

Jüdische Kultur

Studien zur Geistesgeschichte, Religion und Literatur

Herausgegeben von
Karl E. Grözinger

Band 21

2009

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Philosophy, Theology
and Interreligious Dialogue

Edited by Stanisław Krajewski
and Adam Lipszyc



2009

Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

David Novak

Heschel's Phenomenology of Revelation

I.

In his 1962 book, *The Prophets*, my late revered teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "I still maintain the soundness of the method described above, which in important aspects reflects the method of phenomenology."¹ By saying "I still maintain," Heschel is informing his English language readers that *The Prophets* had not been written *de novo*. This book is admittedly a reworking and expansion of his 1935 doctoral dissertation at the University of Berlin, entitled *Die Prophetie*, literally "prophecy." (Due to the virtual impossibility of the publication of books by Jews in Germany at that time, let alone "Jewish" books, let alone a book by a Polish Jew like Heschel, *Die Prophetie* was published in Kraków by the Polish Academy of Sciences in 1936).² Whatever Heschel's reasons for changing the title of this newly reworked and expanded book, the original title more precisely indicates the phenomenological method Heschel employed in all his theological reflections thereafter.³ Indeed, *Die Prophetie* sets the tone for all these subsequent reflections. Thus it is to this book, which is "ur-Heschel," that we should look for his clearest and most profound phenomenology, which then and thereafter was always a phenomenology of God's revelation to man.

When reading *Die Prophetie* straight through, some of us familiar with Heschel's theological writing in English have been struck by the more philosophically rigorous style of Heschel's German prose. (I confess that even though I have looked into *Die Prophetie* from time to time over the years, I only recently read it from cover to cover.) Indeed, during his lifetime and even thereafter, Heschel has often been criticized for having too poetic, romantic, even a flowery,

style of theological writing. In my opinion, though, Heschel was more fortunate in the language he could employ from German philosophical discourse of the early 1930's than in the language he could not employ from American philosophical discourse in the 1940's. The language of phenomenology was being used by other significant theologians of that time: one, because it gave them a hearing outside traditional religious circles; and two, because it well suited their theological agendas, as we shall soon see in Heschel's case. In America of the 1940's, though, the language of Deweyan pragmatism (which was quite non-metaphysical) and the language of Logical Positivism (which was decidedly anti-metaphysical) were being spoken, with disdain or even contempt for the theological issues of concern to Heschel. Nevertheless, with the influence of such religiously oriented, European phenomenological philosophers as Emmanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur, whose influence on philosophical discourse came too late for Heschel to be able to employ it, Heschel's original theological insights can be repeated and explicated more philosophically today.⁴

So much for style, but what about the content of *Die Prophetie*? A book about "the prophets" would seem to be about the specific teachings of the biblical prophets. In fact, some biblical scholars criticized Heschel for paying too little attention to such specific content in the words of the Hebrew prophets. But a book about "prophecy" is about a *phenomenon*; in this case, the phenomenon is the self-disclosure of the One *whom* biblical prophets *experienced* and *how* they experienced *Him*. For Heschel, the *what* or concrete content of that experience, be it by description or even by prescription, follows from the experience; nevertheless, it is not identical with that experience. The experience itself is greater than any content that might emerge from it. On the other hand, though, that concrete content does not contradict the experience of revelation, a point on which Heschel was close to the view of Franz Rosenzweig about the conjunction of commandment (*Gebot*) and law (*Gesetz*), that is, universal norms can follow from and can thus be consistent with unique divine commands addressed to unique persons.⁵ And, on this point, Heschel differed with Martin Buber, who insisted on the disjunction of commandment and law.⁶ For Heschel, Buber's view bordered on antinomianism.⁷

Heschel keenly appropriated the phenomenological method developed by Edmund Husserl (who was very much alive and at work when *Die Prophetie* was being written), and then critically applied that method to an area of human experience that Husserl himself had expressed no interest in, but which students of Husserl were beginning to explore: religious experience.⁸ For Heschel, the prime religious experience or *Urphänomen* (at least for Jews

1 A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), p. xvi.

2 *Die Prophetie* (Kraków: Im Verlag der Polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1936). On the title page, the reader is informed that in Germany the book can be obtained at "Erich Reiss Verlag, Berlin." Erich Reiss had published Heschel's first book in German in 1935, *Maimonides: Eine Biographie*, in connection with the 800th anniversary of the birth of Maimonides, whom many consider the greatest Jewish theologian of all time, and who was appreciated by Heschel in a far different way than he was by most traditionalist and rationalist scholars. Indeed, it could be said that Heschel approached Maimonides as he approached the prophets: phenomenologically. This comes out in his Hebrew essay, "Did Maimonides Believe He Merited Prophecy?" in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume 2* (heb.) (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1946), pp. 159–88.

