

# BOTH ARE THE WORDS OF THE LIVING GOD

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Unlike the holy books of other religions, it took almost 1,000 years for the completion of the Hebrew Bible. The 39 books it contains reflect the experiences of the people of Israel, and the changes of times and conditions. We must pay homage to the "pharisaic" sages who included in the Holy Scripture the Book of Job, that deviates from the doctrine in Deuteronomy that tragedy befalling man is the result of sin, the Song of Songs, which transforms the natural love of man and woman into the sacred love of God and Israel, and the skepticism of Ecclesiastes side by side with the faith of Psalms.

The inclusion in Scripture of books that carry messages in conflict with accepted doctrines is, in itself, remarkable. But, more than that, we find in the Tanakh fundamental doctrinal affirmations and values that, logically, are opposed to each other. This article will focus on four sets of disjunctive doctrines: God Who is transcendental and immanent, Providence and freedom of choice, universalism and particularism, and priest (guardian of ritual) and prophet (guardian of social ethics). Yet, this is the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the Hebrew Bible. Precisely because God is One, there is no rupture in His universe and His message to man: *I am the Lord and there is none else, I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create evil* (Isa. 45:6, 7).

Though these doctrines seem logically opposites, they are fully integrated in a living totality of a multi-dimensional Tanakh. That the Tanakh teaches love of Israel and, at the same time, concern for mankind, is not a Hegelian dialectic of thesis and anti-thesis to be resolved in synthesis, but "both are the words of a living God" addressed to the people of Israel and its prophets.

Kadushin's "organismic" view of value concepts, such as Torah, mitzvah, charity, holiness, repentance, may throw some light on the "opposing" value concepts we are analyzing. Value concepts, Kadushin insists, are "connotative and are not amenable to formal definition . . . they are not related to each other logically but organismically."<sup>1</sup> Expanding on Kadushin's insights, "opposing value concepts" can be included in his scheme. An ingenious treatment of "Justice" and "Mercy" by a talmudical sage is most illuminating.

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Both are fundamental biblical Divine attributes, yet seemingly dichotomous. I quote: "He sits in judgment on the whole world, and when the world is so guilty as to deserve destruction, He transfers Himself from the seat of justice to the seat of mercy (T. Avoda Zara 3b). By the daring simile of the two Divine thrones, the two opposing value concepts turn into a duality, essential to the existence of the moral world.

#### TRANSCENDENCE – IMMANENCE

That God is transcendent is a fundamental doctrine of the Bible. God creates the universe ex-nihilo, but He, the Creator, is beyond His creation. *The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My foot-stool* (Isa. 16:1). Therefore, none of His creation, neither the stars nor any of the phenomena of nature must be worshipped, only He alone. It is this great insight that set biblical monotheism apart from paganism.

There is another aspect of God's transcendence. He is the "Wholly Other." Isaiah, overwhelmed by the theophany that inducted him into prophecy, proclaimed the threefold *Holy, Holy, Holy*, the incomparable holiness of God (6:13). And, adding eternity to the "Wholly Other," Isaiah says: *For thus said He Who high aloft forever dwells, Whose name is holy* (57:15).

However, God's immanence is an equally fundamental biblical doctrine. This is implied in the words of Jeremiah: *If a man enters a hiding place, do I not see him, says the Lord. For I fill both heaven and earth, declares the Lord* (Jer. 23:24). There is no element or phase of existence that does not reflect His presence. More than that, He makes Himself accessible to man. The same Isaiah who was shaken by the "Wholly Otherness" of God, will declare: *Yet I dwell in the high and holy place with him also that is of contrite and humble spirit* (Isa. 57:15).

Here we note the paradox of God's transcendence and immanence in one statement. They co-exist peacefully as two manifestations of biblical monotheism. More than that, in His immanence, God cares for His creation. He makes ethical demands on man for his own good and: *The Lord is good to all and His tender mercies are over all His works* (Ps. 145:9). Such importance was attached to this psalm, known also as the Psalm of Universal Benevolence, that the Talmud insists that he who recites Psalm 145 three times daily is assured of his part in the world to come.

A "living God" is both transcendent and immanent. This is seemingly irreconcilable, but as value concepts both terms are absolutely needed ingredients of a living God Who is beyond nature and, at the same time, most caring about His handiwork.

