

# **The Prophets Study Guide**

## **The Prophets by Abraham Joshua Heschel**

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# Plot Summary

The Prophets by Abraham J. Heschel is a book written for both Jews and Christians. The author describes the prophetic era in the Old Testament Bible and also gives some details to many of the prophets themselves. In addition Heschel details the driving forces behind the prophets and the reasons why they were different from other followers of God.

Heschel begins his book by discussing the attributes that make a man a prophet. Heschel states that it is a man who feels extreme sensitivity to sin that some people may be indifferent to. The job of the prophet was to magnify the guilt and speak the words of the Lord of Heaven to his people. Heschel described the prophet as a lonely man who often was tormented over his duties to God and felt fiercely for the people whom he was speaking out against because of their evil deeds. He begins looking at Old Testament prophetic books including Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah.

Heschel spends time discussing the known past of each of the prophets and the lives that they lived and how it possibly influenced their messages. He also discusses the differences between each of their messages and the similarities. Heschel discusses the history of the prophet and prophecy in the world, both the current world and the ancient. He looks at other religions and makes comparisons between them.

When Heschel looks at chastisement he discusses first the futility of the chastisement and the fact that God used love to direct his people more than he used punishment. The ultimate thing that could be taken away from a person is the freedom that God gives. When God takes away freedom, a person is unable to turn to God and his or her heart is hardened. Heschel ends part one of the book by looking at the justice problem in the land at the time of the prophets. It wasn't that there weren't any laws or any judges, but that they were corrupt and lacked righteousness.

Heschel devotes the second part of the book to the discussion of pathos and ecstasy in relationship to the prophets. He discusses other parts of the world and religions that use ecstasy and how they are different from the prophets in the Old Testament and the ways in which we can assess the validity of their messages. Heschel gives a lot of information in these chapters. He also takes a look at the connection between the leaders of the land, kings, and princess, and the religious leaders, priests, and prophets. Often there was a direct link between the two, and Heschel spends time pointing out the reasons and the problems with this. While the intentions were often pure, they defiled the law of the religion because of their love for their country. This is one of the reasons why it was necessary that God raise up a prophet to come and speak out against the land.

Heschel ends the book discussing God and the relationship that he has with his people. He also contrasts this to the other deities found in history that didn't have a relationship with their subjects. Heschel explains at the end of the book that it is important to first understand God if a person wants to understand themselves.



# Part 1: Chapters 1-4

## Part 1: Chapters 1-4 Summary and Analysis

The Prophets by Abraham J. Heschel is a book written for both Jews and Christians. The author describes the prophetic era in the Old Testament Bible and also gives some details to many of the prophets themselves. In addition Heschel details the driving forces behind the prophets and the reasons why they were different from other followers of God.

Heschel begins his book by describing the type of man a prophet was and the things that defined him. He states that a prophet was someone who looked at things that would have seemed trivial to other people, but outraged him because of the sin that was taking place. Heschel describes how the prophets felt things much more strongly than others around them, making them hypersensitive to the things that would offend God. Heschel takes things that would have been looked upon as lovely by the citizens of great cities and quotes the prophets when they were openly rebuking the city for the same things that would have been called wondrous by others. From Heschel's description the prophets were called upon by God to look at things and see the underlying truth. If a wondrous home was gotten by the ill gains of others, then the person sinned and all that he had acquired through those methods were sinful as well.

Heschel describes several of the prophets in the Old Testament beginning with Amos. Amos had been a shepherd when he was called by God. Amos did not describe God's voice as small and still but as a shouting more like a lion roaring. The people tried to run Amos out of the city of Judah when he said that the king of Israel would be killed and the people enslaved. Amos then explains that he is no prophet but a simple herdsman. Although Heschel admits that Amos' message begins with a message of doom, it ends with a message of hope. Heschel also finds that Amos' compassion for God's people was amazingly strong. Heschel explains that God repented of his wrath. God did not end his wrath because the people were without guilt, but because they were small. Heschel states that God is completely intolerant of injustice and sin—but more than he hates sin, he is forgiving.

The next prophet that Heschel describes is Hosea. Most of this prophet's time was spent in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which Hosea referred to as Ephraim. Hosea was married to a woman named Gomer and had three children. Despite this Heschel states that Hosea differed from Amos in his love for the people. He points out that in Hosea 9:14 instead of asking God to forgive the people for their open sins and turning away, he asks God to deliver them wrath. Heschel believes that Hosea's main purpose was to show that anything could come between the relationship between a person and God. Hosea describes Israel, the unfaithful wife, has forsaken her husband, God. Heschel points out that Hosea's wife, Gomer, was unfaithful to him in marriage but God commanded Hosea to bring her back into the home. Hosea, in Heschel's description, was aware that his marriage with Gomer was a mirror of the relationship that God had



with his people who had turned away. Heschel points out the difference between Amos and Hosea in what they spoke out against. While Amos focused on injustice, Hosea spoke out against idolatry.

Isaiah comes next in the line of prophets described by Heschel. Isaiah received the call to become a prophet the year that King Uzziah of Judah died. The people worked as servants to the king of Assyria, along with his gods, and they turned their backs on the God of heaven. Ahaz died and his son, Hezekiah, was put into power. Both men refused to listen to Isaiah's warnings of destruction. Amos and Hosea had both tried to save the people of what was referred to as the Northern Kingdom but had no reply from the people. God had sent three to warn the people with His words but none listened and so God sent his final judgment. Heschel states that Isaiah is aware of the coming disaster, but knew some would survive and from it would come redemption. When Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, came into power he turned to Egypt for help and protection from Assyria, against Isaiah's warnings. The Lord killed off the Assyrians with a disease. Heschel describes the words of prophecy as polarity—there is always anger and love in the words of the Lord God.