3 The only study devoted to Heschel's phenomenology, of which I am aware, is the excellent book by Lawrence Perlman, *Abraham Heschel's Idea of Revelation* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1989). (I thank my friend, and fellow Heschel student, Prof. Reuven Kimelman of Brandeis University, for directing me to this book.) There, Perlman writes that Heschel's theology "is based on a serious philosophical doctrine – Husserlian phenomenology ... this method can be traced back to Heschel's first academic work, *Die Prophetie*, and is the unifying factor of all his subsequent studies." (Ibid., p. 4) My major difference with Perlman is that Heschel surely departed from Husserl in his ontological concerns, a difference he shared with some other contemporary phenomenologists. As such, he was much less consistently Husserlian (even in *Die Prophetie*) than Perlman makes him out to be. See, also, Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1965), pp. 105–06.

4 Perlman rightly concludes his study by emphasizing, "His [Heschel's] thought is clearly positioned in the tradition of continental European philosophy" (*Abraham Heschel's Idea of Revelation*, p. 165).

5 See "Die Bauleute," in F. Rosenzweig, *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1937), pp. 106–21. English translation in *On Jewish Learning*, ed. N. N. Glatzer, trans. W. Wolf (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), pp. 72–92.

6 See M. Buber *Ich und Du* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1962), pp. 113–114. English translation, *I and Thou*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Scribner's, 1970), pp. 160–61.

7 Cf. *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1955), pp. 336–47.

8 See, e.g., M. Scheler, *On the Eternal in Man*, trans. B. Noble (London: SCM Press, 1966), esp. pp. 161–93. Although Scheler was not a disciple of Husserl, his method was very much akin to that of Husserl in a number of aspects. So, nonetheless, Scheler (d. 1928) was considered a phenomenologist by the time Heschel began his work. And, although Heschel did not cite Scheler at all in *Die Prophetie*, he does mention the English translation of the above book by P. Heath, *The Nature of Sympathy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954) twice, and with approval, in *The Prophets* (pp. 313 and 319). For more on comparing Heschel with Scheler, see *infra*, n. 34.

and Christians) is the Hebrew prophets' experience of revelation. Hence, this is where a true religious phenomenology should begin. But why adopt Husserl's methodology? Surely, there were other ways to approach the phenomenon of biblical revelation.

2.

Husserl's methodology suited Heschel's interest in biblical revelation as an *irreducible* phenomenon.⁹ That is, for a traditional Jewish thinker like Heschel, biblical revelation is an experience *sui generis*, which can then be employed as a template to illuminate subsequent experiences that imitate it. Biblical revelation is not an example of a larger and more primordial kind of experience. Instead, revelation has autonomy in the sense that its own norms emerge from it; it is not simply the instantiation of some higher law or standard. Thus the experience of biblical or prophetic revelation does not collapse into something prior like a *cause* is prior to its effect, accordingly making that effect contingent on its cause. Furthermore, the experience of revelation does not *cause* subsequent experience which can then be reduced to it. It is not the first moment in an ongoing process; instead, it is a unique event (what Heschel and some other phenomenologists would call an *Ereignis*).¹⁰ An irreducible phenomenon/event like revelation, therefore, is neither an effect nor a cause. It is neither the result nor the source of something else. Even its content emerges from what it *is saying* rather than what it *has said*.

Even God, who Heschel emphasizes is the *subject* of biblical revelation, does not *present* Himself in that revelation as a cause insofar as a cause is *absent* when one infers from its present effects what that cause has already done.¹¹ Even when God is spoken of in the Bible as the first cause of nature, that assertion is not our inference of the existence of a by now absent God from present experience; instead, God Himself, in the context of directly speaking to a prophet, also presents Himself as nature's still present maker (in the present tense: *oseh ma'seh bre'sheet* in rabbinic Hebrew).¹² Indeed, more often than not, God mentions His own cosmic causation within the context of His dialogue with a prophet. Thus God's relation to the world (*Verhältnis* in German) is *within* and *for the sake of* God's relationship (*Beziehung* in German) with a prophet and the people for whom the prophet hears God's word and through whom God's word reaches this people.

To be sure, the prophets did suffer the absence of the God who "hides Himself" (*el mistater* or *Deus absconditus* or *ein verborgener Gott* – Isaiah 45:15), but that experience did not become the basis from which one infers a hidden ground, which could be the *object* of a direct experience we ourselves could *intend* or conjure up once more. The absence of God, though, is not a ground from which to infer something positive. The absence of God is not a ground

⁹ See E. Husserl, *Ideas*, no. 2, trans. W. R. B. Gibson (London: Collier Macmillan, 1962), pp. 46–47.

