

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

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

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_expositor-series-1.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php)

we follow them, we live and prosper and our days are long upon the earth, and that, as we deny them, we fade and perish and decay. As long as sun and moon endure He will labour by these laws to bring us to the true life for which He made us.

H. J. FLOWERS.

*THE SECRET EXPERIENCES OF THE PROPHETS.*<sup>1</sup>

1. THE title of this essay expresses, and is meant to express, the view, that the prophets *have* a secret, that they had certain inward experiences which cannot be understood by the uninitiated observer. And we may add at once that it is just the older and the greater among them who have kept this secret. Either because of a reverent restraint, or because their interest lay not in the form but in the matter of their message, or because early Israel was not accustomed to compare and distinguish the experiences of the soul, they shrouded their inward life as with a veil. If we now devote a special essay to this subject, as a preliminary to the detailed exposition of the prophetic writings, we express thereby our conviction that these strange men must ultimately remain unintelligible to us unless we understand these secret experiences.

2. It is not so very long since this subject began to be treated in this spirit. Orthodoxy, seeing in the prophets the mere mechanical instruments of a simply supernatural revelation, gave little heed to their personalities and their peculiar experiences. The "rationalistic" view which came next, and which is not yet quite extinct in theological science, was too dry and blunt to see in the prophets more than pious teachers and respectable preachers. But in

<sup>1</sup> By Professor Hermann Gunkel, being the second of three introductory essays in Professor Hans Schmidt's *Die Grossen Propheten*, Göttingen, 1923.

more recent times the way for a better understanding of their personalities has been prepared by four different scientific movements. The historical view, which became increasingly prominent in the nineteenth century, and which has been supplemented by a "neo-romantic" movement with its subtle power of seeing new shades and hearing new notes, has shown a deep understanding for the long-concealed inner life of these men. Special mention should be made here of Duhm's *Commentary on Isaiah*. The study of Comparative Religion also has gained in breadth and depth and has put an end to the naïve assumption that the prophets of the Old Testament are a thing unique, and has supplied abundant and valuable parallels to prophecy, especially in its lower grades. Then the study of the literary history of the Old Testament has added important contributions to our knowledge of the prophets; for although this field of study deals mainly with the forms of prophetic speech, these very forms of speech indirectly reveal the inner life of which they are the expression. Finally, Psychology has taken up this subject, and is beginning to set forth with the exact methods of science what up till now has been reached more by direct intuition. Needless to say, in spite of all these efforts, there is much that still remains obscure, and on not a few points there are still differences of opinion among scholars.

3. When we of the present day speak of "the prophets," we mean chiefly those among them who exerted the strongest influence on the religious thought of Israel, and whose influence still lives for us in their writings. And indeed these writing prophets—for us the first is Amos, and their other main representatives are men like Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel—overtop all the others so greatly, that this use of the word is perfectly justified. It is to be our task in this essay to describe the inner life of these

men. But this great intellectual movement—for such it was—had forerunners in other men who were called by their people by the same name, prophets (*nebiim*), and who were really more or less akin to the greater men, and especially in the case of Elijah, very closely resembled them. These “prophets” cannot be altogether omitted from our review, because they exhibit, though perhaps in plainer, more arresting forms, the same peculiar experiences.

4. The fundamental experience of all types of prophecy is “ecstasy.” That is a state of consciousness entirely outside the experience of the ordinary man of to-day, and not easily intelligible to him. In trying to describe it, it will be best to begin with the *external actions and symptoms* of this phenomenon in the prophets. In the old story of Saul’s first meeting with Samuel (1 Sam. ix. 1–x. 16), we read of Saul meeting a band of prophets coming from a “highplace” on a march through the land. All kinds of music accompanied them. They themselves were in the condition of a Nabi, i.e., they were in “ecstasy” (Hebrew, *hithnabbe*’, 1 Sam. x. 5). It is plain from this that these “prophets” lived in communal life, and we know from other sources that there were in Israel schools or guilds of prophets, whose members, called “sons of the prophets,” were under the oversight of a man who bore the title of “father” (2 Kings vi. 21; viii. 9; xiii. 14). Elijah was a “father” of this kind. The fact that such prophecy called for communal life proves that the prophetic state of consciousness must in its nature have been something that passed automatically from one person to another. In the same story we read that the spirit “passed” from the band of prophets upon Saul (1 Sam. x. 6, 10). Similarly in the very vivid story of David’s flight to Samuel, the officers whom Saul sends to take David come upon a company of prophets who are at the moment in a state of

ecstasy (nibba'), and themselves fall under its influence. Even the king himself, who ultimately goes on the same quest, is likewise overpowered (1 Sam. xix. 18). It is only the greatest prophets who do not find it necessary to draw new strength from such gatherings; they stand alone. To that class belonged Elijah in the old time and the prophets from Amos onwards. The fact that Amos expressly disclaims all connexion with the "sons of the prophets" is a plain indication that a new stage has begun (Amos vii. 14).