#### UNIVERSALISM – PARTICULARISM

Universalism and Particularism are another set of seemingly disjunctive but fundamental biblical doctrines. The election of Israel is essential to the understanding of Jewish history and existence. At Sinai, Israel is addressed: *Now, then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My Covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* (Ex. 19:5,6). This election of Israel and its special status was ridiculed by William Norman Ewer ("How odd of God to choose the Jews") and rejected by Mordechai Kaplan. Shakespeare recognized it in his *Merchant of Venice* when Shylock says to Bassanio: "I will buy with you, talk with you, walk with you but I will not eat with you or drink with you or pray with you (Act I, Scene 3, 32-40).

However, any knowledgeable person knows that this separation was not meant to be an end in itself. Thus Isaiah:

*I, the Lord, in My grace, have summoned you. I created you and appointed you a covenant people, a light unto nations* (Isa. 42:7).

*In that day Israel shall be a third partner with Egypt and Assyria as a blessing on earth for the Lord of hosts will bless them saying, blessed be My people Egypt, My handiwork, Assyria and My very own Israel* (19:24,25).

The great teaching of Universalism was echoed also in the Talmud. Thus the Mishna Sanhedrin states that only one man was created to teach that no man might say to his fellow, my ancestor was greater than your ancestor (9:5). And, in a debate between two great scholars, R. Akiba and Ben Azzai as to what constitutes the core of biblical teaching, Ben Azzai, inspired by the idea that man was created in God's image, insisted that it was verse 5:1 in Genesis: *This is the book of the generations of Man* (J. Talmud Nedarim 9:4). These words, according to Hertz, proclaim the vital truth of the unity of the human race, and the consequent doctrine of the brotherhood of man. Though in the dispersion the higher aspect of Israel's election was neglected, each

community engaging in the monumental task of maintaining its integrity in a hostile environment, the dual aspects of Particularism and Universalism were never forgotten. The prayer *Alenu*, recited three times daily, and by martyrs before their execution, contains two parts. The first confirms "He has not made us like the nations of other lands." But this separation has an exalted goal, expressed in the second part:

We hope for the day . . . when the world will be perfected under the Kingdom of the Almighty . . . for it is written in Thy Torah – *The Lord shall reign for ever and ever . . . . And the Lord shall be King over all the earth. In that day shall the Lord be One, and His name One* (Zech. 14:9).

#### PROVIDENCE – FREEDOM OF CHOICE

The biblical concept of God in history is another of the great contributions of Israel to world civilization. The world of Egypt was essentially static and unchanging. To Mesopotamia "nothing in the cosmos was permanent and secure, since the gods were capricious,"<sup>2</sup> while the Greeks thought of history in terms of an "eternal return," further burdened by fate. The Bible is in large part a work of history of a special sort. In the words of Speiser "to give a history of a society embarked on a particular quest, the quest for an enduring way of life, a way of life that had universal validity."<sup>3</sup> Underlying the biblical concept of history is Providence, where "God is conceived as the power sustaining and guiding human destiny,"<sup>4</sup> moving toward the messianic era, as expressed in the immortal words of Micah (4:1-4), a prophecy which now has become the motto of the United Nations and its deepest aspirations.

The Bible is replete with incidents of God's Providence. Thus Abraham, in the Covenant Between the Pieces is told: *'Know well that your offspring will be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years'* (Gen. 15:13). The purpose of this oracle is not revealed to Abraham. The Joseph narrative, as it evolves, so human as it unfolds, is then part of the implementation of Divine Providence.

One of the basic contentions between Pharisees and Saducees was the issue of Free Will, with the latter ascribing all events to Providence, while the doctrine of Free Will was maintained by the former. And there is powerful biblical documentation for freedom of choice. Already in the dawn of humanity

God addresses Cain who is distressed that his offering had been rejected: *'Why are you distressed, and why is your face fallen? Surely if you do right, there is uplift, but if you do not do right, sin is a demon at your door whose urge is toward you. Yet you can be his master!'* (Gen. 4:6, 7).

At Sinai, Israel was given the choice to accept or reject God's teaching and the people chose: *'All that the Lord has spoken we will do'* (Ex. 19: 7-8). Probably the most explicit affirmation of Free Will is contained in Moses' farewell address: *'I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day. I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse, choose life'* (Deut. 50:19).