Heschel, a well thought-out scholar, takes more than just the prophets' writings alone and incorporates other historical accounts that add to the validity of what has happened. He also uses other parts of the Bible to solidify the facts. It seems that while Heschel has strong convictions about the things he is writing about, he tries to ensure that his book is based on fact and he avoids telling the reader whether he agrees or disagrees with any particular point the prophets speak.

While Heschel sticks to facts and gives details about each of the prophets, he also compares each one, which seem to incorporate some of Heschel's own bias. These additional thoughts do not detract from the information and give the reader added insights and thoughts as to motivations, and feelings of the prophets. Heschel also adds thoughts about the prophets stating that they are speculative, leaving the reader to make his own decisions but with all the facts.

At this point in the book the reader may have noticed some information that they are unfamiliar with. Heschel uses the Hebrew Bible as a source for scripture passages, as well as other sources. An index is included in the back with sources listed, as well as other places in the book where terms and names appear. In addition Heschel has included a brief appendix on the meaning of pathos that may clarify some of the reading later in the book. The reader will find many of the terms that have come up in this part of the writing may be quoted again later on.



# Part 1: Chapters 5-8

## Part 1: Chapters 5-8 Summary and Analysis

Heschel continues with looking at particular prophets, the next being Micah. Heschel describes Micah as a contemporary of Isaiah's. Micah's concern with the people was that they worshiped the work of their own hands, they revered the sorcerer and fortune tellers, and they had fallen into moral corruption. Heschel writes about the loneliness that a prophet endures and that the standards and concern are too much for other men to relate to. Quoting Micah 7:1-7 Heschel uses this to show Micah's concerns and his intense nature. Micah, although warning the people of destruction because of their sins, also spends part of his words speaking about the ways of true worship. Heschel points out that Micah tells the people that God will be angry but that his anger will pass and the Lord is endlessly forgiving. Micah's message is one of destruction and doom but Micah proclaims it to be for the good of the people although they don't listen to his warnings.

Heschel then looks at the life and words of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a prophet during the time when Jerusalem fell and some time after the fall. Heschel describes Jeremiah as a man who felt pain and gloom holding the knowledge of what was to befall Jerusalem if the people did not repent. Jeremiah is often called a prophet of wrath, and Heschel states this is attributed to the fact that he was more adamant about the wrath of God and the impending destruction of Jerusalem than any other prophet. Heschel also says the time that Jeremiah lived in was one of anger and wrath and that prophets have a duty to their time and place. Jeremiah felt that his time was one of emergency. In Jeremiah Heschel describes there being pieces of both the unending love of God as well as His immense anger against his people. There were many changes in leadership while Jeremiah was a prophet. He was imprisoned, accused of abandoning the Babylonians. He was released later at the capture of Jerusalem but Jeremiah never stopped his work for the Lord. Jeremiah, like Micah, insisted that that the enemies would overtake the cities of Judah.

Heschel looks at the words of Jeremiah 45:4 to explain God's sorrow at what he is going to have to do to his own people. In this chapter of Jeremiah God states that he will have to destroy what he has built, referring to his people. Heschel describes God as having no home on the earth if he has to truly turn his back on the people because he will have to also turn his back on the land. Jeremiah's warnings were ignored by the people, and Heschel states that Jeremiah knew the severity of what he was prophesying and refers to the people of God as murderers because they refused to turn themselves toward God.

Habakkuk, Heschel states, is a little book. Although it only spans a few chapters, Habakkuk was a man who had been called of God and worked as a prophet. Heschel describes Habakkuk as a man tormented by the fact that God is allowing evil to prevail and wonders how long God can let it continue. Habakkuk asks God directly "How long?" and "Why?" When the Lord answers Habakkuk he doesn't give the answer that



Habakkuk is waiting for. He tells him that his hand is constantly working even if it can't be seen. There is destruction that is coming, and Habakkuk has felt that this is the opposite of God and never takes into consideration that God is using the people who are working against the people as a tool to correct the wrongs.

The next prophet that Heschel looks at is not ever truly named but is often called "Second Isaiah." This piece takes up Isaiah 40-66, and Heschel describes it as being filled with tears and joy that can heal all. Heschel notes that the tone changes toward the people of Israel. The previous prophets had described the people in foul terms warning them to turn to God, but Second Isaiah refers to them as a people who are searching and working toward God and his righteousness. Heschel spends much of the time on this prophet pointing out the change in tone from what had previously been said. Not that he was contradicting the other prophets, but that the situation had changed that much. It is with this prophet that God gives a promise of the redemption that is to come.

Heschel breaks down each part of the prophets' messages in these chapters and not only explains meaning but also contrasts. The man and his life play a part in the message that they bring. The only prophet whom we are unaware of having a past or a name is the one depicted as Second Isaiah. Heschel gives relevance to the kings and times when the men were busy with God's work as well as background information.

Heschel gives pieces from other books in the Bible to support or show contrast between each of the prophets and the direction of their messages. While Heschel is very detailed oriented and concerned with the facts, he often gives striking pictures with his words, and he gives each of the men attributes to explain their thoughts and feelings that may have been in play when they were called to do God's work.

