

The Bible and the World

By Abraham Joshua Heschel

Is the Bible an Illusion?

We have discussed the idea of prophecy; we have dealt with the claim of the prophets. We must now turn to the Bible itself. The Bible is not an abstract idea, a spiritual possibility. It is more than a claim made by men who lived once upon a time. The Bible is an ever present reality, and it is in the presence of the Bible that we raise again the problem of prophetic inspiration.

At what source did the prophets find that stream of insight which has been channeled into the books of the Bible? Who has done unto them what they are able to do unto us? Did their own heart radiate a conceit which is able to illumine the world's spiritual gloom?

The prophet's answer is consistently the same: It was a word of God that scorched my tongue. Is it right for us to ignore, belittle or traduce that claim?

We are confronted with a stubborn fact. A galaxy of men such as Moses, Nathan, Elijah, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, claim to have perceived a word of God. If their claim is false, are we not compelled to condemn them as impostors who have confused the minds of men for more than three thousand years?

The character of the Bible is a most embarrassing issue; it is too important to be ignored. More disquieting than the personal problem, namely, whether we are ready to believe, is the objective question: is Biblical prophecy an illusion? The affirmation of this question is fraught with grave implications. The issue, then, is not only whether we can believe in revelation, but also whether we can believe in the negation of revelation.

Is God Absent Everywhere?

It may seem easy to play with the idea that the Bible is a book like many other books, or that the story of Sinai is a fairy tale. Yet it is in such playing that we may gamble away our commitment, our tie to God.

Consider what such denial implies. If Moses and Isaiah have failed to find out what the will of God is, who will? If God is not found in the Bible, where should we seek Him?

The question about the Bible is the question about the world. It is an ultimate question. If God had nothing to do with the prophets, then He has nothing to do with mankind. And if God had anything to do with the prophets, then the prophets were neither liars nor impostors.

And yet, we, Philistines, continue to insist upon intellectual clichés, upon setting up our own life as a model and measure of what prophets could possibly attain. We oppose the prophets' word with our claims that God can never reach an ear, God will never stoop to light a word in the mind of man. But this is the principle of fools: what is unattainable to us is unattainable to others. The average man is not the measure. It is not an achievement of man that we are exploring. It is something in which the power of God was active. It is not for us to say that God must conform to our standards. The platitudes of our theories must not decide the

greatest issue. There are many things between God and man of which scholars have never dreamt. Does psychology decide the validity of mathematical laws? Does history proceed the way logic predicts?

The Place of the Bible in the World

What is the place of the Bible in the world of spirit? What shall the Bible be likened to?

The book that avers:

Grace is deceitful,
and beauty is vain

shall it be appraised for its esthetic achievements? Some people hail the Bible as "literature,"¹ as if such juxtaposition were the highest praise, as if "literature" were the climax of spiritual reality.

What would Moses, what would Isaiah have said to such praise? Perhaps the same as Einstein would have said, if the manuscript of his Theory of Relativity were acclaimed for its beautiful handwriting. Who but a child would claim that the essence of the ocean is its beauty? Or that the meaning of the stars lies in their charm?

Since the ninth century the Mohammedans have presented as a proof of the divine origin of Islam "the beauty of the Koran," or "the insuperability of the Koranic style."² The merit of the claim has always escaped the understanding of non-Mohammedans. It is significant, however, that the esthetic quality of the Bible has never been used as an argument in proving the dogma of revelation. How could Jews and Christians—until recent times—fail to see that the Bible is supreme in form; that never have thoughts been cast in a finer mold; that no man's imagination has ever conceived of a work comparable to it in profound, unvanishing and often unbearable beauty?

We all have a need for beauty and a thirst for noble expression. Beauty and noble expression in varying degrees may be found all over the world. But is the soul in need of beauty and expression alone? The soul, we believe, is in need of consecration; to achieve that goal we must turn to the Bible. There are many literatures, but only one Bible.

The Bible is an answer to the question: how to sanctify life. And if we say we feel no need for sanctification, we only prove that the Bible is indispensable. Because it is the Bible that teaches us how to feel the need for sanctification.