5. We have further some indication of the causes that brought these guilds together. The prophets who met Saul were coming from a "highplace"—they have been holding a celebration at the sanctuary. That they require a leader also points to such communal action. We have to take it that through these celebrations the spirit of each participant was raised out of its normal condition and made capable of receiving the "spirit." From the same story we learn that music, with its peculiar power to produce excitation, played an important part. Elisha called for music to inspire him (2 Kings iii. 15), and down to the latest times we find prophecy and poetry closely allied.

6. If, therefore, the prophets who met Saul were traversing the country to the accompaniment of such music, we may also take it that, as they went, they performed rhythmic movements, i.e., they were dancing. We obtain a very graphic conception of the prophetic dance from the narrative of the proceedings at Mount Carmel, where the prophets of Baal, before they reach the ecstatic condition, "leap" round the altar crying aloud (1 Kings xviii. 26). There are graphic descriptions of similar proceedings in Greek authors who give an account of Syrian religions, and in the narratives of travellers regarding the present day dervishes of the East. Such physical movements, combined with extreme mental excitation, we must conceive

as at first voluntary and conscious. Gradually, when the "spirit" comes, they become convulsive and ultimately unconscious. The Elijah narrative itself looks down with contempt on the dances of the prophets of Baal. The literary prophets are completely free from anything of that kind.

7. In the case of Amos and his successors, there is no mention even of fasting, which is universally looked upon as a means of preparing for the reception of revelation. It is recorded of Moses (Exod. xxxiv. 28), and it plays a great part later among the Apocalyptic (Dan. ix. 3, 21; Ezra v. 20; vi. 35; Apoc. Bar. ix. 2), and also in the early Christian circles (Matt. iv. 2; Luke iv. 2). But there is one kind of preparation known even to the greatest prophets. They compare themselves to a man who ascends his watchtower in order to gaze into the distance (Hab. ii. 1). The vision comes from God, but the *gazing* is the part of the prophet. Or to change the figure, there is in the prophet something like a second self, a double, whom he can set to gaze (Isa. xxi. 6). The prophet is able to suspend all other impressions and to devote himself entirely to that for which he is looking—a mental attitude which necessarily involves excitation, and, if it last any length of time, nervous prostration (Isa. xxi. 7). For such inward preparation the prophet may seek the solitude of the mountains—Elijah (2 Kings i. 9). Elisha (2 Kings iv. 23) occasionally dwelt on Mount Carmel. Ezekiel in Babylon went out into the open field (Ezek. iii. 22; xxxvii. 1). We meet with the same practice later among the Apocalyptic (Ezra ix. 26; xii. 40; Apoc. Bar. xxi. 1; xxxi. 2). John the Baptist dwelt in the desert (Matt. iii. 1), and Moses (Exod. iii. 1) and Elijah (1 Kings xix. 4) and Jesus went up into a mountain (Matt. xiv. 23). Amid the silence of nature, far from the noise of men, the inner life comes to its own.

The prophet finds it easier to listen inwardly and to receive the secret of God. The prophets were fond also of sitting beside running water, which with its rhythmic babbling sound exercises on the mind a peculiarly hypnotic influence (Dan. x. 4; Enoch xiii. 7; Apoc. Bar. v. 5; Ezek. i. 1; x. 20). And, repeatedly, we read that it was in the darkness of the night that the prophet saw his visions and heard the voices (Zech. *passim*, also 1 Sam. iii.; Job iv. 12; xxxiii. 14; Num. xxii. 8). Such solitude with God is specially sought by the prophet when some difficult question is in his mind. Habakkuk tells how he went up into his tower in order to hear "*what He shall answer to my complaint*" (Hab. ii. 1). Very instructive in this connexion are the words of the Apocalyptic to his spirit (4 Esdras iii. 1). "Thou hast obtained for me this vision, because thou art pondering the ways of the Divine," i.e., he has been vouchsafed the revelation, because he has been striving with all his power in fear and deep dread to learn the ways of God. Of course it is natural that the prophet should pour out all his fear to God in prayer, until the inner tension is relieved by a revelation. Of such prayers, preceding a divine revelation, we hear with special frequency in the case of that prophet whose inner life we know best—Jeremiah xi. 18; xii. 1; xiv. 1; xiii.; xvii.; xv. 10; xxxii. 16. When the people put to him a question for which he had no immediate answer, he asked for time to pray and wait for an answer, and he was able to give an answer after ten days (Jer. xlii.). It is not at every moment that the prophet is ready with the word of God. On one occasion Jeremiah brought upon himself a defeat before the people, because he was dumb at the words of the "*lying prophet*" and could only answer after a time (Jer. xxviii.). But the revelation might also come to the prophet without any preparation at all, quite suddenly, in the midst of a crowd.