It would seem that Heschel enjoyed doing the research associated with these men. There are places where the reader may be left wondering about other small pieces of history, such as dates of deaths or births, but with the information provided it would appear that these could be easily found if the reader so chooses. It is also seen that Heschel includes previous prophets' characteristics and methods of prophecy with the next. This is helpful to the reader in understanding the history that unfolded and the steps that God took to turn his people back to him.



# Part 1: Chapters 9-11; Part 2: Chapter 1

## Part 1: Chapters 9-11; Part 2: Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Heschel takes a look at the history that caused a need for prophets. He discusses that there were few who were willing to openly speak out against things that were happening that were contrary to God's will and commandments. Heschel points out that Isaiah claims that the cause of all evil is man's misgivings in believing he can make himself sovereign and man's pride. This is not only absurd, but dangerous because of the unlimited cruelty that a man is capable of when he believes he is the final authority and sovereign. Isaiah also points out that God will bring all to humility and dishonor those who try to honor themselves, as well as bring honor and justice to those who are low and uncared for. Ultimately, Heschel points to the fact that the prophets have a history of always looking toward the time when God will end all evil and the knowledge of God and his just reign will be in control.

Heschel states that God is not history and it is a mistake to think that God reflects what is going on in heaven by the happenings here on earth. God cannot be explained here on earth because man's mind is not capable of imagining him or his home accurately. Since that is the case it is impossible that what happens here is the mirror for what is happening in God's home in heaven. God has ultimate control over what happens on earth and so he also has control over what happens in history.

In the next part of the book Heschel takes time to look at chastisement. Heschel doesn't spend a great deal of time talking about it and in fact labels the first part of the chapter "The Futility of Chastisement" stating that God's ultimate goal has never been to destroy but to purify people. Heschel quotes Jeremiah when he is talking to God pointing out that even though the people are punished they don't seem to care. While God is wrath and capable of punishing his people, he doesn't desire to have them obey out of fear but out of love. Heschel also talks about when God pulls a person to him and calls him to be a prophet, this is the point when the prophet will lose his companionship with man. He is shunned and often rejected by others because of the work that God calls him to do. When Heschel discusses freedom he describes it as a gift from God to man. When God hardens someone's heart, that is when the person has lost his or her freedom. The ability to understand or see God's hand at work and be drawn to God can be taken away or given as God sees fit. Heschel ends this chapter by pointing out that God's words are never final when he sends a warning of destruction. He states that no matter what a prophet says a change in a man's heart and actions will change God's judgment. This is attributed to God's unending love and forgiveness.

Justice is a chapter that Heschel goes into detail. He begins with sacrifices that were conducted in the Old Testament. He describes the sacrifice of animals, incense, and songs all given as pivotal pieces of worship. Heschel quotes Samuel "to obey is better than sacrifice" and explains that it doesn't matter what a person sacrificed if they weren't





willing to obey God. Sacrifices were to be the last thing that a person did to appease God. The prophets did not speak out against sacrifice but stated that animals and hymns didn't clear out the evil deeds that they had done. To express the futility of sacrifice alone Heschel describes the occurrence of Mesha, the king of the Moabites, who sacrificed his own son to his gods during war time to appease his idols.

Throughout the rest of the chapter Heschel spends time discussing different aspects of justice that afflicted the land. The land had judges and laws but they were both without righteousness. The prophets pointed to the leaders, kings, princes, and false religious leaders for the problems with the justice in the land. Intimate relatedness is the aspect that Heschel claims puts life into divine perspective. God is our father but also our judge, and when he judges us he is also compassionate.

Then Heschel discusses the theology of pathos. Heschel states that the prophets had no ideas about God, but possessed an understanding. God showed himself to prophets in absolutes and never as a vague notion. Understanding God depends on the relationship a person has with God. It is the difference between being and expression. Heschel explains that God reacts to things happening in the world and is not detached from us. He has joy, sorrow, and anger at the things that we do and that happen to us. Pathos, Heschel says, is a living care and an outgoing challenge, and an act or attitude.

Heschel uses the Greek gods to example how pathos is associated to God in heaven. The Greek gods often were known to be jealous, self-centered, and lustful. But pathos is not self-centered but prophetic thinking, directed outward in relation to man. It is not an unchangeable quality but is more of a situation or personal implication in God's acts. Heschel connects the problems that men have with God's part in the human situation. Heschel ends the chapter by explaining that the basis for the relationship of God and man is the divine pathos.

Heschel begins discussing parts of being a prophet in this part of the book but even when his focus is not a particular prophet he still uses the words that were recorded in their books. Heschel has many subjects to discuss under the subject of justice. It would seem that this subject was very important to him. The reader sees that in other subjects where the relevance to the prophets was discussed in only a few pages, Heschel still seemed to feel passionately about the subjects.

It appears that the wording that Heschel used was decided upon so that it would create strong feeling in the readers. Much like the prophets' words. Once Heschel begins talking on subjects in relation to the prophets, he brings a multitude of scriptures from various books in the Bible that add to the reader's knowledge of how it all connects in the prophets' lives. While Heschel spends a lot of time discussing the theology of pathos in this part of the book as well as coming chapters, he never defines the phrase. He does explain what the words mean, but he takes several paragraphs to do so. To help the reader there is an appendix in the back of the book that notes the meaning of pathos. While it has been discussed in the book in short places it isn't until Chapter 1 of Part 2 where it is the focus of the chapter.