On the basis of sheer logic, there seems to be an unbridgeable gap between Providence and Free Will. Biblical narration, oblivious of this inherent difficulty, proceeded unimpeded, with some of its great stories where both of these fundamental concepts interact. Medieval Jewish philosophers struggled with this problem and attempted, I believe unsuccessfully, to solve it in accordance with their Platonian or Aristotelian preferences. The sages of the Talmud, aware of the dichotomy between the two terms proclaimed: "All is foreseen but free will is given" (Pirkei Avot 3:15). In the final analysis, both Providence and Free Will are indispensable to an understanding of Judaism. Without freedom of choice there is no possibility of ethics, human responsibility, and accountability for human deeds. At the same time, the Bible insists on Providence: God in His mysterious ways is in control of events and in good time will fulfill messianic expectations.

#### PRIEST – PROPHET

There is a tendency, particularly among some Christian Bible scholars, to denigrate the priest, the supposed guardian of ritual and ceremonies, contrasting him with the prophet, guardian of ethics, social concerns, and universalism. Thus James Fleming as per note 5: "The priestly writers . . . conceived God as caring deeply for ecclesiastical ordinances . . . [which] were valuable for Him in themselves . . . This rigidity and even harshness characterized this portrayal of God."<sup>5</sup> And the grotesque statement by Pfeiffer regarding the Ten Commandments: "The Ten Commandments do not represent the prophetic teaching but rather a Deuteronomic compromise between the prophetic teaching [of right motives] and the priestly religion of ritual observance."<sup>6</sup> Of

course, both are entirely oblivious of the Judaic view that both are the words of a living God, addressed to a living Israel. Both writers, and regrettably some Jewish liberals following in their steps, forget that two of the greatest prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, were also priests, and that both priests and prophets performed vital functions. The prophets, to strengthen the moral fiber of the Bible, preparing the people for a higher universal goal, to bring humanity to a recognition of One God. The priest's stress on ritual served a dual purpose: (a) As for every faith community which has its own rites and ceremonials, one of the purposes of Jewish ritual is to strengthen the body politic of the Jewish nation, to serve as the underpinning of loyalty to God; (b) Ennobling daily, prosaic acts, by investing them with the spirituality of holiness.

The so called Holiness Code (Lev. 19:1-2), considered by the rabbis as the kernel of the Torah, contains a blend of the spiritual and ceremonial. *You shall love thy neighbor* (18) next to *you shall not sow the fields with two kinds of seed* (19). Or *Just balances, just weights, a just ephah and a just hin, shall you have* (36), close to *you shall separate between the clean and the unclean* (20:25).

Prophets indeed fought mindless observances or even abuse. Nevertheless, Isaiah, inviting the strangers who keep the Sabbath, and hold fast the Covenant, says: *Their burnt offering and sacrifice will be welcome on My altar* (Isa. 56:7). And Jeremiah consoles: *There shall be no end to the line of levitical priests before Me, of those who present burnt offerings and turn the meal offerings to smoke and perform sacrifices* (Jer. 33:18).

It may come as a surprise to many of our readers that August 1st is celebrated by Christianity in commemoration of the seven martyrs of the Maccabees. It is obvious that Christianity laid stress on those who were martyred for their faith in order to strengthen its followers who were persecuted. There is irony in the fact that the Maccabees fought a royal decree "to abandon their ancestral customs and live no longer by the laws of God" which were: circumcision, permitted food, and sanctity of the Temple. It is for these rituals that Christianity discarded that the Maccabees fought, thus assuring the integrity of Israel.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Torah views human life as an indivisible whole and declines to exclude any phrase thereof from its purview. Man's encounter with God yields surprises. We may experience Him as the Wholly Other, or as the One near to us; we may experience Him as the One Who foresees the course of activity we freely choose. He is the universal God of all mankind but has chosen Israel to be the messenger for all men. Both ceremonial and ethical behavior are fundamental value concepts not excluding each other.

Perhaps, an episode recorded in the Talmud (Eruvin 13b) may throw some light on the topic we are discussing. In the talmudic period, two major schools, those of Hillel and Shammai, had conflicting views regarding Jewish law. A three-year long debate of the sages took place with the heavenly verdict, "Both are the words of the living God."

#### NOTES

1. Max Kadushin, *Worship and Ethic, A Study in Rabbinic Judaism*. (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964) p. VII.
2. E. A. Speiser, "The Biblical Idea of History in its Common Near Eastern Setting," in *The Jewish Expression*, ed. Judah Goldin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976) p. 4.
3. Speiser, p. 7.
4. Webster, *New Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1983).
5. James Fleming, *Personalities of the Old Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1951) p. 434.
6. Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941) p. 230.