While Elisha is sitting amongst the elders of Samaria, he suddenly hears the footsteps of the king who is coming to kill him (2 Kings vi. 32). Ezekiel also (viii. 1) receives a vision while he is in the midst of the elders.

8. We come closer to the peculiar secret of the prophets when we inquire into the kind of *actions* in which the ecstasy finds outward expression. These were mainly certain convulsive movements. When Elijah had overcome the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and called down by prayer the drenching rain after two years' drought, *the hand of Jahveh came upon him*; he girded up his loins and ran before the king's chariot amid the storm from Mount Carmel to Jezreel (1 Kings xviii. 46). When we think of the uselessness of such an act, and the more than human strength it involved, we see how the mysterious power comes suddenly upon the prophet urging, nay forcing him to strange action, a power in which he himself can see nothing but *Jahveh's hand*. Comparable with this, if not quite so violent, is the pilgrimage of Ezekiel from the place where he received his first revelation to his compatriots in Tel-Abib; "*the spirit lifted me up and carried me, and I went in the glow of my heart, and Jahveh's hand lay heavy upon me*" (Ezek. iii. 14). According to these words, Ezekiel in his ecstasy has a peculiarly mixed sensation—he feels himself at once carried and under a heavy weight. But strange pilgrimages of this kind may come upon the prophet without his will or knowledge. Elijah (1 Kings xviii. 12) undertakes to meet King Ahab at a certain place. He receives the answer, "*But how, if Jahveh's spirit seize thee and carry thee, who knows where?*" (1 Kings xviii. 12). And the prophet can even come to harm in this way. When Elijah was translated to heaven, the story tells how the sons of the prophets searched for him on the mountains and in the ravines, to see whether Jahveh's spirit had not taken

him away and *thrown* him somewhere (2 Kings ii. 16). Calmer and more gentle must have been the personality of a man like Jeremiah, but even he compares himself to a drunken man, whom wine has overpowered. "*All his bones stagger*" (Jer. xxiii. 9). This comparison of a man who is filled with the spirit to a drunken man recurs in the Acts of the Apostles (ii. 13), although it appears there as a malicious misunderstanding. And the unknown author of Isaiah xxi. 1-10 describes how he was thrown into convulsions by an overpowering revelation, so that he loses the power to see or hear. It is like this, beyond all measure passionate, that we have to conceive the behaviour of many of the prophets in the presence of the people. Ezekiel stamps on the ground while he speaks (vi. 11; xxi. 19), striking his sides with his hands or striking his hands together.

9. The strange actions thus done under the influence of the spirit are very numerous. Self-mutilation in ecstasy is mentioned in the Elijah story as a peculiarity of the prophets of Baal, but it cannot have been rare amongst Jahveh's prophets also (Zech. xiii. 6). In Israel also the earliest prophets rent their clothes from their bodies (1 Sam. xix. 24), a frequently mentioned indication of extreme excitation. Even Isaiah imitated these wild ecstasies and went about at times "naked" (Isa. xx.). Or a prophet comes forth wearing horns of iron (1 Kings xxii. 11) or with a yoke on his neck (Jer. xxvii.): or he smashes an earthen vessel (Jer. xix.) or sinks a linen girdle in a river (Jer. xiii. 1). Ezekiel tells of himself things even stranger. He laid siege to a stone with an iron pot (iv. 1), and on another occasion he tied all his belongings on his back and forced his way through a hole in the wall into his own house (chap. xii.). He even prepared a nauseous cake with all manner of fruits and baked it over human excrement (iv. 9). And