## Part 2: Chapters 2-5

### Part 2: Chapters 2-5 Summary and Analysis

Heschel continues to look at the theology of pathos and contrast and compare it. He feels that it is better understood when compared to other theological points of views. Heschel admits that the idea of pathos is both a paradox and a mystery. He explains more about the theology of pathos but the reader will see that as pathos is detailed it creates other questions. Heschel also discusses Tao, meaning the way, and the fact that it forms an antithesis to the prophetic idea of God because Tao is unchangeable and you are to do away with all feeling and obtain a type of peace. He then moves on to Karma, an opposite to prophetic thinking. Karma states that whatever a person goes through is a direct result of the wrong or right they have done. There is no grace or repentance for sin, just cause and effect. Pathos states that even when people seem to be doomed by their own deeds, they can receive God's grace and forgiveness. Heschel contrasts God to other deities such as Zeus who, unlike God, did not have absolute supreme power, as well as the Egyptian god, Thracian god, and many others.

The philosophy of pathos is the next aim of Heschel's discussion. He states that there are those in religion who seem to be embarrassed by the theology of pathos because of its Greek origin. He argues that it must be considered though. Heschel looks much at Greek history and the relation that the Greeks have to what is associated with God. Heschel explains the grounds upon which pathos was rejected. At this point in Heschel's writings he quotes other scholars such as Plato, and Philo, as well as God's disciple Moses. Heschel states that there are many who feel that apathy is the thing that should be the ultimate goal since it controls all emotions where pathos uses passionate feelings. Heschel continues by taking a look at emotions that occur in the Bible. Heschel finds no place stating that the passions and desires a person feels should be ignored and done away with. Some writers in the Bible state that emotions and feelings have been inspired by God. He looks at the Stoic sage who aims for apathy and the state of the prophet who wants to attain sympathy. At the end of this chapter Heschel describes God as someone who cannot be described.

Anthropopathy discusses the problem with trying to describe God with human-like characteristics. Heschel alludes to the fact that to describe God in any terms that one could describe a person would be to imply that God is himself imperfect. He does state however that seeing God in human form as he is often pictured, and imagining him with passions like a man is not the same as thinking of him as a sinful human. Heschel explains that the problem is not based on the fact that we depict God incorrectly but that we try to depict him at all.

Wrath is the main subject of the next chapter. Heschel points out that the prophets were quick to talk about the wrath of God and the judgment that was to come as well as the love of God. There are those who find it hard to understand that a righteous God can be capable of wrath or anger. The way that we describe earthly wrath is what causes these



issues. Heschel explains that wrath is usually a description of someone who loses control. God's wrath is as just and righteous as he is, but our human minds have a difficult time understanding this. God's love to man is not continually giving us good things that we desire, but giving us a connection to God. Heschel speaks about indifference and calls it evil. He explains that when we become unmoved by the wrongs that are done it is more dangerous than the act of evil itself because indifference is more contagious. God is described as an end to indifference since every sin is the same to him and he treats them all the same. Heschel states simply that the prophets were not adding their own words into the scriptures but that God is capable of such anger. Heschel does amend that while God's anger is great and to be feared, he is long suffering and capable of great compassion.

Heschel's writing remains the same throughout the book. The reader may find times when words or phrases are unclear, but where there is doubt there are notes to help with understanding. There are some words, however, that are never defined, and the reader may need to look them up to understand the full meaning of Heschel's thoughts. Heschel seems to enjoy using the Greek gods as a point of contrast for God in heaven. He does look at other religions but the Greek deities are a reoccurring theme. It is unclear if this is because Heschel had an interest in the Greek culture or if it was to the benefit of the reader as the Greek idols are commonly known. The overall effect is very helpful.

Heschel shows his ability to understand more than the Bible with details about other religions and beliefs such as Karma and Tao, and comparisons with the Bible. While Heschel remains fact-based in his writing, the reader will notice that he seems to be very driven in conveying certain aspects to the reader such as the theology of pathos and the fact that it is not accepted by many religions.



## Part 2: Chapters 6-9

### Part 2: Chapters 6-9 Summary and Analysis

Divine anger, Heschel states, has created a problem. He discusses the Gnostic, Marcoin, who states that since the world is so full of filth and sin that a just and loving God couldn't have created it—and the thought that God is capable of a divine anger only adds to his point of view. Marcoin announced that a good God was not able to get angry and was free from all affections. Marcoin was expelled from his church and his teaching thrown out in 144 C.E. Heschel explains that there were many ideas throughout the years; that God is impassible and is incapable of a feeling such as anger. Heschel also describes the fact that in ancient times Israel only knew God as mysterious and terrible, and only in much later times did they believe him to be a loving and good God.

In the next chapter Heschel describes the concern's of the prophets being inline with the concern's of God. Heschel states that when the pathos of God is upon a prophet it overwhelms him in his life and his heart. It is this strong surge of feeling that gives the prophet the courage to speak the words that the Lord of Heaven has given to him. The prophet is to have active cooperation and self-dedication to God. Heschel points out that having a friendship with God doesn't mean that we are equal with God as someone of Aristotle's thinking would have believed friendship to be. Throughout the rest of this chapter Heschel details the ways in which sympathy are shown in God and differ from other forms of sympathy that man shows, and how pathos once again works into the theology that Heschel holds to.

