

ECSTASY AND THE PROPHETS

ROBERT L. ALDEN, A.B.

The use of the term "ecstasy" to describe the state of revelation in the Old Testament is not altogether modern. The "deep sleep" (*tardema*) of Abraham in Genesis 15:12 is rendered by ἔκστασις in the Septuagint. The Greek translators also chose that term to describe Daniel's trembling at the great vision (10:7).¹ Rab, the celebrated Babylonian Amora and founder of the academy in Sura (d. 247 B.C.), in reference to Genesis 15:12, called Abraham's deep sleep the "deep sleep of prophecy."²

Tertullian used the word in his discourse "On the Soul."

This power we call "ecstasy," a deprivation of the activity of the senses which is an image of insanity. . . [Citing Gen. 2:21, the *tardema* falling on Adam] Sleep brought rest to the body, but ecstasy came over the soul and prevented it from resting, and from that time this combination constitutes the natural and normal form of the dream.³

Elsewhere he said:

When a man is rapt in the Spirit, especially when he beholds the glory of God, or when God speaks through him, he necessarily loses his sensation because he is overshadowed with the power of God.⁴

Origen denied this and similar views of ecstasy.⁵ Most of the ancient discussions of the matter centered on ecstasy among the people present and not on the prophets of a former era. Another focus was on inspiration but the word "ecstasy" was not used in this connection.

Apart from mystics who engaged in their own kind of ecstasy, no one until modern times paid any attention to the matter.⁶ Duhm was the

1. ἔκστασις occurs twenty-seven times in the Old Testament translating eleven different Hebrew words. Most of them mean "fear" or the like.
2. *Midrash Rabbah*, Genesis XVII:5, VLIV:17; Cf. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1962), pp. 337-44.
3. Ch. 45:3 (*Tertullian Appologetical Works and Minucius Felix Octavius*, trans. Edwin A. Quain, Vol. 10 in *The Fathers of the Church*, ed. Joseph Deferrari and Others [New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1950], p. 280).
4. *Against Marcion*, IV:22, trans. Peter Holms, Vol. 7 in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868), p. 268.
5. *Contra Celsum*, VII, chs. 3, 4; *De Principiis*, III, 4f. (*The Writings of Origen*, trans. Frederick Crombie [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872], II).
6. Cf. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (5th ed.; New York: Methuen & Co., 1914); Martin Buber, *Ekstatische Konfessionen* (Leipzig: Insel, 1921); James Leuba, *The Psychology of Religious Mysticism* (London: Paul, Trench, & Truber, 1925); Henri Delacroix, *Etudes d'histoire et de psychologie du Mysticisme* (Paris: Alcan, 1908); Gershom Sholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1946); A. F. Puukko, "Ekstatische Propheten mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der finisch-ugrischen Parallelen," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, LIII (1935), pp. 23ff.

first to draw attention to so-called ecstatic elements in the prophets.⁷ Gunkel⁸ and Holscher⁹ followed and popularized the theory. T. H. Robinson was the most notable exponent of it in England.¹⁰ Robert Pfeiffer espoused it in America.¹¹ The psychologists and comparative religions students joined their support to this characterization of the Hebrew prophets.¹²

Definitions are abundant and diverse. Here are three typical ones.

Abraham Heschel wrote:

From the viewpoint of psychology, ecstasy is a "withdrawal of consciousness from circumference to center;" a state in which the absorption of the mind in one idea, in one desire, is so profound that everything else is blotted out.¹³

Johannes Lindblom remarked: "When inspiration strongly intensified it turned to ecstasy."¹⁴ And N. W. Porteous commented:

... The appropriate term to apply when an overmastering emotion of whatsoever kind produces a state of exaltation or stupefaction in which the mind is obsessed by a single idea or group of ideas to the exclusion of all other ideas, or one or more senses is abnormally stimulated, with accompanying suspension of the other bodily functions.¹⁵