¹ The theory that the Bible is literature was, indeed, maintained by the contemporaries of Ezekiel. The prophet is charged by the Lord to say to "the forest": "Hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God: Behold I will kindle a fire in thee and it shall devour every green tree in thee . . . and all faces from the south to the north shall be seared thereby. And all flesh shall see that I the Lord have kindled it; it shall not be quenched." But the prophet knew what his people were going to maintain, and he said to the Lord: "Ah, Lord God! They say of me: Is he not a maker of parables?" (Ezekiel 21:1-5).

"Alas for the man who regards the Torah as a mere book of tales and everyday matters! If that were so, we, even we, could compose a Torah dealing with everyday affairs and *of even greater excellence*. Nay, the princes of the world possess books of greater worth which we could use as a model for composing some such torah." *Zohar* III 152a. An appreciation of the Bible's literary qualities is found, however, in Moses Ibn Ezra, *Shirat Israel*.

² See Tor Andrae, *Die Person Muhammads*, Stockholm, 1918, p. 97, and Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam*, Chicago, 1946, p. 94ff. On the Mutazilites' reservations, see I. Goldizher *Vorlesungen über den Islam*, Heidelberg, 1910, p. 102.

What the Bible Did

What have the prophets done for the human situation? Let us try to recall but a few out of many things.

The Bible showed man his independence of nature, his superiority to conditions, and called on him to realize the tremendous implications of simple acts. Not only the stars but also the deeds of man travel a course that either reflects or perverts a thought of God. The degree of our appreciation of the Bible is, therefore, determined by the degree of our sensitivity to the divine dignity of human deeds. The insight into the divine implications of human life is the distinct message of the Bible.

The Bible has shattered man's illusion of being alone. Sinai broke the cosmic silence that thickens our blood with despair. God does not stand aloof from our cries; He is not only a pattern, but a power, and life is a response, not a soliloquy.

The Bible shows the way of God with man and the way of man with God. It contains both the complaint of God against the wicked and the shriek of the smitten man, demanding justice of God.

And there dwells also in its pages reminders of man's incredible callousness and obstinacy, of his immense capacity to bring about his doom as well as the assurance that beyond all evil is the compassion of God.

He who seeks an answer to the most pressing question, what is living? will find an answer in the Bible: man's destiny is to be a partner rather than a master. There is a task, a law, and a way: the task is redemption, the law, to do justice, to love mercy, and the way is the secret of being *human and holy*. When we are gasping with despair, when the wisdom of science and the splendor of the arts fail to save us from fear and the sense of futility, the Bible offers us the only hope: history is a circuitous way for the steps of the Messiah.

No Words More Knowing

There are no words in the world more knowing, more disclosing and more indispensable, words both stern and graceful, heart-rending and healing. A truth so universal: God is One. A thought so consoling: He is with us in distress. A responsibility so overwhelming: His name can be desecrated. A map of time: from creation to redemption. Guideposts along the way: the Seventh Day. An offering: contrition of the heart. A utopia: would that all people were prophets. The insight: man lives by his faithfulness; his home is in time and his substance in deeds. A standard so bold: ye shall be holy. A commandment so daring: love thy neighbor as thyself. A fact so sublime: human and divine pathos can be in accord. And a gift so undeserved: the ability to repent.

The Bible is mankind's greatest privilege. It is so far off and so direct, categorical in its demands and full of compassion in its understanding of the human situation. No other book so loves and respects the life of man. No loftier songs about his true plight and glory, about his agony and joys, misery and hope, have ever been expressed, and nowhere has man's need for guidance and the certainty of his ultimate redemption been so keenly conceived. It has the words that startle the guilty and the promise that upholds the forlorn. And he who seeks a language in which to utter his deepest concern, to pray, will find it in the Bible.

The Bible is not an end but a beginning; a precedent, not a story. Its being embedded in particular historic situations has not deterred it from being everlasting. Nothing in it is surreptitious or trite. It is not an epic about the life of heroes but the story of every man in all climates and all ages. Its topic is the world, the whole of history, containing the pattern of a constitution of a united mankind as well as guidance toward establishing such a union. It shows the way to nations as well as to individuals. It continues to scatter seeds of justice and compassion, to echo God's cry to the world and to pierce man's armor of callousness.

