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Prophetic Repentance

The prophetic call to man to rebuild his sin-broken psyche by means of repentance is a hallmark of prophetic literature. On the other hand, the possibility of a prophet sinning and being coaxed back into psychic wholeness by a divinely-induced repentance would seem at first glance to be foreign to biblical patterns of thought. Yet on further reflection the situation is more common than expected. Such a situation seems to be reflected in at least the cases of Jeremiah, Jonah, and possibly in the cases of Elijah and Samuel. This study will limit itself to an examination of the phenomenon as reflected in the case of Jonah.

Overtly, the tale of Jonah deals with the sin and repentance of Nineveh. However, another theme seems to be operative in the book running parallel with the first one: the rebelliousness of the prophet, God's use/or misuse of the stubborn almost sinful prophet, who is virtually dragged to the sinful city; God's rehabilitation of his petulant and pseudo-suicide-prone messanger, by a logotherapy leading to his ultimate repentance and rehabilitation.

The final chapter gives us an illuminating glimpse into this process. At first, God questions theprophet concerning the seriousness of

his wish to die. After all, hadn't Jonah lost face because of that inexorable foe of all prophetic proclamations of doom: God's willingness to forgive and man's ability to repent? "Yes," says Jonah, "I'm mad as hell, mad enough to die" (4:1-4). The reason given for his suicidal wish is seemingly ideological: the saving of sinners. But by a subtle ruse, God confronts Jonah with his real wish to live. He provides a miraculous sun-shade, the gourd over which Jonah literally jumps for joy. This is hardly the appropriate gesture for a real suicide. Then the gourd is taken away, catapulting Jonah into a deep depression. God, with delicate pedagogic cunning, ~~then~~ does not ask Jonah ~~not~~: "are you really mad about the repentance of Nineveh (Jonah's 'formal' reason for his depression)?" but: "are you really mad about the loss of the gourd?" Not realizing the divine ruse, Jonah blurts out: "I'm so mad about the loss of the plant (which kept me alive) that I want to die!" (4:9) Paraphrased into the vernacular, the argument goes something like this: "You faker! I thought it was your ideological position that you were so concerned about. But no! You are really interested in living on your own terms, not according to my divine needs and plans (which may on occasion bring about a loss of face)."

The narration stops abruptly. Although it seems that Jonah got the message, almost no salt is rubbed into the prophet's wounds. It is as

if the writer had the good taste not to show us a man at the moment of his embarrassment. Yet, dramatically, one would have expected some confession on the part of Jonah, some statement about how wrong he was, and how wise is God. Without such a statement, we are left hanging, and psychologically the story needs a climax. In fact, ~~this very problem may~~ a similar line of reasoning may have prompted some ancient midrashist to ~~explain why the following verses from Michah are~~ append to the book of Jonah when ~~liturgically~~ read in the synagogue ~~on~~ as the haphtara on Yom Kippur the following verses from Michah:

"Who is a god like Thee, forgiving guilt and passing over transgression on behalf of the remnant of his inheritance? He will not hold his anger forever, for He delights in kindness and will again show his mercy." (7:18ff),

The words of Micha, put in the mouth of Jonah thus provide the reader with ~~What more than may be one could not have wanted a more appropriate hymn for Jonah, both dramatically and pedagogically. In fact, if it actually~~ the dramatically and psychologically needed climax: a hymn of contrition on the part of Jonah. In fact, if such a hymn actually were there, not even the most radical of textual critics would have excised it.

Furthermore, just such an unspelled-out juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated biblical verses seems to have been characteristic of the oldest layers of midrash. Such a procedure is quite common in Dead Sea documents, where verses from different books of the bible are strung together, at times with no exegetical or midrashic nexus, and at other times, with the needed interpretive peser (=midrash). Such a string of verses from various books of the bible is a common technique of early poets

like Yannai who actually provides a list of biblical verses whose midrashic interpretations are going to serve as the grist for his poetic mill. Such a procedure is also familiar in a slightly different form in the midrashic petihtot.

Our feeling that in some ways the book is more than the story of the repentence of the Ninevites but also the education and the act of contrition of the prophet himself, seems to have been shared by the authors of the various recensions of the late Midrash Jonah. In one recension (Eisenstein, Ozar Midrashim, p.220), we read

> When the Holy One saw that the Ninevites had repented, He relaxed from His anger, removed Himself from His throne of punative justice, and sat Himself on His chair of mercy saying kindly "I hereby forgive." Jonah

immediately fell on his face (in prayer) and said:

"Lord, I know I have sinned, forgive my transgression."