Heschel focuses on Prophecy and Ecstasy and explains the things that the theory of ecstasy has accomplished—reducing the biblical prophecy, as well as offering a psychological explanation of an enigma. He states that ecstasy is belief in the temporary separation of the soul from the body when a person is asleep, sick, or in a trance state. There are many places in the world where abnormalities, physical and psychical, are said to be caused by spirits, demons, or even gods. With the explanations given about possession and enthusiasm, Heschel describes why they are often confused with ecstasy. Ecstasy is described as a state when the soul is freed from or raises above the body and the normal vital functions are depressed. Heschel also explains about divine seizures, sacred madness, and many types of ecstasy. The ultimate purpose of ecstasy is said to attain, contact, and union with a divine unity; and this can only be done through ecstasy.

Heschel states that from an endeavor to mix Greek and Jewish doctrines and applying them to the prophets, Philo of Alexandria developed a comprehensive approach to biblical prophecy. Philo declared ecstasy to be a definitive mark of a prophet. When in an ecstasy state a prophet will be overcome by God and not be speaking but God is speaking through him. Rabbis don't agree with Philo's view on the prophets' inspiration from ecstasy. The Rabbis state that it is the mark that showed the difference between

Moses and Balaam. However there are Jewish teachings that agree with Philo's thoughts on ecstasy. Heschel goes on to look at other places both in the Bible and in modern times where ecstasy comes into play.

The book has become much more in-depth at this point and the reader is learning about different cultures, ideas, and religions that will all be integrated to some part into the theories that are explained. Heschel gives the terms some explanation at most points in the story but there are times when the reader may still require further explanation to be fully aware of what is being discussed.

Some of the people Heschel quotes or talks about are given large introductions and the reader receives much background, but sometimes the reader will have to gather additional information. Heschel continues to talk about ecstasy and pathos as the book continues. He seems to be trying to inform and convince at this point in the book.



## Part 2: Chapters 10-13

### Part 2: Chapters 10-13 Summary and Analysis

Heschel states that the task has become now to look at the theory of ecstasy, but limits it to the literary prophets. He looks at the state of mind of the prophet at the time when they were to be receiving the words of God. Heschel explains that some think the prophets may have been under the influence of subconscious impulses and victims of hallucinations. This obscures much about the prophetic personality. Heschel takes information from parts of Israel's culture to understand the prophets, as well as facts from the cult of the Baalam. Heschel states that if ecstasy were a requirement for a prophet then Moses, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah would not have been classified as prophets. They are conscious when they receive their visions from the Lord and react to them, sometimes in shock and fear, at the moment they receive them. According to Heschel the drive from ecstasy comes from a person's desire to be connected to gods and in the process lose themselves. He uses prophets from Egypt and Mesopotamia cults that used ecstasy to solidify his point. Although Heschel describes many aspects of ecstasy, he admits that there is no way for a person to accurately describe what is experienced while in the state of ecstasy—but it is the goal that a prophet works toward.

Heschel begins to focus on the descriptions of prophecy in the following chapter and compares it to poetry. Heschel states that many parts of the Bible should be looked at as songs telling the story of God. Heschel links divine inspiration to a gift of poetry. Heschel quotes Democritus who calls what a poet writes beautiful, if it is written with enthusiasm and divine inspiration. Heschel quotes other people in this chapter who denounce the Bible and the prophets' words stating that they were frauds who, at the least, bought the information they shouted from fortune tellers. Heschel states that much of these beliefs came from an era when people wanted rationality. Heschel ends this chapter by comparing the relationship of inspiration to a poet and the relationship that inspiration has to a prophet. According to Heschel, inspiration has no meaning to the evaluation of the work of a poet, but for a prophet will be the essence and justification for what he does.

As Heschel looks at the explanations for prophets and their inspiration in the next chapter, he discusses several ideas that have been given describing the origins of the prophets' words. There are those who state that any poet must be mad in order to create anything beautiful. Heschel discusses these thoughts and the driving force behind them. He finds it odd that a man must be brought to the bottom of the pit to be exalted. To continue on that thought process there are those who claim that in order for the prophets to have had revelations from God they had to have madness in them that led to a psychic ability. Heschel states that a reliable diagnosis of the prophets' mental health is beyond our reach. Heschel discusses Spinoza's idea that the prophets, such as Moses, were not talking to God but were making judgments about God's desires from the information they had about God. Heschel disputes this because of the fact that



Israel had rather normal thoughts about God and Moses wouldn't have taught much more than simple rules of right living. Heschel describes the prophets in many other ways in this chapter and argues his point of view from those who oppose him.

Heschel gives facts but is also quick to give the point of views of those who oppose his thinking. Heschel gives a lot of information to the reader, which can be overwhelming but is effective. It is as if Heschel didn't want anyone to be able to claim that he forgot to mention something that could disprove his writing.

The reader will see that Heschel never talks poorly about any other writer. There are points of view that he agrees with and uses to support his own, but Heschel also argues with others but takes time to explain why their findings are flawed. While he takes time to do this he never talks about them in derogatory tones. He takes a tone of someone who is grading someone's work to decide whether they got it right or wrong. Even if Heschel disagrees with it he speaks in a respectful manner.