¹⁰ Note *Die Prophetie*, p. 55: "Der Prophet erlebt den Akt als bewusstseins-transzendentes Ereignis." See *ibid.*, pp. 100, 120; also, *God in Search of Man*, pp. 209–11. Cf. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, no. 73, 15th ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1979), pp. 381–82. I am not saying Heidegger influenced Heschel. (In fact, Heschel detested Heidegger for both theoretical and moral reasons). Nonetheless, both thinkers were *mutatis mutandis* attempting to come out from under what is now called "ontotheology" and its whole legacy.

¹¹ *Die Prophetie*, p. 101.

¹² See, e.g., *Mishnah*: Berakhot 9.2.

but an *Abgrund* or bottomless abyss; that absence is *groundless*. God's absence is not just a *privatio*, a relative absence or non-being (what is called *mē'on* in Greek). It is an absolute absence or *negatio* (what is called *ouk'on* in Greek).¹³ God is either present or absent, and that is the presence or absence of a subject, not an absent object waiting as it were for us to uncover it and make it present again by some sort of causal inference. Only God can make Himself either present or absent: *ehyeh asher ehyeh* ("I shall be there whenever I shall be there" – Exodus 3:14).¹⁴ Divine presence and divine absence are totally dependent on God's will. Occasionally God tells a prophet His reason for willing to be present or to be absent; more often He does not.

This is why Husserl's famous "bracketing" (*Einklammerung*) of the question of the extra-mental being of the content of experience lends itself to Heschel's phenomenological theology.¹⁵ When one brackets the question of what lies *behind* a phenomenon, this implies a rejection of the principle of sufficient reason as the basis for the explanation of the essence (*Wesen*) of a phenomenon. This is certainly the case with a phenomenon experienced in the fully human world (what Husserl called *Lebenswelt*) as distinct from a phenomenon studied in the abstract atmosphere of a scientific laboratory.¹⁶ A phenomenon like revelation cannot be the subject of an experiment. The God of revelation is not a hypothesis. As such, Heschel points out at the very beginning of *Die Prophetie*, that his phenomenology of revelation can only offer "clarity" and "unlocking" (*Aufschluss*) rather than "truth" (*Wahrheit*) in the sense of verbal correspondence with some external reality that is knowable outside the phenomenon itself, namely, a correspondence that verifies this phenomenon.¹⁷

Following Leibniz, most philosophers have always assumed that the location of the cause of a phenomenon told one all he or she needs to understand about that phenomenon, that is, what makes it what it necessarily is. Husserl's bracketing of this question, which follows Kant's assertion that we can never know the first cause of anything in the world, that we can thus never "get to the bottom of it," shifts the question of experience from *whence* to *how*, that is, how a

¹³ Thus in post-biblical Jewish theology it is emphasized how God creates the world "out of nothing" (*me'ayin*), i.e., *ex nihilo*. See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2.13. For Heschel, influenced by Kabbalah, revelation like creation is an event *sui generis*. See G. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. R. Manheim (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), pp. 32–44. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 12.2/1069b20.

¹⁴ In this translation, I follow Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig who rendered Exod. 3:14, "Ich werde dasein als der ich dasein werde," in *Die Fünf Bücher der Weisung* (Cologne: Jakob Hegner Verlag, 1954), p. 158. Note, also, their translation of Isa. 55:6 ("Seek the Lord where He may be found [*be-himots'o*]"): "Suchet IHN da er sich finden lässt," in *Das Buch Jeschajahu* (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, n.d.), p. 225. Surely, Heschel would agree that we do not find God as one would find an object in the world but, rather, we find God when God as the Subject of the world allows Himself to be found by us, i.e., when God locates us rather than our locating God by our own initiative. See D. Novak, *The Election of Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 200–202; also, *Talking with Christians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 96–98.

¹⁵ See *Ideas*, no. 56, p. 155.

¹⁶ See E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, nos. 33–35, trans. D. Carr (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 121–135.

¹⁷ *Die Prophetie*, 2. Cf. E. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. B. Bergo (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 56–57.

preceding cause and subsequent effect are interrelated temporally.¹⁸ That is, we are no longer interested in the empirical origin of a phenomenon but, rather, *the way* that a phenomenon shows itself to us *when and where* it appears as it does. This is best expressed in Husserl's philosophical motto: *zur Sachen selbst* ("to things themselves"), which can be interpreted to mean our interest in *things themselves* as distinguished from things that are seen as having been made (*factum*) by something else, and as distinguished from things in the process of making or developing themselves into something else.¹⁹ Both the first reduction, which seems to go backwards, or the second reduction, which seems to go forwards, are both bracketed by Husserl's phenomenological method. For insight into a phenomenon like revelation, whose very phenomenality seems to want to explain itself and its analogues and epigones rather than be explained by something else, Husserl's method was no doubt a Godsend to Heschel who was not only interested in revelation but who actually oriented his own life and thought upon an irreducible revelation or type of revelation.

