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The prophets today

by [Hadley Arkes](#)

A review of *The Prophets*, by Norman Podhoretz.

Norman Podhoretz approaches the prophets of the Hebrew Bible with all the care that scholarship can bring to the project. But his purpose in the end is to administer a jolt—to bring out the challenge that classical prophecy would pose against the orthodoxies of our own day. Those new orthodoxies have commanded their deepest allegiance among the political class that rules now in the academy and the media, in the schools of law and the courts. That the outlook of this class has come to be seen as so intertwined with “modernity” is not to establish the futility of classical prophecy or the irrelevance of what the prophets had to teach. It may only confirm that the ancient vices of idolatry have taken a shape more suited to our own times. When they are recognized in their various modern guises they may seem tame in their familiarity, but Podhoretz urges us to take seriously the notion that they hold for us, today as in the past, the same evil that the prophets had the wit to see and decry in their own age.

And yet, the classic Hebrew prophecies came to us at times in parables, with some layers of meaning discreetly hidden from the vulgar. Uncovering those layers of meaning has given rise to a whole industry, or vocation, of biblical scholarship. Podhoretz has disclaimed the authority of the most accomplished biblical scholars, some of whom were his own teachers. That disclaimer might have been too modestly made, for his learning here is considerable. When he majored in English at Columbia in the early 1950s, he also worked toward a degree of Bachelor of Hebrew Literature at the College of Jewish Studies, then a division of the Jewish Theological Seminary. Abraham Joshua Heschel was on the faculty then, and Podhoretz came to know other scholars in this field when he published them in *Commentary* magazine. He took on the editorship of *Commentary* in his late twenties, after a stint of study in Cambridge, and his editorship ran for nearly forty years.

Some reviewers have been so struck by the biblical scholarship that they have fastened on that character of the book; but in that reading, I think, they miss the point. What is at work in the book are the same perspective and concerns that were described in his editorship. His understanding was furnished by a serious study of literature and theology; and in growing up in Brooklyn in the 1930s and 1940s he had cultivated at least that urbanity of one anchored in the world, able to see it as it was. From this background of study and experience, he brought his intelligence to bear on the issues that vexed our politics. His concern is to read the prophets seriously, but to read them with a sense of what they may genuinely have to say about those issue of moral consequence that trouble our politics right now. In this sense, as Podhoretz notes, he brings to the task the character of an “amateur” in the most literal sense, as one who loves the subject and approaches the prophets with love and reverence.

To take in the full sweep of the prophets, from Joshua to the Second Zechariah, from the death of Moses to the end of the sixth century B.C.E., is to take in a history of the Jews that is worthy of Hollywood, in its scenes of miracles and mayhem, of picturesque slaughter along with romance and martyrdom. There are warriors collecting foreskins of their enemies and aggressive wives, like Jezebel, egging on their pusillanimous husbands.

After Joshua's breathtaking performance at the battle of Jericho, he does an encore no less striking. He confronts a coalition of Amorite chieftains, and God comes to his aid again, raining hailstones down on the Amorites, and granting yet another miracle: He will have the sun stand still until Joshua finishes off the Amorites. After the death of Joshua, an angel appears, delivering yet another in what would be, over the years, a string of familiar complaints and charges: The children of Israel are denounced for failing to fulfill their part of the covenant with God, the God who brought them out of Egypt, and even now promises not to abandon them. But the Israelites have mingled with the inhabitants of the surrounding lands, and picked up their habits. They set up altars in groves, and some fall into the worship of Baal. The saga of the prophets becomes an ongoing series of recriminations and warnings, of dooms foretold, to a people that have fallen away from the "laws and statutes" of the one God. For it is precisely those laws and statutes that have defined the people of Israel and their mission as a people "chosen."