The Singularity of the Bible

When a great poet appears, he does not offer proof of his being a poet. His poetry speaks for itself, creating in us the power to appreciate its novel and exceptional vision of life at the price of abandoning established conceptions. We do not identify his work as poetry by means of preconceived notions. *Genius identifies itself.*

The Bible is not in need of proof of its singularity. It has exercised power over the spirit of man throughout the ages *not* because it was labeled "The Word of God" and was poured into the minds of man through the funnel of a dogma, but because it contained a light that set souls aflame. Had it come down to us without such renown, without such a label, our amazement at its powers would have been even stronger.

Why does the Bible surpass everything created by man? Why is there no work worthy of comparison with it? Why is there no substitute for the Bible, no parallel to the history it has engendered? Why must all who seek the living God turn to its pages?

Set the Bible beside any of the truly great books produced by the genius of man, and see how they are diminished in stature. The Bible shows no concern with literary form, with verbal beauty, yet its absolute sublimity rings through all its pages. Its lines are so monumental and at the same time so simple that whoever tries to compete with them produces either a commentary or a caricature. It is a work we do not know how to assess. The plummet line of scholarship cannot probe its depth nor will critical analysis ever grasp its essence. Other books you can estimate, you can measure, compare; the Bible you can only extol. Its insights surpass our standards. There is nothing greater.

Is it not true that the Bible is the only book in the whole world that can never be replaced, the only book without which our past as well as our future is dark, meaningless and unbearable? None can usurp its place, none can inherit its role. One is afraid to utter its praise.

How to Account for It

Other books you can try to account for, but an attempt to explain the Bible is a supreme opportunity to become ridiculous.

Use your imagination and try to conceive of a book that would excel the Bible, and you will admit that the power of the spirit has never gone farther than the Bible. Where is the mind that could express its worth? Endeavoring to appraise it, you discover that the mind is incongruous with the task. It is not a book-it is the limit of the spirit on earth.

Our heart stops when we ponder its terrible greatness. It is the only thing in the world which we may associate with eternity; the only thing in the world which is eternal. The eternal Book. The earth may not be the most important planet, our eon may not *be* the only one. But in this world, in this eon, the Bible is the most enduring vessel of the spirit.

How are we to comprehend this incomprehensible fact? How and whence did it emerge? What were the circumstances which concurred to permit this incomparable marvel to come to pass? If God was silent while Moses lived, if God did not speak while Moses heard, then Moses was a being whose nature surpassed anything human; then the origin of the Bible is not a mystery but total darkness.

The Omnipotence of the Bible

The omnipotence of God is not always perceptible, but *the omnipotence of the Bible* is the great miracle of history. Like God, it is often misused and distorted by unclean minds, yet its capacity to withstand the most vicious attacks is boundless. The vigor and veracity of its ideas are perceptible under the rust and batter of two millennia of debate and dogma: it does not fade in spite of theology nor collapse under abuse. The Bible is *the perpetual motion of the spirit*, an ocean of meaning, its waves beating against man's abrupt and steep shortcomings, its echo reaching into the blind alleys of his wrestling with despair.

No sadder proof can be given by a man of his own spiritual opacity than his insensitiveness to the Bible. "A ship which looms large in the river seems tiny when on the ocean." The greatness of the Bible becomes more manifest when studied within the framework of universal history, and its majesty increases with the reader's familiarity.

Irrefutably, indestructibly, never wearied by time, the Bible wanders through the ages, giving itself with ease to all men, as if it belonged to every soul on earth. It speaks in every language and in every age. It benefits all the arts and does not compete with them. We all draw upon it, and it remains pure, inexhaustible and complete. In three thousand years it has not aged a day. It is a book that cannot die. Oblivion shuns its pages. Its power is not subsiding. In fact, it is still at the very beginning of its career, the full meaning of its content having hardly touched the threshold of our minds; like an ocean at the bottom of which countless pearls lie, waiting to be discovered, its spirit is still to be unfolded. Though its words seem plain and its idiom translucent, unnoticed meanings, undreamed-of intimations break forth constantly. More than two thousand years of reading and research have not succeeded in exploring its full meaning. Today it is as if it had never been touched, never been seen, as if we had not even begun to read it.