Because Heschel was a theologian who spoke in the first person, whether directly or indirectly, biblical revelation was for him the archetype into which he wanted to locate his own experience of the presence of God. That is *why* he was so interested in biblical revelation; it alone made his own experience gain ontological/historical significance and thus it should not be taken to be an accident of his own idiosyncratic personality. This, moreover, distinguishes Heschel from Husserl (whom, as far as I know, Heschel never met or studied with), who was best criticized by his student Jean-Paul Sartre for never giving any reason or even a motive for a philosopher to be interested in one phenomenon rather than another or, for that matter, to be interested in anything at all other than what has been aroused by his or her mere curiosity.²⁰ Accordingly, Heschel was interested in Husserl's anti-reductionist methodology for better reasons than those evidenced or concealed by Husserl himself. Indeed, in his introduction to *The Prophets*, where Heschel admits the influence of phenomenology on his theology, he is quick to tell his new English language readers that "I have long since become wary of impartiality," which might well be his way of rejecting Husserl's indifference to a phenomenologist's existential situation, which occasions his or her being gripped by one phenomenon rather than another in the world.²¹ (Think of Heidegger's *In-der-Welt-sein* as a similar rejection of Husserl's ontological indifference).²² Husserl was still much too much wedded to a "transcendental ego," which like that of Kant has no interests in the world, and which in the words of the contemporary American philosopher, Thomas Nagel, is "a view from nowhere."²³

Heschel used Husserl's anti-reductionism in rejecting two approaches to revelation that he saw as being in the service of two "dogmas" he could not accept philosophically. The first

18 See I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B560. Moreover, unlike the phenomena with which Kant and Husserl were concerned, God, who shows himself in the phenomenon of revelation, also tells the recipients of that revelation *why* He has presented himself to them and *why* He calls for their response.

19 See E. Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. A. Orianne (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 20–21.

20 See J.-P. Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, trans. F. Williams and R. Kirkpatrick (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1957), pp. 102–03.

21 *The Prophets*, pp. xvi.

22 See *Sein und Zeit*, no. 26, pp. 117–25.

23 See T. Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

dogma he called "theological"; the second dogma he called "psychological." The phenomenological error of most theology is that of "objectivism"; the phenomenological error of most psychology (of religion) is that of "subjectivism."²⁴

The theological error is to assume, as does most dogmatic theology (both Jewish and Christian) that revelation is a static datum, that it is something already given (*als ein Gegebenes*) to a totally passive recipient, who is a *tabula rasa*, someone upon whom the content of revelation has been placed and who only needs to unpack its meaning and then apply it. But, for Heschel, revelation is a dynamic "giving" (*als ein Geben*).²⁵ Thus one must experience and re-experience revelation, drawing and redrawing content from that divine giving which refuses to recede into the irretrievable past. Revelation is new and renews itself, unpredictably to be sure. Thus the error of the theological dogmatist is that he or she assumes that the recipient of revelation, the prophet, contributes nothing to the event of revelation. But, for Heschel, revelation occurs in the context of a dialogue between God and the prophet. As such, revelation goes *through* the prophet and is actively mediated by him. The prophet does this by giving voice (*Bestimmung*) to the divine *pathos* or concern for humans that is revealed in the event of revelation. Or, to use the nomenclature of Husserlian phenomenology, the prophet *constitutes* the content of revelation both descriptively in narrative and prescriptively in norms.²⁶ In rabbinic terms dear to Heschel, this is the emergence of aggadah and halakhah, which the prophet and his rabbinic heirs actively elicit out of revelation rather than simply adding on to revealed data.²⁷ In other words, the prophet structures the content of revelation so that it can become transmitted in the world. But are there any Jewish precedents for what Heschel seems to be doing in *Die Prophetie*?

3.

I see Heschel's notion of the prophet giving voice or *bespeaking* revelation being influenced by his reading of Maimonides. We see this in *Die Prophetie* and in Heschel's later treatment of revelation in his 1955 work, *God in Search of Man*. Note what Maimonides says about revelation in his theological masterwork, *Guide of the Perplexed* (1.65): "The general consensus of our community on the Torah being created [*beru'ah*] ... is meant to signify that His speech ... is created ... there is a divine science [*mada elohi*] apprehended by the prophets in consequence of God's speaking to them ... [they are not] mere products of their thought and insight ... He, may he be exalted, never spoke using the sounds of letters and a voice [*b'otiyot ve-qol*]."²⁸

Heschel is convinced that revelation per se is wordless. "The nature of revelation, being an event of the ineffable, is something words cannot spell, which human language will never be

24 *Die Prophetie*, pp. 2–3.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 56–57.

26 Note *Ideas*, no. 55, pp. 152–53: "... all real unities are 'unities of meaning' ... which on its side is absolute and not dependent in its turn on sense bestowed on it from another source."