## Part 2: Chapter 14-17

### Part 2: Chapter 14-17 Summary and Analysis

When discussing the events and experiences surrounding the prophets, Heschel begins by talking about the certainty of being inspired by God as each prophet claimed to be and was willing to prove by calling on God. Heschel quotes prophets such as Moses when he is talking in Numbers about the fact that he is willing to prove that he is speaking the words of God and not out of his own mind. Heschel discusses the age in which the prophets lived and how that would have affected them. Heschel poses the question that if it really were simply in a person's mind and the prophets were not chosen by God, then why were there no prophets from any land other than Israel's? Heschel quotes other prophets and the words that they used and compares them to "false prophets" who were disproved in the Bible, such as the worshipers of Baal. Heschel also touches on the inspiration of particular events and looks at the events themselves. Heschel describes the prophets as men who did God's will unconditionally but were never without the power of their own minds. He points out another theory, that the prophets were speculators and desired only to impress people with their power and authority. Heschel disputes this with the facts concerning the prophets' intensity and concern for the people.

Heschel looks at prophets from different places in the world and even a brief look at the different religions that have their own prophets. He compares the differences and similarities, and points out the ways that they are vastly different from the Christian religion. Heschel takes a look at the primitive cultures and the religions and beliefs that have come from those cultures. He states that primitive men have possessions but not revelations and no communication. Heschel also writes about divination and dreams, and the role that they took in ancient times and modern. Heschel states that the only place that can be found where prophecy came as a dream is in the second chapter of Daniel. Heschel states that throughout the world people can find some type of figure that equals a prophet for that religion.

Heschel discusses the connection between, God, king, and prophet in the next chapter. It has been found throughout history that many cultures revere their king as god and Heschel discusses the relationship between Israel and their king in relation to God. In addition to this the prophet or priest often had close ties to the king as a source of power to the god that they worshiped. Many of the religious figures that the old testament prophets spoke out against were the ones that were close to the king and unwilling to speak out against their people. Heschel believes that these men were most likely patriotic and loved their country but had begun down a path opposite of God's will.

In the conclusion of the book Heschel looks back at the different paths that pathos can lead a person and the similarities between them. In this final chapter Heschel captivates the meaning of pathos into a few words as a "divine attentiveness and concern." He states that prophetic religion is not what a man does with his concern but what a person





does with God's concern. Again in this chapter, as in previous ones, Heschel describes God as a figure who shouldn't be imagined because we have no way to accurately give him the respect and the description that he deserves. He also touches on the subjectivity of God. Heschel states at the end that it is much more important to understand God than to know yourself. He quotes First Chronicles chapter 28:9 where it tells us to "Know thy God."

Heschel uses the conclusion in the book to connect discussions from the beginning of the story to the later chapters. While the reader has the ability to make his own decisions with the information given him it appears that Heschel is very clear in his thinking and able to communicate his thoughts in a very persuasive manner. He ends the book with remaining questions, or at least a lack of definitive information about God, but he appears to believe that the questions are normal questions since the topic of discussion has been God. Heschel seem to believe that no one on this earth can ever hope to fully understand God and to try to describe God in full terms may be a sin. There are some things that will continue to be considered solely on a person's faith rather than knowledge of a subject.

Heschel's book seems to be one that should be used as a study guide over a period of time much more than a simple book. There is a lot of information that Heschel gives the reader so they can compare his findings to that of others throughout history. There is a lot for the reader to absorb because Heschel has been so very thorough.

At the end of the conclusion the reader will find information about the author as well as further information on pathos. Pathos has been something that the author has discussed throughout the book but it is still not easily explained. It is easy to see that Heschel was a biblical scholar and that he studied other areas to further explain his findings.



# Characters

## Prophet

A prophet described by Abraham J. Heschel as someone who feels hypersensitive to the evils that go on in the world. The person is someone who has given himself over to the will of God but has not lost control of his mind. Heschel points out differences between an average person and the prophets explaining that most people overlook things that have been labeled in society as meaningless sins but that a prophet finds them as appalling as murder.

The prophets often were people who were separate from the world in many respects, but some did have families. The prophets heard the call of God and obeyed despite the consequences. Prophets were people who spoke out and made targets of themselves in the cities, and because of their convictions and words they could be driven out of the cities, imprisoned, or worse. The prophets were put there to magnify the guilt of those who were working against God so the city could have a chance to turn back to the Lord. The prophets' words could be of doom that was to come to the people but God would stay any judgment given by the prophets if the people would repent. A prophet is a person who feels a burden on his heart that God has placed there.

## Hosea

Hosea was a prophet in the Old Testament Bible. It is recorded that much of his prophecy regarded the Northern Kingdom of Israel which Hosea referred to as Ephraim. He was different from some prophets, as were his teachings. He was married and had three children, and it is thought that he was most likely a baker. Hosea often referred to Israel as a harlot who has been unfaithful to her husband and her first love, referring to God. It is noted that Hosea was himself married to a woman named Gomer who proved to be unfaithful to him, and he was commanded by the Lord to take her back.

By all accounts Hosea loved Gomer, and this relationship seems to have been a mirror of the relationship that God had with his people. Hosea never said openly that it was to prove a point that he was commanded to take Gomer back and forgive her. There are many different thoughts on why but none are completely definite with the information given. In Hosea's words his focus point was that the people did not know God and what God feels for Israel. Hosea says to the people, "There is no loyalty, no love, and no knowledge of God in the land."

## Amos

A prophet that proclaimed God's word during the reign of Jeroboam II. He spoke out against the lack of justice, the poor that were forced into slavery, and corrupt government officials.



## Isaiah

Isaiah began proclaiming the word of God in the year that King Uzziah of Judah died. The book of this prophet deals with the sorrow that God feels, rather than his anger, that his children have turned away.