Another version fills out this confession of sin with the following (Eisenstein, p. 221, col. b): "Forgive my transgression, that I tried to escape from You at sea for I was ignorant of the greatness of Your deeds." Further on we actually find a beautiful hymn of contrition and praise which we will not translate in full here, whose main theme is none other than the מי אל כמוך of Michah! Of course, it is virtually impossible to establish whether the midrash is simply a take off on an ancient liturgical practice which fused Jonah with Michah or whether the late midrash actually spells out (correctly) the reason for this ancient fusion: Jonah was a sinner, he repented and expressed his contrition using the fragment of the hymn from Michah. Or stated another way, either an ancient liturgical anomaly sparked a late midrash, or the late midrash actually spelled out what was in the mind of the early liturgist.

The sin and repentance of Jonah is concretized in yet another way by the author of Midrash Jonah. It has been axiomatic among critical scholars, that Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish (2:1-11) doesn't

quite fit Jonah's situation. Expressions like "the waters closed in over me, the deep engulfed me, weeds are twined around my head" were originally used as metaphors of deep anguish and were not to be taken literally. What has happened here, is that the author of Jonah needed a psalm of help, one that seemed to deal with the prophet's predicament: surrounded by waters of the ocean. Creatively--though not quite to our modern taste--the author of the book of Jonah reconverted the ocean and the seaweed back into the original non-metaphorical realities. The de-metaphorization may have worked, if not for the presence of so many other statements that do not fit Jonah's reality (especially vv.9-11). The reconversion of metaphors into their original palpable realities may be called stage one of the midrashic process. In another passage in the Midrash Jonah (cf. Eisenstein) the author, realizing the inconcinity of the hymn with Jonah's real situation, simply substituted a more appropriate psalm--Ps. 139:7ff: "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? And whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to the heavens, Thou art there? If I make Sheol my bed, Thou art there also. If I take up the wings of the dawn, and dwell at the back of the sea, ever Thy hand will grab me." This substitution of a more appropriate psalm for a less appropriate psalm, we may call midrash b.

However, immediately following we find a total rewrite of the psalm, expressing not merely Jonah's psychic anguish, but once again his sinfulness at trying to run away from God's mission. The new composition is virtually a piyyut of the selihah type:

אתה הוא מלך על כל הממלכות, אתה אזון מושל על כל רוצני תבל,
כסאך שמי השמים והארץ הדום רגליך. מלכותך במרום וממשלתך
בשחק, מצאה כל העולם לבנך בלומ ותשלומות כל צבא למעלן
בדומים, בבכי כל הארץ אתה תוקיר ומצאתי כל מי אתה הותלו,
וכל כלי עולם. נזעקים לך ולבבות אתה מבין, מחשבות כל אדם
גלוים לך כל מסתרין בלון לך. אין תשלומות למעלן כמוך בקונך
ואין נסתר מעיניך כי כן וכך, אתה סוקר כל ארץ וכדר
וכל מקום אתה שם עינך בעבות כעסים וכובים ...

(Midrash Jonah, Eisenstein, p. 219)

Although Jonah's sin, running away from the divine fiat, is not specifically mentioned, the fact that the prayer is a <u>selihah</u> of the type used on Yom Kippur, subtly implies his sin and subsequent repentance, by stressing God's absolute knowledge of our deepest thoughts.

Midrash Elijah

There are two themes which will concern us in the following investigation: a) Elijah's attempt at suicidal escape and the methods used by the Lord to restore him to his calling--a theme which runs parallel to that which we have already discussed concerning the last chapter of Jonah; b) the substitution of a theophany of silence for a more ancient theophany of spectacle, fire, noise and wind.

Let us turn our attention to the first question. In IIKings 18:___ ? Elijah puts on a display of prophetic wizardry virtually unequalled by his prophet forbearers. He beats the prophets of Baal at their own game, much like Moses before him. Water soaked offerings are dramatically consumed by a divine fire at the command of the prophet. Immediately thereafter, one of the most devastating droughts in Israelite history, (one which was initiated by Elijah himself:"As the Lord lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except at my order." [I Kings 17:1]) comes to an end as quickly as it came (cf. IKings 18:5-6). With supreme selfconfidence, the prophet says to the king, who has probably been fasting as a sign of mourning over the drought (cf. Joel 1:): ? "Go up, eat and drink for there is the rumbling sound of rain." The storm is

brewing and thunder and raging winds bring with them the blessings of rain. But this episode like the episode of the scorched sacrifices is accompanied by a spectacular prophetic mummary, one which is not specifically commanded by God, but one which the prophet hopes will be seen by the people as a sign of his intimate relation with the Lord who does what he says: "Let it be known today in Israel that Thou art God in Israel and that I am thy servant and that by thy command I have done these things" (IIKings 18:16). The nerve!