Samuel warned the Hebrews that if they chose to be governed by a king, they would experience all of the corruptions that come with monarchy. Kings would deploy their sons and their property as though they were their own. Still, the people shunned that advice, and what followed were the kingships of Saul (c. 1020–1004 B.C.E) and David (c. 1004–965 B.C.E). Podhoretz characterizes them as "relatively benign," but they were attended with rough times and high costs. After the death of David's son, Solomon, the united kingdom broke into two, with a kingdom in Judah in the north and in Israel in the South. From that point follows a string of disasters, which might have borne out the presentiments of Samuel.

Jewish scholars have been moved, of course, to puzzle about a God who would dispense a rough justice on the people He had chosen, punishing them, say, for the sins of David. But as the story unfolds we see other incidents, as harsh or astounding. The celebrated Elijah offers a challenge to the rival prophets of Baal, collecting about four hundred and fifty of them in a contest to see whose sacrifice could be consumed with fire from above. Elijah's sacrifice is consumed, along with everything in the immediate vicinity, and his adherents then proceed to kill all of the prophets on the other side for the sake of rooting out the idolatry in their midst.

Just from these ingredients, in a story richly unfolding, the record describes a God not at all reluctant to intervene in history and take sides. Elishah exhibited the power of bringing a child back from the dead, and his power did not desert him at his own death, for he managed his own resurrection. And Elijah, after a life filled with incident, had the distinct honor of being borne directly to heaven with a fiery chariot. With these ingredients in place, the story of Christ's advent and resurrection is striking, but not novel. The awareness of that record may only confirm Paul's observation that the account of God-become-man was, for the Jews, a difficulty, but for the Greeks an absurdity.

For the Greeks, and the cultivated pagans of Rome, there were the things that were permanent and the things that were ephemeral and contingent. The God of this scheme was part of the permanent things, but in that event, as Aristotle suggested, God would not have moving parts, for God could not be material. Material things decomposed, and they could not be part of the permanent things. From that understanding one could derive the God who was the First Cause in the universe, the unmoved mover, though not the God who negotiated with Abraham over Sodom and Gomorrah, or the God who died on the cross. The kind of God who could direct Elijah to cross the lines of different polities, cashier the rulers in one place and install rulers in another—that had to be a God with a universal jurisdiction. And it figured: the God who authored a universal law of physics would

not have authored a moral law confined to Damascus or Jersey City.

Podhoretz catches the logical core of the matter when he observes that “If only one God exists, then it is axiomatic that He is the God of all people.” The classical philosophers could reason back to a First Cause that is not merely contingent, and Augustine, using his wit to expose the incoherence of the Roman polytheists, suggested that reason itself could work its way back to that one God. Nevertheless, Jews and Christians take, as a distinct teaching of revelation, the God who disclosed himself as the Creator. From that point, Podhoretz engages, as he says, the axioms of reasoning, to extract the God who covers all—and whose laws then are universal. Spinoza had taunted the Hebrews: they would be “no less blessed,” he wrote, “if God had called all men equally to salvation, nor would God have been less present to them for being equally present to others; their laws would have been no less just if they had been ordained for all.”

As Podhoretz argues, however, there was no hypocrisy, because the universal sweep of the teaching had been present from the beginning in the awareness of the God who was One. And for that reason Podhoretz sets himself decorously, but emphatically, against the biblical scholars who seek to argue that there was a shift, somewhere around the time of Amos, from the God tied to a “particular” people, exacting rituals of obedience, to a more universal God, available to all, with “moral” principles that swept now, more broadly, beyond the written statutes and the prosaic, daily rituals. “There is,” Podhoretz writes,

no problem here [of God covering all people with his laws and concern]. A question arises only because God has entered into a special relation with one people alone, the people of Israel.

[H]e affirms that, for inscrutable reasons of His own, God has chosen the children of Israel as the human instrument through which to reveal Himself and to promulgate His laws and His commandments. But in order to spread those laws and those commandments throughout the world, the people of Israel first have to fight against their own attraction to idolatry, which is always standing in the way of their divinely ordained mission.