Its spirit is too much for one generation to bear. Its words reveal more than we can absorb. All we usually accomplish is the attempt to appropriate a few single lines so that our spirit becomes synonymous with a passage.

Precious to God

All flesh is grass,
And all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field ...
The grass withers, the flower fades,
But the word of our God shall stand for ever.
Isaiah 40:6-7,8

Never before and never since has such a claim been expressed. And who will doubt that the claim has proved true? Has not the word, spoken to the people of Israel, penetrated to all the corners of the world and been accepted as the message of God in a thousand languages? Why did most religions die which were not born of its seed, while every generation welcomes anew the spirit that sprouts from it? Indeed, countless cults, states, empires withered like grass; books by the millions are in the graves; "But the word of our God shall stand for ever." In

moments of great crisis they all fail—priests, philosophers, scientists—the prophets alone prevail.

The wisdom, teaching, and counsel of the Bible are not in conflict with the ultimate attainments of the human mind, but, rather, well ahead of our attitudes. The idea of the equality of man, for example, has become a commonplace in our mouths, but how far is it from being an irresistible insight or an honest, ineradicable conviction? The Bible is not behind the times; it is ages ahead of our aspirations.

There is one thing we should try to imagine. In the whirlwind of history the Bible could have been lost; Abraham, Moses, Isaiah retained as vague memories. What would be missing in the world, what would be the condition and faith of man, had the Bible not been preserved?

It is the fountainhead of the finest strivings of man in the Western World. It has elicited more holiness and compassion from mankind than we are able to comprehend. Most of what is noble and just is derived from its spirit. It has given birth and shape to a myriad of precious things in the lives of individuals and peoples.

Free of any tinge of vested interests, of class or nation; free of any regard for persons, be it Moses, the highest of prophets, be it David, the most revered of kings; unconstrained by false deference to any institution, be it the state of Judah or the temple in Jerusalem; it is a book which can conceivably be precious not only to man but to God. Its aim is not to record history but rather to record the encounter of the divine and the human on the level of concrete living. Incomparably more important than all the beauty or wisdom that it bestows upon our lives is the way it opens to man an understanding of what God means, of attaining holiness through justice, through simplicity of soul, through choice. Above all it never ceases to proclaim that worship of God without justice to man is an abomination; that while man's problem is God, God's problem is man.

Holiness in Words

The Bible is *holiness in words*. To the man of our age nothing is as familiar and trite as words. Of all things they are the cheapest, most abused and least esteemed. They are the objects of perpetual defilement. We all live in them, feel in them, think in them, but, failing to uphold their independent dignity, to respect their power and weight, they turn waif, elusive—a mouthful of dust.³ When placed before the Bible, the words of which are like dwellings made of rock, we do not know how to find the door.

Some people may wonder: why was the light of God given in the form of language? How is it conceivable that the divine should be contained in such brittle vessels as consonants and vowels? This question betrays the sin of our age: to treat lightly the ether which carries the light-waves of the spirit. What else in the world is as capable of bringing man and man together over the distances in space and in time? Of all things on earth, words alone never die. They have so little matter and so much meaning.

The Bible does not deal with divinity but with humanity. Addressing human beings about human affairs, whose language should be employed if not man's? And yet, it is as if God took these Hebrew words and breathed into them of His power, and the words became a live wire charged with His spirit. To this very day they are hyphens between heaven and earth.

What other medium could have been employed to convey the divine? Pictures enameled on

³ A. J. Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, p. 25.

the moon? Statues hewn out of the Rockies? What is wrong with the human ancestry of scriptural vocabulary?

If the Bible were a *temple*, equal in majesty and splendor to the simple grandeur of its present form, its divine language might have carried the sign of divine dignity with more undeniable force to most people. But man would have worshiped His work rather than His will ... and this is exactly what the Bible has tried to prevent.

Just as it is impossible to conceive of God without the world, so it is impossible to conceive of His concern without the Bible.

If God is alive, then the Bible is His voice. No other work is as worthy of being considered a manifestation of His will. There is no other mirror in the world where His will and spiritual guidance is as unmistakably reflected. If the belief in the immanence of God in nature is plausible, then the belief in the immanence of God in the Bible is compelling.