27 See *God in Search of Man*, pp. 273–78.

28 *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1.65, trans. S. Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 158–59. Hebrew text, *Moreh Nevukhim*, trans. Samuel ibn Tibbon (New York: Om Publishing Co., 1946).

able to portray."²⁹ But if the prophets apprehend something that is *ineffable*, what could that be? Is it what we would call "thought"? If so, how does thought differ from audible speech? Doesn't thought think with words? Doesn't thought, then, presuppose language, a language that it hears, then internalizes, and then by its intentionality issues forth again into intelligent speech? The answers to these questions, for Heschel that is, lie in the character of the words the Bible uses to describe the event of revelation and represent its prescriptive content.

Whereas Maimonides does not tell us how the Bible bridges the gap between God's uncreated thought and His created words, Heschel does seem to tell us how that gap is bridged. "This is why all the Bible does is to state *that* revelation happened; how it happened is something they only convey in words that are evocative and suggestive."³⁰ In other words, the Bible doesn't depict revelation since it doesn't put forth theological propositions *about* revelation, either theoretical or practical, which *enclose* revelation within words or concepts. Instead, revelation is *evoked*, which is the communication of poets, not the communication of philosophers or theologians or lawyers. Now poets feel more than they can understand, and even more than they can convey to others. A poet is not someone who senses less about reality than do philosophers or theologians or lawyers; rather, a poet senses more than they do. Heschel began his literary career as a poet.³¹ As a poet he stands at the frontier of language: making it (*poiēsis* in Greek) rather than just receiving it and rearranging it to sound more precise.³² And just as the great poets insisted they did not originally speak or create the evocative words they uttered, but rather *bespoke* what their muse inspired in them and through them (*Eingebung* is Heschel's word for it), so did the great prophets bespeak the divine pathos that works in them and through them.³³ Thus the prophets cooperate with the active divine pathos by feeling-with God, and acting out divine pathos in the world. So we have the following scheme: divine pathos then prophetic sympathy then empathy with the humans who are the ultimate objects of divine pathos.³⁴ As Heschel wrote: "The basic prophetic experience [*Grunderlebnis*] is an co-experiencing

29 *God in Search of Man*, pp. 184–85.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

31 His first published book was a collection of his Yiddish poetry, *Der Shem Hamefeyrosh: Mensch* (Warsaw: Hutner Publishing House, 1933). English translation: *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*, trans. M. M. Leifman (New York and London: Continuum, 2004).

32 *Poiēsis* means to form something intangible like words. It is unlike *technē* (hence a "technology") because it is "doing" rather than "making." Accordingly, Heschel's language is more "poetic" and less "technical." See Aristotle, *Poetics* 9/1451b9–10; also, E. K. Kaplan, *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Poetics of Piety* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 45–59.

33 See *Die Prophetie*, pp. 54–56, esp. p. 56 where he writes: "Jede Eingebung ist eine Rede Gottes, die für das Volk bestimmt ist." Ordinarily, one would translate this key sentence as "Every inspiration is a speech of God, which is determined (*bestimmt*) for the people." However, following Heschel's line of thought, it is more fitting to translate this last clause as "... which is bespoken (*bestimmt*) for the people." That is a more literal translation of the German *bestimmen*, viz., "bespeaking" or "voicing" (which in noun form is *Stimme*, "voice").

34 It has often been asked how close Heschel's notions of sympathy are to the well-known notions of Max Scheler in *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (see *supra*, n. 8). Yet, even though Scheler speaks about God's love for man in *The Nature of Sympathy* (e.g., pp. 102, 164), one does not find anything like Heschel's God of pathos in Scheler's work as far as I know. For Heschel, God's love for humans is not only effective, which is the way it functions for Scheler (who, by the way, seems to avoid invoking anything from the Hebrew Bible), but primarily affective. See *Die Prophetie*, pp. 180–81.

[*Miterleben*] the feelings of God, feeling-with divine pathos, the basic motive of prophecy is realized through spiritual imitation or empathy [*Einfühlung*] giving voice to it."³⁵

If this is the way Heschel read Maimonides (and I have some inkling that this is the way he did read Maimonides from some of the conversations I was privileged to have with him), then this reading is also influenced by Kabbalah, which Heschel so richly imbibed in his Hasidic youth in Poland (and which was his official field of specialization in the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, where he taught for the last twenty-seven years of his life).³⁶ The influence of Kabbalah here is seen in Heschel's speaking of divine "feelings" (plural: *Gefühlen Gottes*).³⁷ Unlike Maimonides' strict univocal monotheism, Heschel à la Kabbalah assumes a multifaceted inner life of God, which are states of divine being (*sefirot* in kabbalistic terms) the prophets directly experience sympathetically. This reading is also kabbalistic in that the procession from self-feeling (what we might call *Gefühl an sich*) to feeling-with (*Mitgefühl*) to projecting that feeling into the situation of another person (*Einfühlung* or *Gefühl für sich*) seems to be a process of emanation (*atsilut*), which is God's prime relation to the world for Kabbalah, especially for the *Zohar*, the central kabbalistic text. Indeed, the *Zohar* itself could be taken as a metaphysics of revelation.³⁸