7. *Die Theologie der Propheten* (Bonn: Marcus, 1875); *Israels Propheten* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1922). The first modern psychoanalysis of prophecy was Wilhelm Wundt, *Volkerpsychologie* (9 vols. Leipzig: Engelmann, 1904-18).
8. "Einleitungen," in H. Schmidt, *Die Grossen Propheten*, Vol. II:2 in *Die Schriften des Alten Testaments in Auswahl*, ed. H. Gressmann and Others (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1923), pp. xi-lxxii; English trans. By Gunkel, "The Secret Experiences of the Prophets," *The Expositor* 9th Series, I (1924), pp. 356-66, 427-35 and II (1924), pp. 23-32; *Die Propheten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1917), p. 30.
9. *Die Profeten: Untersuchungen zur Religionsgeschichte Israels* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1914), pp. 1-158; "Zum Ursprung des israelitischen Prophetentums," in *Alttestamentliche Studien* (Rudolf Kittel *Festschrift*; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche, 1913), pp. 88-100; "Das ekstatische Prophetentum in den semitischen Religionen," *Vom Buch das Tausend Jahre Wuchs*, ed. Max Soloweitschik (Berlin: Welt, 1932), pp. 75-87; Cf. Sigmund Mowinckel, "Ecstatic Experience and Rational Elaboration in Old Testament prophecy," *Acta Orientalia*, XIII (1935), pp. 264-91; Otto Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (2nd ed.; Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1956), pp. 87-90.
10. "The Ecstatic Element in Old Testament Prophecy," *The Expositor*, 8th Series, XXI (1921), pp. 217-38; *Prophecy and Prophets in Ancient Israel* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 50; cf. H. H. Rowley, "The Nature of Prophecy in the Light of Recent Study," *Harvard Theological Review*, XXXVIII (1945), p. 2, n. 9.
11. *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1948), p. 543 *et al.*; cf. T. H. Robinson, "Neuere Propheten-Forschung," *Theologische Rundschau*, III (1931), pp. 75-103; Herbert Ualdo Hines, "The Development of the Psychology of Prophecy," *Journal of Religion*, VIII (1928), pp. 212-24.
12. Cf. J. W. Povah, *The Old Testament and Modern Problems in Psychology* (New York: Longman, Green, & Co., 1926); W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Sacred Dance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923); Alfred Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938).
13. P. 324.
14. *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), p. 4.
15. "Prophecy" in *Record and Revelation*, ed. H. Wheeler Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 228.

These definitions hardly come from the Bible itself. The temporal distance is so great and the material so limited, to say nothing of the altogether different world in which they operated, that we will never get an accurate picture of it. As Lindblom says elsewhere: "In analysing prophetic personalities it must always be kept in mind that inspiration and ecstasy have many degrees and many manifestations."¹⁶ These range between Abraham and Paul; a span hardly satisfied by one definition.

Then there is the additional question of inscripturation. Are the records we have the product of the author as he wrote it, or is what we have the end of an indeterminable period of written and/or oral tradition? In regards to ecstasy some have blamed it on the editors.¹⁷ Others, such as Mowinckel, bow out of the discussion by consigning the whole matter to the psychologists.¹⁸ Still others have gone to the opposite extreme (and there are more of these) and have completely psychoanalyzed the prophet and found him ready for commitment.¹⁹ Classifying the accounts of ecstasy as literary devices is another system that has been used.²⁰

While there are those who connect the word "ecstasy" with all kinds of frowned-upon activities,²¹ there are those who, though not abandoning the term, mean only the mild excitement which each of us occasionally shows.²²

In addition to "vision" and "dream" which are biblical words, ecstasy is attached to hallucination, frenzy, mania, unconsciousness, subconsciousness, clairvoyance, and many more such textbook terms.²³ One of the classical extra-biblical etymological arguments (!) is the Egyptian hieroglyph for "to fall into ecstasy" in the Wen Amon story. It pictures

