

## BOOK REVIEW

*Thinking About the Prophets: a Philosopher Reads the Bible* by Kenneth Seeskin (Philadelphia: JPS; Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2020), 137 + xxxiii pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker.

This readable book considers several of the biblical prophets and then sets “a historical context for their teachings, and examine[s] their teachings in light of later thinkers and historical developments. Amos raises questions about the nature of moral reasoning, Hosea about the divine persona, First Isaiah about divine providence, Jeremiah about ... suffering [for the sake of God], Ezekiel about the power of repentance, and Second Isaiah about what it means to believe in a monotheistic conception of God” (p. xiv). Seeskin then casts his eye on one more figure, Job, technically not a prophet, but a book that raises questions about innocent suffering. Seeskin, the Philip M. and Ethel Klutznick Professor of Jewish Civilization at Northwestern University, is by training a philosopher and has published several books about Maimonides. Consequently when examining prophetic teachings “in light of later thinkers” he refers to Maimonides, as well as Plato and Aristotle, Hegel, Kant, Hermann Cohen, Buber, as well as Levinas and Soloveitchik.

In the sixteen page Introduction, Seeskin superbly and succinctly addresses a key question: What is a Prophet? A prophet (*navi*) “is a messenger or spokesperson for God” who transmits “the voice of God.” Paraphrasing Abraham Joshua Heschel’s classic work, *The Prophets* (first published 1962), Seeskin notes that “a prophet is also a poet, preacher, patriot, statesman, social critic, and moralist” who faces and responds to “concrete questions such as when to go to war, how to respond to political and economic changes, what to say to priests, and whether judges and merchants are treating people fairly” (p. xvii). Subsections here include Understanding Prophecy,

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Identifying a True Prophet, The Varieties of Prophetic Experience, Predicting the Future or Exhorting Behavior?, Are There Any Modern-Day Prophets?, Prophecy and Religious Renewal, and The Prophetic Legacy.

The prophets speak of cause and effect, but their “predictions of impending doom were not like a scientist’s prediction of what will happen” (p. xxv). The prophets are intent on “motivating people to change their ways. Their descriptions are graphic, their oracles gut-wrenching. Within the space of a few chapters one is likely to find inspired poetry, condemnation of current practices, visions of apocalypse and promises of redemption” (p. 41).

Some of the prophets, like Jeremiah, not only challenge the people of his time, but also challenge God. The emotional intensity of Jeremiah is clear. “Like Moses, he will occupy the no-man’s land between heaven and earth, pleading for mercy with one and a moral awakening with the other. In the words of [Martin] Buber, he is the messenger of God *and* intercessor in one. Also like Moses, he is not afraid to hold God to account. At 12:1, he [Jeremiah] raises the classical formulation of the problem of evil: “*You will win, YHWH, if I make claim against You, yet I shall present charges against You, why does the way of the wicked prosper?*” Seeskin continues, “To understand this turmoil, we must not forget that while Jeremiah is disgusted by what he sees the people doing, they are nonetheless *his* people – and, just as important, *God’s* people, too” (emphases in original, pp. 66-67).

Within the prophetic corpus clearly there are also messages of hope. Ezekiel preaches, “‘Cast away all the transgressions by which you offended, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit’ (18:31). We are not defined by our past mistakes. Provided we follow the path of repentance, we are free to make ourselves over and start anew” (p. 82).

This is a thoughtful introduction to prophets and prophecy from a philosophical viewpoint, yet the book also necessarily has limitations. Seeskin confines himself to a handful of the traditional prophets, and those are all part of the literary or later prophets. For a more general introduction to *all* of the Bible’s prophets, including Samuel, Nathan, and the many other literary prophets one needs to go to a more comprehensive work such as, to cite but one example among many, my work, *The Bible’s Prophets: An Introduction for Christians and Jews* (2013). Seeskin’s book which is part of