The prophet's bespeaking the divine pathos revealed to him or her in revelation is not the product of his or her own psyche. Such a reduction to the personality of the prophet himself or herself is the error of psychological dogmatism or subjectivism, an error that Heschel considered to be the inverse of the error of theological dogmatism or objectivism. Heschel was well aware of how the reduction of religion to inner psychic states by Freud and his followers and imitators had taken hold of many of (to use Schleiermacher's phrase) "religion's cultured despisers" as a way of turning revelation from being an *ur-phenomenon* into what ought to become an *epiphenomenon*, something to be overcome sooner or later as a sentimental childish illusion.³⁹ To be sure, the psyche of the prophet plays an important role in the phenomenon of revelation, but it is the prophet's psyche as a participant in revelation as a dialogical encounter, not the prophet's psyche as the origin of revelation. Revelation is not something the prophet's

35 *Die Prophetie*, p. 70 (my translation).

36 Heschel's title on the Seminary faculty was "Professor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism." The title itself seems to indicate the faculty's misgivings about "mysticism," indeed about the type of theological speculation in general to which Heschel was so committed. (One could say, most charitably, that most of them were theologically ambivalent and philosophically naive.) As such, mentioning "Ethics" before "Mysticism" was, perhaps, a way of making Heschel's enterprise more palatable to the faculty and supporters of the Seminary. To be sure, Heschel was concerned with ethical questions in both his thought and his social activism. Nonetheless, I do not think he ever taught a course at the Seminary that could be considered "Ethics" in the academic sense of that term. Interestingly enough, Heschel's ethical/political activism bothered some of his Seminary colleagues. Like his "mysticism" it seems they would have preferred that Heschel would have engaged in less "subjective" and more "objective" ethics. Indeed, they would have preferred that he research and write on mystical/kabbalistic texts (or ethical texts) the way Gershom Scholem and his colleagues and students at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem were researching and writing on them. But they hardly understood who Heschel was. Any text he touched was to be incorporated into his own thought, not to be a way for him to think vicariously.

37 *Die Prophetie*, p. 70; also, *ibid.*, p. 131.

38 See G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd rev. ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), pp. 207–25.

39 See *Die Prophetie*, pp. 164, 170.

psyche projects due to hidden personal motives.⁴⁰ Even more than theological reductionism that over-explains revelation, as it were, psychological reductionism, in effect, explains it away. This is like the old joke: "The operation was a success, but the patient died."

4.

Ideally, phenomenology should strike a total equilibrium between subjectivism and objectivism. In Husserl's terms, the *cogito* ("the knower") and the *cogitatum* ("the known") should be interrelated on an even playing field.⁴¹ Truth should then show itself as emerging from the dialectical interchange of these two symmetrical elements in this noetic scheme (rather than being correspondence to the object or the coherence of the thought of the subject thinking the object). But, in fact, this never happens. Either the subject constitutes the object or the object constitutes the subject. At most, phenomenology can ensure that the knowing-subject not be taken as the cause or projector of the known-object or vice-versa. Now, at the time Heschel was thinking and writing *Die Prophetie*, Husserl (and some of his followers) was moving more and more in one direction: towards the knower.⁴² But Heschel (and some other better known phenomenologists at that time like his teacher, the Russian Jewish philosopher, David Koigen) was moving in the other direction: towards the known.⁴³ Being interested in what we call ordinary sense experience, that is, the experience of *things*, it is clear why Husserl moved more and more to being concerned with the *ego cogito*.⁴⁴ The ego consciously constitutes the object, framing it within the ego's own horizon, which is the *terminus ad quem* of the ego's intentionality, and which is a limiting horizon the ego knows *ab initio* it cannot transcend. The object itself, however, does not manifest any intentional consciousness at all. As the idealistic Jewish philosopher Hermann Cohen argued, very much following Kant, any datum from religious sources is "dumb and blind" without a prior concept, as it were, "grabbing" it (which is the meaning of the German word for "concept," *Begriff*, coming from the verb *greifen*: "to seize").⁴⁵ But how did Heschel move in the other direction? Clearly, a subject can grasp an object by thinking it, but how can an object grasp a subject who thinks it?

Heschel answers these questions by reversing the roles of subject and object in the prophetic experience. That is, God is not the object approached or even sought by man; instead, God is

40 See *ibid.*, p. 124.

41 See E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, nos. 14–17, trans. D. Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), pp. 31–41; also, L. Perlman, *Abraham Heschel's Idea of Revelation*, pp. 45–64.