Podhoretz explains here the puzzle among some commentators as to how early the Jews had been committed to monotheism. Had they not been committed to monotheism from the beginning, from God’s covenant with Abraham? Well, yes and no. For as Podhoretz points out there was a lingering “monolatry,” an inclination to worship one God, but to acknowledge other, lesser gods. The continuing war against this paganism defined the mission of the prophets. The record confronting them, in the daily lives of the people, was grim by any reckoning: there were Jews practicing cannibalism at the time of Micah and apparently persisting with the sacrifice of children even at the time of Jeremiah.

Perhaps with a sense of the baseness still unmeasured, still not experienced in its bottomless depths, Amos was moved to declare, with a certain anguish, that even murder may be better than idolatry. What could not be ruled out, in the murders and villainies yet to be licensed when people had detached themselves radically from any sense of the laws that cast up restraints? Later, Zephaniah would insist that God had to concentrate now on Judah and Jerusalem because, as Podhoretz writes, they had been “so thoroughly infected by idolatry of every kind—Baalism, astral worship and child sacrifice dedicated to the god Molech.”

Podhoretz candidly notes that, as political seers, the prophets had a dismal record. Neither Zephaniah nor Nahum foresaw the rise of Persia. Neither Habakkuk nor Jeremiah anticipated that the Persians would take the ascendance over the Babylonians. But Podhoretz argues that acuteness in prediction is not the standard against which the prophets should be measured. By the end of the

period of classical prophecy, idolatry had been discredited and virtually purged from the understanding of what defined a Jewish people. By any measure of things, that was a massive achievement, and without it, it is hard to imagine the new sect of Jewish-Christians taking on the task of bringing that rigorous monotheism to the rest of the world.

But at the same time, that achievement could not have been managed by prophets who were willing, in the modern style, to recede from “judgmentalism” at every sign of moral slippage. Nor by men who fancied that they could bring peace to the world by refusing to confront the evil before them. It would be a grave mistake, as Podhoretz says, to identify the prophets with the fuzzy liberalism of our own day, ever ready to turn swords into plowshares (citing Isaiah) and hope that, if the wicked went unopposed by arms, the lion would lie down with the lamb. Podhoretz reads the prophets as men never taken in by that kind of utopianism. They leave to God, and only God, the office of performing miracles. In the meantime, they would call the Jews to look seriously at the evils before them, including the evils of their own making.

As Podhoretz understands the lessons of the prophets, the evils they sought to resist were not confined to Jews. It was just that the Jews had to confront them among themselves before they could rightly take up their mission of bringing the laws to the rest of the world. By the same measure, the things the prophets had to teach would instruct the people who were not of the Jews, and even the atheists. But as he makes this move, he appeals to “the terms which, in his own heart, each man knows.” That is a classical formulation of the “natural law,” the law that is accessible to people even when they do not know, or follow, the laws or the rituals among Jews and Christians. With that move, Podhoretz can encompass figures as diverse as Saul Bellow, a Jew quite detached from the religious tradition, and George Orwell, a professed atheist. In Orwell’s courageous opposition to murderous totalitarian regimes, Podhoretz finds a man “doing God’s work.” In this vein, appealing to the natural law, Podhoretz appreciates the American Founders with their appeal to “Nature and Nature’s God.”

In one form or another, the central vice, as Podhoretz sees it, is antinomianism, the rejection of lawfulness and the moral restraints that the law prescribes. In the ancient world, it came along with paganism and polytheism; in our own world, the detachment from moral restraints comes from moral relativism in all its familiar forms—cultural relativism, nihilism, postmodernism, and even radical feminism, with its denial of “nature” and of moral truths springing from that nature. In our own time, the malady expresses itself most vividly in the release of sexuality from the framework of marriage and commitments sustained by law. The vast wave of divorce has brought wreckage in the lives of children, including rising rates of suicide among the young. With the ethic of easier divorce came a new rationale to justify sacrificing the needs of children to the interests of their parents. As Podhoretz suggests, this may be the form that “child sacrifice” has taken in our own time, and the results have hardly been less deadly.