## Micah

Prophet in the days of Hezekiah. He was the first prophet to state that Jerusalem was to be destroyed.

## Jeremiah

Was called to be a prophet in the year 625 B.C. and continued for many years. Jeremiah tells of Jerusalem's destruction but offers a way to repentance if they will turn back to God.

## Habakkuk

The life of Habakkuk was not recorded but prophesied during the time of Jehoiakim during the triumphs of Nebuchadnezzar. He is the prophet who asks God how long he will let the evil continue in the land.

## Shepherd

Someone to help guard and guide the sheep, the followers of the Lord. Those who are not doing their jobs are warned that the blood of their followers will be required at the shepherd's hands.

## Sheep

A name given to the followers of God. The followers of God are watched over and protected by God as if they were sheep.

## Cain

Murdered his brother Abel. The Lord heard Abel's blood crying to him out of the ground.



# Objects/Places

## Divine Pathos

Said by Heschel to be the key to inspired prophecy.

## Prophecy

What has happened to God and what will happen to the people. Judgment on a people in prophecy is never final if they will repent.

## Israel

Was the home to a great many people who were considered God's people.

## Righteousness

Righteousness is said to be interdependent and give peace and trust.

## Patriots

Men who love their country. The prophets are given this name by Heschel's description.

## Bible

The Bible is a book that is said by Heschel to be not consistent in nature to anything else we know about during the time it evolved.

## Zeal

The zeal of the Lord is said to be what accomplishes many things. Isaiah states that it is what explains the surviving remnant.

## God's anger

The wrath that the Lord feels when he is not obeyed by his people. His anger is powerful but the Lord God is merciful and willing to forgive.



## **Marriage**

A symbol of the union between God and his people.

## **Greek gods**

Given as a comparison to the God of Israel. The Greek gods were to be feared by the people and were not in ultimate control as is the Lord God of Heaven.

# Themes

## The Importance of Information

The Prophets main goal is to give the reader information. Abraham J. Heschel gives information not only about the prophets themselves but information about other cultures and religions. This is given so that the reader has all the facts. Heschel also gives information from other sources. Heschel is described as one of the foremost Jewish theologians of his time.

In The Prophets there are many terms that the reader may be unfamiliar with. There are times when the reader will have the terms explained but there are other times when the terms have been created by Heschel himself to explain his own thoughts. In these moments the reader will have to follow Heschel's thought process to understand what the explanation is. Heschel gives as much information as he can about the prophets that he discusses in the book and their lives surrounding their call to become prophets. There may have been some of this information that doesn't lend immediate credit to the reader's understanding of Heschel's writing, but it seems that Heschel felt that all the information had a place and a purpose as he left nothing out. In addition to his writing, he gave an index in the back of the book that not only gives subjects and names that are found in the book but also names of people that he quoted or that added to his insight for the writing of the book.

## The Role of Faith

A large part of the focus of Heschel's book is the circumstances surrounding the prophets and their discussions with God. While Heschel keeps this as his focal point, he does discuss other religions in the world, both past and present, and their contrast to the religion that the Old Testament prophets had. He also discusses the relationship that empires and civilizations had between their leaders and their prophets or priests. Heschel describes the connection as an important one and gave instances where the religion and the power were closely connected and sometimes even ruled by the same person.

Heschel also brings the importance of believing back to more modern times when he discusses the importance of knowing God. Heschel states that a man cannot know himself if he doesn't know God. He uses a quote from First Chronicles in the twenty-eighth chapter for this explanation. In addition to this Heschel points out how the laws of the land were connected to the faith that was practiced. He also points out that many wars were connected to the faith of the people. The faith that God gave his people played a crucial role in God's ability to work in the lives of His people.



## God's Forgiveness

Heschel spends most of the book looking at the prophets of the Old Testament and the messages that they brought. He explains the words that they shouted in the city and many times they were words of doom and warnings that God was going to destroy a people. While many of the prophets gave warnings of doom and words that would strike fear into the hearts of the citizens, there was always hope. Heschel describes God with terms explaining that while he is capable of being angry with his people, he is always willing to forgive his people if they are willing to turn from their ways and earnestly repent.

Heschel points out that many of the prophets who gave warnings of destruction didn't give an option for salvation in their message. Heschel doesn't suggest that the prophets were wrong or leaving words of God out of their message, but he does give the reader a picture of how many of them left the people in the cities. God didn't call his people to continually sacrifice for their sins telling them that if they obeyed the words of God that was better than any sacrifice that could be given. Israel often turned from God, and Heschel states that had the Lord God of heaven been a stern God then he would have long ago cut off His covenant with his chosen people.



# Style

## Perspective

The story is written in third person. The writer was a Jewish theologian who was a refugee from Nazi Germany. He wrote the book with the desire to persuade and inform the reader about the Old Testament prophets and their relationship to God. When Heschel begins, he tries to stay informative more than persuasive, but as the writing continues the reader finds that he begins to give his opinions. He also gives the reader reasons why he is correct and supports his own opinions by giving the reader quotes from other theologians and writers.

He writes the book from the point of view that the prophets were men who were hypersensitive to the evil that goes on in the world because of their intimate relationship to God. Heschel, who believed that to be religious demanded that you get involved in political affairs, was strongly opposed to the war in Vietnam and founded the Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam. Heschel's writings have been accepted by many as writings derived from a true spiritual experience. Heschel felt strongly about his convictions, and his thoughts and beliefs added to his study and writing of the book.