42 See G. B. Madison, "Phenomenology and Existentialism: Husserl and the End of Idealism," in *Husserl: Exposition and Appraisals*, eds. F. Elliston and P. McCormick (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), pp. 247–68.

43 See *Die Prophetie*, p. 98. For Heschel's very important relationship with Koigen and his circle in Berlin, see E. K. Kaplan and S. H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 129–39.

44 See E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, nos. 53–55, pp. 178–89.

45 See H. Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Joseph Melzer Verlag, 1966), pp. 4–5. Cf. F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. B. Galli (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), p. 404.

the subject who seeks man out as His object of special concern or pathos.⁴⁶ Heschel emphasizes what he calls *Subjektivität Gottes* ("divine subjectivity"), speaking of God as "the sovereign subject of a revelation."⁴⁷ This also comes out in his 1951 book, *Man Is Not Alone*, when he (obliquely) inverts Martin Buber's by then famous constitution of the "I-thou" relationship as pertaining not only to inter-human relations, but also to the God-human relation. Heschel writes: "... the more deeply we realize the object-nature of the self. We begin to understand that what is an 'I' to our minds is an 'it' to God."⁴⁸ As such, unlike the symmetry we find in the inter-human I-thou relation, in the relation of God and man there is asymmetry. God is the One who approaches man; man can only respond to God or flee from God. In kabbalistic terms, this means that Heschel is stressing the priority of the "awakening from above" (*it'aruta de-le'la*) over the "awakening from below" (*it'aruta de-le-tata*).⁴⁹

Heschel's emphasis on transcendence plays a key role in his thought. It is God who enters man's world from the other side of the normal horizon of human experience, a horizon that God *transcends* and then makes Himself immanent on our side of that horizon by descending towards us, but only when God chooses to do so by criteria unknown to us. "My plans [*mahshevotai*] are not your plans, and your ways are not My ways, says the Lord" (Isaiah 55:8). Accordingly, this is the very opposite of the *transcendental* perspective that Husserl employed, with his emphasis of the "transcendental ego," whereby the ego represents the world to itself from an Olympian perch as it were. To intend transcendence is altogether different from the type of transcendental constitution Husserl remains with.⁵⁰ Humans can (upwardly) transcend their normal intentional horizon *since* the self-revealing God has already broken through or (downwardly) transcended the barrier that normally separates the divine from the human, the Creator from the creature.⁵¹

Nevertheless, there is a difference between the human object of God's concern and non-human objects of God's creative power. After all, humans as the image of God (*tselem*

46 Thus in *Man Is Not Alone* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951), p. 129, Heschel writes: "The Bible is not man's theology but God's anthropology ... He [God] is not the object of a discovery but the subject of revelation," Cf. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I:8.21, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936), p. 363: "[T]hat is what self-unveiling [*Selbstenthüllung*] is ... the thing man cannot supply himself with, what only God can give him ... [it is] an event [*ein Ereignis*], and an event that can be explained by or derived from neither the will and act of man nor the rest of the world's course..." [Original German text: *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I:8.2, 3rd ed. (Zürich: Zollikon, 1939), p. 333.] There is no evidence that Barth influenced Heschel or that Barth ever read Heschel or even heard of him. Nevertheless, as committed and profoundly theological readers of the Bible, and both being determined to retrieve and revive a pre-Enlightenment theology, it is not surprising the thoughts of Barth and Heschel did overlap from time to time on an issue as significant as revelation. What a loss for biblically based theology that Barth and Heschel never met! (But see Kaplan and Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, p. 272.) I might add that today some students of Barth are in fruitful discussion with some students of Heschel, thus having the conversation that their respective teachers did not (maybe could not) have. See, e.g., "Theology and Philosophy: An Exchange with Robert Jensen," in D. Novak, *Talking with Christians*, p. 229–246.

47 *Die Prophetie*, p. 164; also, *ibid.*, p. 135.

48 *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 126.

49 See *Zohar* I:164a.

50 See E. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, no. 11, pp. 25–26.

51 Cf. F. Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, pp. 31–48; also, D. Novak, *The Election of Israel*, pp. 78–85.

elohim) certainly have a different relationship with God than other beings have, which as far as we know, are neither conscious of God nor are free enough to choose to affirm or deny God.⁵² Indeed, not to make this important distinction would be to fall back into the theological error of assuming that humans are merely the inert recipients of what God gives them, their activity only coming after the gift has been severed from the Giver rather than being an essential component in the giving itself. "Objects" do not respond to those who objectify them. In fact, in this view of revelation, human reception is epiphenomenal rather than being an essential component of the phenomenon of revelation per se. For this reason, I think it best to say that Heschel's designation of man as an "object" is dialectical, that is, it is a hyperbole uttered in order to deny that God is an object of human thinking. In fact, though, the relationship between God and man shown in revelation evokes an intentional response from humans in their active sympathy for God's unique involvement in the human life-world.