With a Baalam-like symbolic (or shall we say magical) act, the prophet went up to the top of Carmel, and crouched down on the earth (the verb is ghr used in a different context to revive a dead child), with his face between his knees, saying to his servant, "Go up now, look towards the sea." As Balaam built seven altars to increase the tension and elaborate the hocus-pocus, he said: "Go back seven times." So the servant went back seven times. However, the seventh time he said: "There is a cloud as small as a man's hand rising out of the sea."

Again, with supreme self confidence, having only this unimpressive evidence that a torrent was about to break forth, the prophet says to the king: "Go up and say to Ahab 'Harness your steeds and go down and let the torrent not stop you.' Moreover, in a very short time, the heavens grew black with clouds and wind and there was a great downpour."

As a final gesture of prophetic power, the old prophet, seized by the hand of the Lord, actually not only kept pace with the speedy chariot of the king, but actually ran before it. The reader can only say: "In all fairness, O prophet, if you are looking for prophetic spectaculars, you can not ask for more. Not even your ancestors, not even Moses at the Theophany of Sinai was able to do more."

Although, it is hardly proper for the writer to pass judgment on a holy man, his subsequent petulant suicidal escape after a temporary setback (the queen rightly wants to "eliminate" him for executing her cadre of prophets and making her look like a fool), seems to be totally uncalled for. He is more than a perfectionist who wants to outdo all the other prophets before him: "I am not better than my fathers (a patent untruth)" He seems, with all reservation and respect, to be a sublime egotist with an ego easily hurt. Big men don't act that way. When he finally winds up at the cave of the Mosaic revelation, God duly reprimands him by the curt criticism: "What in the world are you doing here?" Paraphrased: "What do you of all people possibly want from Me? Could I have done more for you? Didn't I go along with your show to the very last detail? Don't give Me this nonsense that you want to die, that you're not better than your fathers--so much fake modesty--that they are trying to kill you. What do you expect after the

pogrom you made? And don't tell me you are the only one left; Elisha will serve as an excellent replacement. And by the way, stop lying down and going to sleep. Get off your haunches and appoint Elishah in your stead! And as theophanies are concerned, I've had my fill of noisy spectaculars, of pyrotechnic theophanies. I reveal Myself not in fire and not in wind and not in trembling mountains, but in a quiet mysterious stillness."

What we have here, if I'm not mistaken, is not only a slightly veiled critique of the immediately preceeding chapter, but a radical change in Israel's conception of the nature of divine revelation. What is happening before our eyes is a virtual revolution; a theophany of silence is daringly substituted for the traditional Sinaitic theophany with its fire, its thunder and its quaking mountains. It is a virtual subversion of the simple meaning of the biblical text.

Echoes of this radical change in ancient Israelite thought are found in Shmot Rabbah 29: אמר ר' אבהו בשם ר' יוחנן: בשעה שעמד הקב"ה את התורה נפער לו ענף של אש, שור לו גחל, אפפוהו לבן עפן, שיפים ולא אמרו יקבל קבוץ הים לפני לבדינא, הברואה לו בדרך אלא העולם שתקו ומחרישו ויצא הקול "אנכי ה' אלהיך" ... ואם תמה אתה על לן הדי אלוהי כשהוא לבדו כל הכוחות ואומר לפניו (שמות כ"ו יח) "ויראו העם וינועו" כלומר. מה עשה הקב"ה הדחים כל העולם והשתין העליונים והתחתונים כדי שיבוא הברואה לשון חוק ומוסר.

Like Jonah, Elisha feigns suicide unless he has every thing--and I mean everything his own way. In both cases, the Lord subtly attempts to rouse his not-so-perfect prophets from their desire to sink into oblivion when everything does not go their way. However, here the two prophets part company. Jonah yearns for oblivion because Nineveh is not to be destroyed. Elijah is so scared (read in 19:3 with many MSS, the Samaritan, and the Greek) when his own life is threatened.

The man who slaughtered the prophets of Baal with no compunction, now is literally scared to death when his own life was threatened by Jezebel. But a person scared to death on one level, desparately wants to live--but on his own terms.