## Tone

The tone of the book is partisan in the sense that Abraham Heschel was a Jewish theologian. It is obvious that his own beliefs are put into the book and that he wrote as much on fact as he did on what he felt to be a truth spiritually. Heschel had a desire to convince the reader, and the book also had an objective tone in that Heschel gave a lot of information and never told the reader what to think. He includes information, not only from his own religion, but from other beliefs and religions. Heschel seems to want to teach the reader and give as much information as he can, but ultimately leaves the final judgment and decision up to the reader.

The book is written in a very informative style. Heschel was a studied professor and the book may be hard to understand at moments. It is very stiff and formal, and there are specialized terms that the reader may have a hard time understanding. Heschel explains some of the terms, but he is so well educated that the reader may remain unsure about his meaning.

## Structure

The book was written with two main parts. The parts themselves are numbered but are not titled. There are several chapters within each part that are titled. The chapters are divided into sections that are titled and may contain a single paragraph or last for several pages. Two of the chapters were short enough that the writer didn't divide sections within. There are quotes from the Bible throughout the writing taken from the





Old Testament. The writer also provides references for information retrieved from other books and informative sources as well as authors.

There is an index that gives page numbers for key words, phrases, and names mentioned in the book. Since the author spends a great deal of time discussing pathos, there is an appendix in the back with a note on the meaning of pathos to help the reader in their understanding. Heschel also gives an index with the passages used from the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, Rabbinical Writings, New Testament, and other scriptures such as Yin Fu King, Tao Tech King, and Rigveda. There is also a brief piece explaining the life of the author. While there is a lot of information to absorb, the reader will find that Heschel left very little out of his informative and comprehensive book.



## Quotes

"But if such deep sensitivity to evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to the abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails?" Part 1: Chapter 1: Page 5

"How deeply Hosea must have sensed the pathos of God to have been able to convey such dreadful words against his own people whom he loved so deeply." Part 1: Chapter 3: Page 57

"Unlike the nations of the world, Israel is reprimanded not only for arrogance and moral iniquity, but also for idolatry and the abandonment of God." Part 1: Chapter 4: Page 117

"To extricate the people from despondency, to attach meaning to their past and present misery, was the task that the prophet and God had in common." Part 1: Chapter 8: Page 193

"Perhaps the answer lies here: righteousness is not just a value; it is God's part of human life, God's stake in human history." Part 1: Chapter 11: Page 253

"The prophets never identify God's pathos with His essence, because for them the pathos is not something absolute, but a form of relation." Part 2: Chapter 1: Page 298

"This was the central endeavor of the prophet: to set forth not only a divine law, but a divine life; not only a covenant, but also a pathos; not the eternal immutability of His Being, but the presence of His pathos in time; not only absolute Lordship, but also direct relatedness." Part 2: Chapter 4: Page 355

"The ultimate end of Philosophy is, according to Plotinus, in the attainment of complete contact and union with the divine unity. Such contact, however, can be attained only in an ecstasy, 'in which reasoning is in abeyance and all Intellection and even, to dare the word the very self,' and in which the soul is swept entirely out of itself and carried up into a realm where the One manifests itself in its majesty." Part 2: Chapter 8: Page 426

"The next step was to regard the prophets exclusively as poets, prophetic inspiration as poetic enthusiasm, and to look upon their words, not as repository pure and simple of the divine truth, but as divine truth in the form of a human product." Part 2: Chapter 11: Page 480

"The certainty of being inspired by God, of speaking in His name, of having been sent by Him to the people, is the basic and central fact of the prophet's consciousness." Part 2: Chapter 14: Page 545

"It is not brought about by the prophet, but comes about without and even against his will. It presupposes neither training nor the gradual development of a talent. It comes about as an act of election and grace." Part 2: Chapter 14: Page 567



"'Know thy God' (1 Chron. 28:9) rather than 'Know Thyself' is the categorical imperative of the biblical man. There is no self-understanding without God-understanding." Part 2: Chapter 17: Page 625



## Topics for Discussion

Heschel states, "There is not self-understanding without God-understanding" (page 625). Given what Heschel has explained in the book, explain this from your own understanding. Give information to support your answer.

Heschel is discussing the characteristics of a prophet and says, "But if such deep sensitivity to evil is to be called hysterical, what name should be given to the abysmal indifference to evil which the prophet bewails?" (page 5). Give your own word or phrase that would fit the "abysmal indifference" that Heschel describes. Explain why you chose this word or phrase.

Heschel explains that, "all images, parables, and symbols fade when applied to God." Give some examples of common symbols that are associated with God and the reason why they are not accurate according to Heschel's writing. Explain why they are used.

"Why are human beings so obsequious, ready to kill and ready to die at the call of kings and chieftains?" This is the question that Heschel poses at the beginning of Chapter 9 on page 202 while explaining the need for prophets in the Old Testament. Give an answer to Heschel's question while staying within his beliefs as stated in the book.

Heschel states that God appears like a confused man or a strong man that cannot save (page 225). Explain what Heschel meant in this passage.

In Part 1 Chapter 10, Heschel discusses the futility of chastisement. Do you agree with his finding that chastisement is not effective from God? Why?

In Part 1, Chapter 11, Heschel explains that sacrifice is not as necessary as obedience. Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Heschel gives an extended explanation of pathos in relation to God. Provide a short one-sentence definition of the same pathos. Explain why this sums up the thought.