Heschel speaks of *die Intention auf Gott*.⁵³ By this, he no doubt means *kavvanah*, the rabbinic term for "intention," about which he wrote nineteen years later: "Kavanah is attentiveness to God ... it is an act of valuation or *appreciation* of being commanded, of living in a covenant, of the opportunity to act in agreement with God."⁵⁴ Surely an "object" is incapable of *kavvanah*, especially so understood. Thus, despite Heschel's constant emphasis on the prophet's deference to the divine "I," he does not forget that "the prophet knows himself not as spiritless, not as a dumb tool, but rather as an 'I' that is intended by the divine 'I.'"⁵⁵ Thus one could say that the recipient of revelation is a receptive "me" before he or she becomes a responding "I." In other words, what we have here is an inter-subjective relationship, albeit a decidedly asymmetrical one. And along these lines, I think Heschel would have rejected Emmanuel Levinas' asymmetry of the relationship of a human self and a human Other as confusing man for God.⁵⁶

The greatness of Heschel's phenomenology of revelation is that it helps many of us avoid a type of religious dogmatism that makes revelation a *fait accompli* so that it is existentially irrelevant whether its content comes from God or not. And his phenomenology of revelation helps many of us avoid a type of psychological dogmatism that deprives religious acts (*mitzvot* for Jews) of their essential intentionality, which is the *kavvanah* God expects from us. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us that God can expect these intentional acts *from* us because they are inspired by God's far greater pathos *for* us, which through prophetic sympathy enables us to actively meet God in the world. "When the Lord God speaks, who can not be a prophet?" (Amos 3:8) This is what we can expect to receive *from* God, whether we are prophets or even only the children of prophets. As Heschel wrote: "Our faith is faith by virtue of being a part of the community of Israel, by virtue of our having a share in the faith of the prophets."⁵⁷

52 See *Die Prophetie*, pp. 178–79.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 180.

54 *God in Search of Man*, p. 315.

55 *Die Prophetie*, p. 124 (my translation).

56 Cf. E. Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 108.

57 *God in Search of Man*, p. 164.

Abraham Heschel's Philosophy of Judaism as a Phenomenology of Religion

Abraham Joshua Heschel belongs to those modern Jewish thinkers who do not have a problem combining philosophy with faith. In Maimonides' terms, he may even have reached the status of a prophet, being able to "plunge into speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion,"¹ but with one remarkable difference. Although he mastered the "divine science" and, in Maimonides' words, his intellect attained an enormous strength, still "all the gross faculties in the body,"² defying Maimonides' expectations, did not cease to function. On the contrary, as a philosopher of religion, Heschel himself stresses that "philosophy of religion is not philosophy of a philosophy"³ but philosophy of concrete things, events etc. In other words, genuine religious philosophy is not speculation on intellectual constructs such as notions, concepts, dogmas etc., but an observance of the existing world and the effort to understand it, to gain insight into it, to grasp its meaning. Heschel thus implicitly rejects Maimonides' strictly rationalist position by attempting to get the sense of *all* existence through rational analysis of *experiential* reality, particularly of its, as he puts it, "holy dimension."

In this way, Heschel joins those modern students of religion who prefer to reflect on religious *facts* rather than on religious *ideas*. Therefore, his religious philosophy is not philosophy of a philosophy, or philosophy of a theology, it can be characterized rather as a philosophically oriented *phenomenology of religion*. When speaking of Heschel's phenomenology of religion, we should not have in mind a merely descriptive discipline without normative claims. Although he speaks about religion, or religions, as such, he is always already "biased": his worldview is deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition and his starting point is the monotheistic perspective, tacitly conceiving of the ultimate power beyond this world as a personal and ethical being. Despite these "limitations," or perhaps because of them, one element of his phenomenological philosophy of (the Jewish) religion very much resembles one aspect of the general phenomenology of religion, as represented by the classics of the discipline, such as Nathan Söderblom, Rudolf Otto, or Gerardus van der Leeuw:⁴ the idea of the *irrational* is, after all, at the root of all religious reality.

As with the above-mentioned authors, Heschel also presupposes something that transcends earthly reality that gives it its ultimate meaning. We encounter this "something" in rare moments of insight, in flashes of understanding, which come from "beyond" and vastly exceed our rational capacities; Heschel calls it "the ineffable." This encounter produces in us what is usually called a "religious experience"; but through a mere theoretical investigation of the religious experience, even in all its aspects – psychological, sociological, anthropological,

1 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), vol. 2, III, 51, p. 619.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 620.

3 A.J. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 55.

4 Also these "general" phenomenologists are "biased": they are Christian theologians by education.