Israel as Evidence

Judaism is not a prophetic religion but a people's religion. Prophets were found among other nations as well. Unique was the entrance of holiness into the life of all Israel and the fact of prophecy being translated into concrete *history* rather than remaining a private experience of individuals. Biblical revelation took place not for the benefit of the prophets but for the sake of Israel and all men.

In almost every cult and religion certain beings, things, places or actions were considered to be holy. However, the idea of the holiness of an entire people, Israel as a holy people, is without parallel in human history. Holiness is the most precious word in religion and was only used to describe what was believed to be an undeniable manifestation in a certain being of a startling, supernatural quality. Only extraordinary, supernatural events in the life of all of Israel would have made the usage of the term "a holy people" possible.

Had Israel never received a revelation, the puzzle would have been greater. How, of all nations, did an obscure, politically insignificant people acquire the power to speak for the souls of all men in the Western World?

The wonder of Israel, the marvel of Jewish existence, the survival of holiness in the history of Israel is a continuous verification of the marvel of the Bible. Revelation to Israel became a revelation through Israel.

Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, when asked by Frederick the Great: "Herr Professor, give me a proof of the Bible, but briefly, for I have little time," answered: "Majesty, the Jews."⁴

How to Share the Certainty of Israel

Our attitude to the Bible is more than a problem of isolated individual faith. It is as members of the community of Israel that our ultimate decision must be made. Estranged from the community of Israel and its continuous response, who could understand the voice? We are close to the people reprimanded, to the situation in which the words were said, as well as to the prophets. As Jews we are the prophet's spiritual contemporaries.

⁴ A. Jeremias, *Jüdische Frömmigkeit*, p. 57.

It is not the rejection of a dogma that would sever us from the Bible but the tearing of the bonds which tie us with the people that lived with the voice.

Our problem, then, is how to share the certainty of Israel that the Bible contains that which God wants us to know and to hearken to; how to attain a collective sense for the presence of God in the Biblical words. In this problem lies the dilemma of our fate, and in the answer lies the dawn or the doom.

Not because of Proof

He who cannot make up his mind, who will not introduce his soul to the Bible until the reasons for its divine dignity have gone all the way to meet his mind, is like a person who refuses to look at a painting before he can decipher the name of the artist signed at its corner. He does not realize it is the work which identifies the signature. Signatures may be forged, a work of art must be created. We easily forget that reasons, too, are in need of reasons; that no proof is ultimate or self-supporting.

The Bible is its own witness. The evidence for its unique origin is that of *self-evidence*. It has in the course of the ages identified itself as a voice of God. If there is anything in the world that ever deserved the attribute of the divine, it is the Bible. There are many books about God: the Bible is the book of God. Disclosing the love of God for man, it opened our eyes to see the unity of that which is meaningful to mankind and that which is sacred to God, showing us how to make a nation, not only the life of an individual, holy. It always holds out new promise to failing, honest souls, while those who discard it court disaster.

We do not accept the word of God because of proof one, two, three ... We accept it because in approaching it our splendid ideas turn pale, because even indisputable proofs appear vulgar at the sound of prophetic words. We do not decide to turn to the Bible because of reasons; we turn to the Bible in order to find a meaning for existence that gives firmness to all reasons.

But our insights may be wrong. Is it not possible that we have all been deceived? Indeed, everything is conceivable, but in such case we must not forget what such a possibility implies.

To deny the divine origin of the Bible is to brand the entire history of spiritual efforts and attainments in Judaism, Christianity and Islam as the outgrowth of a colossal lie, the triumph of a deception which captured the finest souls for more than two thousand years. Yet, an assertion such as this would be such a formidable shock as to have repercussions upon our very ability to make such a statement. If the finest souls are so frail, how can we claim to attain knowledge about the prophets' self-deception? What would remain for us except to despair? The Bible has either originated in a lie or in an act of God. If the Bible is a deception, then the devil is almighty and there is no hope of ever attaining truth, no reliance on the spirit; our very thinking would be useless and our efforts futile. Ultimately, then, we do not accept the Bible because of reasons, but because if the Bible is a lie all reasons are a fake.

Source: Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man. A Philosophy of Judaism*, New York: Harper & Row 1966, pp. 235-248.