Notice his nagging and repeated complaint to the Lord: "(just imagine) they wanted to take my life." God is not moved: "as My messenger you have to expect set backs and even attempts on your life. That is the name of the game (something that any underground fighter or Russian poet takes for granted)." Again God is not moved (and probably) somewhat angry; He repeats his elliptical rebuke: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" But unfortunately the lesson did not take, the lesson being that God usually supports his messengers, but there are times when they have to take persecution and the threat of death like men.

Elijah's fear and the divine rebuke remind us in many respects of the young Jeremiah. In Jeremiah 11:18-23 God informs the prophet that the men of Anatoth are out to get him: "The Lord informed me and I knew. I saw what they were doing." (16) He then is sure of divine aid because knowing that God reads the minds of men and their intentions for good and evil, he is absolutely sure that he will be vindicated. "O Lord of hosts who judges righteously, who can examine (man's) mind and conscience (and who certainly can see that my intentions are noble, and theirs quite evil), let me see Thy vengance upon them. (Knowing this) I give my case to You (i.e. You be my lawyer!)"

The Lord answers affirmatively. "For I will bring trouble to the men of Anatoth, the year of their reckoning." This statement of divine aid seems not to suffice the prophet who was promised at his investiture that God would protect him like an iron wall. All this, however, is not enough, and as a kind of petulant Job he whines: "Even though I know You will put down any complaint I lay before You, I still say 'why does the way of the wicked prosper; why do all the faithless live in comfort?'" Blaming God he continues: "Thou plantest them, and they take root."

God, however, has had all He can take. Even when God declared at Jeremiah's induction that He would protect him like an impregnable metal wall, He also added: "Do not be dismayed/broken lest I let you be dismayed before them." I.e., I will defend you like an iron pillar and a bronze wall, but you must have faith in yourself and not fear, for once you let fear get ahold of you, I will let fear take its natural course and let it overwhelm you. Therefore, inspite all of My help you must expect some set-backs and not fear."

So in Jeremiah 12, after this pseudo-Jobian complaint why God lets the wicked persecute him, God rebukes the prophet and offers him some strong medicine. "If you have raced with men on foot and they have beaten you, how will you compete with the horses? And if you take to flight (variant collapse) in a safe land, how will you do in the jungle of the Jordan?" Paraphrased: "If you can't win at the little leagues, how can you expect to win at the Olympiada!"

In both cases--Jeremiah and Elijah--God goes along with his prophets a long way, but at a certain point they have to go it alone, repress their private feelings and have the prophetic/professional bravery not to fear threats on their life. "For if you fear, I will let the fear take over."

Heads of state may be afraid privately but publicly they cannot be afraid. Similar thoughts are expressed in Jeremiah psalms of complaint, one of which, chapters 14-15 almost leads to a blasphemy on the part of Jeremiah. "Why are You to me like a shell-shocked warrior, a fighter who can do nothing, a dry gulch, a mirage (14:17-18)?"

Getting back to Elijah, God had gone as far as he could. He made the fire and He brought the rain. Now His boy is on his own--and at the slightest threat to his life he is scared to death.

The first thing a person in this situation does is to aimlessly wander wherever his soul takes him, to escape from those who want to take his soul. Next, he gets rid of his servant. He wants to sulk alone and can't stand the company of people. Then as a classic mode of escapism, he falls asleep (cf. Jonah escaping into sleep in the belly of the ship). Just as someone who has taken an overdose of sleeping pills has to move and eat, so the angel pokes him into life by stirring his appetite for food and drink. He eats and drinks, but immediately falls asleep again. The second time this food-therapy succeeds and he unwittingly eats so much that the prophet was sufficiently charged for a forty day marathon race to Sinai to whimper before the Lord. There the two themes of

prophets wanting to die and the radical substitution for a quiet rather than a pyrotechnic revelation fuse into one organic whole.

NOTES

1. ~~It is interesting to note that~~ The whole complex of ideas concerning prophetic sin and repentance in the bible and the midrash, was taken up with much interest by Islamic and Jewish philosophers of the middle ages, cf. M. Zucker, "The Problem of 'Iṣma - Prophetic Immunity to ~~Error~~ Sin and Error in Islamic and Jewish Literatures" (Hebrew), Tarbiz, 35 (Dec. 1965), 149-173.

2. Although loss of face leading to suicide seems alien to the biblical thought patterns, ~~world~~, it is clearly found in the story of Ahitophel (IISamuel 17:23).

3. ~~It is interesting to note that~~ According to H.L.Ginsberg, this section of Michah was composed by a contemporary of Jonah, or even Jonah himself.

2

Testimonia