dialogue with his surroundings and with all the treasures of the cosmos. Most important, it is the apostolic impulse of these poets who have been delivered from death or from abysmal despair that constitutes the foundation of the prophetic mind, whose sovereign motive is the social mission.

There are of course important differences between the prophet and the psalmist. The psalmist does not reprove his contemporaries, does not dissociate himself from

society as does the prophet. On the contrary, it is his rootedness in his social group that allows him to praise God publicly. He addresses the people not as a collective entity, but as fellows and friends. The scope of his mission is personal; it is the fervor of his devotion that expands his prayer to include the entire universe.

For the prophet, however, it is the mission – more precisely, the active, "educational" obligation vis-a-vis society – that is the organic point of departure. Although the preaching of wisdom literature is a salient example of the educational activism inherent in the internal structure of biblical monotheism, this preaching does not emanate from a particular personal experience, but is rather performed by elders and wise men who wish to exhort their fellows, particularly the youth, to adhere to just and upright ways. Their arguments are largely pragmatic. The tasks the psalmists take upon themselves, on the other hand, seem to issue from a profound existential experience that is felt as God's nearness. I contend, therefore, that it is these psalms, and others like them, that reflect the psychological ground from which prophecy grew.

Nevertheless, additional differences divide the psalmist and the prophet. The psalmist has not heard the voice of God; he bears no well-devined message imposed on him from the outside. The proclamation of God's works is, for the psalmist, an emotional and spiritual need, while the prophet's mission is *imposed* upon him. This mission created distance between the prophet and his contemporaries, a distance which caused him painful dilemmas: on the one hand, the prophet's identification with his Sender leads him to reprove, warn, and threaten destruction and woe; on the other hand, he identifies with his people and serves as their advocate before God. This inner conflict between the role of prosecutor and that of defender – a conflict that rent Jeremiah's soul – is the salient mark of the prophetic mind. These two conflicting elements – the sense of mission and the desire to be Israel's advocate – are both rooted in the popular Israelite faith, and both grew organically from this popular religious stratum that found its literary embodiment in the Psalms.

Immanuel 21 (Summer 1987)