we must include it amongst these strange actions, striking and even repellent to the people of the time, when Hosea married a harlot. Such acts must originally have been purely convulsive. At a more highly developed stage, prophecy liked to regard them as signs or symbols, and to give them an allegorical meaning. Ezekiel's stone represented Jerusalem, and the frying-pan was the Chaldean army. Hosea in his strange marriage depicted the unquenchable love of God for his adulterous land. In such allegorising we have the result of conscious reflection by the prophets on the meaning and purpose of their actions : and the strange element in the case of the literary prophets may occasionally have been merely an imitation of the old ecstasies and may find its explanation in their desire to arrest the attention of the people. In other cases, e.g., Ezekiel's cake, a vague impulse may have been at work. The desire for such food is a well-known phenomenon in cases of nervous or mental disease. In any case, it helps us to understand how hostile opinion in Israel placed the prophets on a level with madmen (2 Kings ix. 11, etc.) : how the mental malady of Saul is described by the same word (*hithnabbe'*), which is elsewhere used for the prophets (1 Sam. xviii. 10); and how the "prophets" were treated in the temple of Jerusalem is shown by the letter of Semaiah (Jer. xxix. 24), who writes to the priests, that he has been appointed to the oversight of all the *madmen and prophets* in the temple, in order to put them in the stocks if they are guilty of disorder.

10. It is in a similar manner that we have to conceive the *mode of speech* employed by the prophets. The current word for this is *qārā'*, to shout or cry. Prophets do not speak in a calm restrained manner. It was with loud cries that the prophets of Baal danced round the altar, but also an Isaiah speaks with voice loudly raised ; may heaven

and earth hear it, and the hills around bear witness. Another word, used occasionally, *hittif*, means originally to slaver, to drop the spittle, and the word means the spittle which exuded from the prophet's mouth as he spoke. At times, too, we hear of the prophets *muttering mysteriously*, when they announce secret oracles, and their speech was mocked by enemies as being stammering and stuttering—a jibe which cannot have been without basis in the reality. Even in the literary prophets we find certain mysterious words and combinations of words which help us to imagine what the strange cryings of the oldest ecstasies must have been—Jezreel, Lo-ammi, Lo-ruhama, Immanuel, Shear-jashub, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, Rahab-hammoshbath. The prophet of the earliest times, and not only he, is so full to overflowing with excitement as he speaks, that he can only stutter. To get an idea of the passion of such stammered prophetic words, one need only read such a passage as Ezekiel xxi. 26, "*Away with the mitre; down with the crown! This is not this. Up with the low; down with the high! Overturn, overturn, overturn it will I. This too shall not abide, till he come, whose right it is, and to him do I give it.*" It accords with such a condition of excitement that the prophet's words, as soon as they pass from stuttering to actual language, automatically take metrical form. Sometimes too the prophets sang (Isa. v. 1), and the word *hithnabbe'*, to come forth as prophet, is used of an inspired minstrel (1 Chron. xxv. 1). In our prophetic books, of course, we have numerous passages, which must have been delivered with far less passion.

11. Lastly, it can also happen, that the prophet loses the use of his limbs for a longer or shorter time. Ezekiel tells (iv. 8) of a condition lasting a month in which he felt as if he had been bound with ropes, so that he was unable to turn from one side to the other. Such a condition came

on most frequently at the close of a revelation. After that strange walk, already referred to, Ezekiel sat dumb amongst the people of Tel-Abib for seven days, great though his desire had previously been to preach. The Apocalyptic are specially given to describing such disablements during or after revelation. This condition of the *nebiim* must therefore have at times been so terribly exhausting as to lead to complete collapse. Some of these phenomena might seem to us cases of nervous or mental derangement, but we should remember that our Psychiatry has till now been exclusively occupied with the psychic life of civilised people of the present day, and that different criteria must be used for these passionate children of the hot East.

HERMANN GUNKEL.

*(To be continued.)*

### *THE TEMPTATIONS OF JESUS CHRIST—WERE THEY TRANCE OR HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES?*

THE records of the life of Jesus Christ, for the period before He entered upon His public work, are too few that we could not welcome an addition to them; and too precious, for what light they offer on Him, that any one of them should be allowed to become myth-like through a means of explanation which is, in reality, an explaining away of the narrative; and by so much, a turning of history and the historical Person into the substance of a tale which might have been told. The narrative of the Temptations, with its quick précis-wise form, is perhaps that part of the early life of Jesus which invites that order of treatment. Just as in the Letter to the Hebrews, where the writer tells us "He was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin," the theological idea of sinlessness has sometimes made the figure of the historical Christ of a sufficient tenuity to be little