Podhoretz cites here the Palestinian intifada, where the Palestinians were willing to incite their own children to challenge Israeli tanks, and in that way make martyrs of their children. Yet when it comes to the willingness of parents to sacrifice children to their own interests, and even to see the lives of their children snuffed out, America over the last generation has surely given the world a far more dramatic example. I take it as an example of Podhoretz’s delicacy that he says nothing here of abortion, though there could hardly be an example of his point more evident or lethal (with about 1.3 million deaths each year, carried out for nearly thirty years). As the philosopher Robert George remarked, “an infallible sign of [idolatry, or the worship of] false gods is the demand for innocent blood.”

In other instances, the record of universalism and particularism was also politically rather mixed. Was the “wrong” of genocide a universal wrong, to be resisted in all places? Or would the Holocaust be regarded mainly as a crime committed against Jews, with no proper analogue anywhere else?

Jews have been resolved that it was a grievous fault of political leaders in the West that they turned away from the prospect of rescuing the victims in Hitler's death camps. But there was no notable movement among American Jews in the 1970s to mobilize American arms to resist the genocide carried out in Cambodia, as the Khmer Rouge slaughtered about two million out of a population of eleven million. Jews showed a reluctance to seem parochial, in defending their own interests, when it came to self-described American Nazis seeking to march through Skokie, Illinois and taunt survivors from Hitler's camps. In this case, organizations like the American Jewish Committee identified the interests of Jews with the interest in preserving a regime of the First Amendment. To my mind, there was a grave mistake in assuming that the First Amendment would be oblivious to an assault in the form of speech, or that it made no distinction between the victims and the assailants. But was this reaction, on the part of the Jewish community, a move to forego the narrow interests of Jews for the sake of becoming the bearer of a broader ethic to a wider community?

Podhoretz argues that the particular is not lost in the universal, that the insistence on ritual does not mark a deafness to a moral world extending beyond the Jews. But as he candidly acknowledges, he has not exactly been Orthodox himself in his adherence to the rituals, with their insistent, daily demands. As he moves to the natural law, written on our hearts—as he moves, that is, to an understanding that encompasses the Jews who have drifted into atheism, along, one might say, with righteous gentiles, he would seem to be moving quite decisively to the side of the moral ethic rather than the particular ritual, to the universal law rather than the rules of the tribe. And he is anchored there even though one enduring question remains unanswered. That is the question of theodicy or God's justice: Why does God permit the wicked to prosper, while the righteous and the innocent suffer? Podhoretz takes it as a cardinal point in favor of the honesty of the Bible that this question is recorded persistently, as a charge against God, even though the answers are never finally satisfying. Habakkuk (c. 586–610 B.C.E.) confronts God on the question, and laments at one point, “Oh Lord, how long shall I cry and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save? Why dost thou show me iniquity and cause me to behold grievance?”

It is surely no answer to the question to retort, as God does to Job, Where were you when I “laid the foundations of the earth”? The problem may not be so acute if one doubts that God intervenes in history, and that a Himmler is receiving his punishment even now, and everlastingly, in the life that comes after death. But the problem remains nagging for the Jews, for as Podhoretz notes, nowhere “does the Hebrew Bible unmistakably and unambiguously hold out the prospect of an afterlife in which rights are wronged and wrongs are righted.” For the Orthodox, these things will be taken care of in “the world to come.” But in the meantime, Podhoretz settles in with the mysteries of God. The doubting, but reverent man, will finally “bow his head, accept in all humility that there are questions he cannot and never will be able to answer, and he will rely on faith to carry him through.” And yet, Podhoretz's faith here seems to be undergirded with the conviction that there are moral laws anchoring our world, laws that instruct us in the ways of duties manfully accepted, and of liberties forborne. With all of the sober doubts there is a conviction that God will keep his promises, that He will say, as He did through Isaiah, “Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine.”

Hadley Arkes

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