16. P. 25.
17. William Irwin, *The Problem of Ezekiel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), p. 333.
18. "A Postscript to the Paper 'The Spirit and the Word in the Pre-exilic Reform-Prophets' in *JBL*, LII, 799ff.," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LVI (1937), p. 264.
19. Cf. Edwin C. Broome, "Ezekiel's Abnormal Personality," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXV (1946), pp. 277-92. For a criticism of this article see Carl Gorden Howie, *The Date and Composition of Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1950), pp. 69-84.
20. J. M. Powis Smith, *The Prophets and their Times* (2nd ed. rev. by William Irwin; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), p. 13.
21. Pfeiffer, p. 532; Holscher, pp. 6-16 *et al.*; L. P. Horst, "L'extase chez les prophètes d'Israël d'après les travaux de Holscher et de Gunkel," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses*, II (1922), p. 347.
22. Cf. August Knobell, *Der Prophetismus der Hebraer* (Breslau: Max & Komp, 1837), I pp. 155-56; Ernest Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *Christologie des Alten Testaments* (2nd ed.; Berlin: Ludwig Oehmigke's Verlag, 1857), Bd. 32, pp. 158-84. Eng. trans. Theod. Meyer & James Martin, *Christology of the Old Testament* (reprinted: Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1956) Vol. IV, pp. 350-69; Franz Delitzsch, *System de biblischen Psychologie* (2nd ed. Leipzig: Dorffling & Franke, 1861), p. 285. Eng. trans. Robert Ernest Wallis, *A System of Biblical Psychology* (Clark's Foreign Theological Library, No. 13, 2nd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1875), p. 335.
23. Broome, pp. 291-92.

a figure with waving arms and dancing legs.²⁴ Jacobi said that ecstasy was the essence of the prophets.²⁵

Let us conclude the matter of defining the word by noting Guillaume's quip: "Ecstasy . . . is a plant of dubious origin and associations"²⁶ and casting the lot with Heschel when he wrote:

The truth is that revelation is a problem that eludes scientific inquiry; that no scholar has ever devised a lens to pierce its mystery. Biblical criticism may have succeeded in finding spots in the sun and in compelling us to modify our conception of how the text was transmitted, but the act of revelation remains beyond its scope.²⁷

We have noted the major proponents of the ecstatic theory. To them we might add many more.²⁸

R. B. Taylor saw three types of ecstasy in the Old Testament represented respectively by Samuel (concerned with domestic matters), Balaam (concerned with the future), and Saul (concerned with rousing nationalism in a time of crisis and oppression).²⁹ Ezekiel, however, more frequently serves as an example of ecstasy. Pfeiffer said: "Ezekiel was the first fanatic of the Bible" and "Like most fanatics, Ezekiel was dogmatic. . . In ecstatic trance he saw visions and heard voices."³⁰ Beryl Cohon bunches all the early prophets together, the false along with Elisha and calls them "mad enthusiasts."³¹ One of the most radical analyses of Ezekiel appeared a decade ago in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* where he was termed a "paranoid schizophrenic," and "true psychotic (unrecognized in his day and looked upon as an ecstatic)," having "a narcissistic-masochistic conflict with attendant phantasies of castration and unconscious sexual regression" etc.³²

On the other hand we find men using the term "ecstasy" when they mean something quite different. Hengstenberg, for instance, in the appendix of his *Christologie* said:

24. Cf. Holscher, p. 133; Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (London: John Murray, 1920), p. 530a.
25. *Die Ekstase der alttestamentlichen Propheten*, Vol. 108 of *Grenzfragen des Nerven- und Seelenlebens* (Munich: Bergmann, 1920), p. 4.
26. P. 107.
27. *God in Search of Man* (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1956), p. 220.
28. E.g. Adolph Lods, "Recherches recentes sur le prophetisme israelite," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, CIII-CIV (1931), pp. 279-316; Aage Bentzen, *Daniel*, Vol. 19 in *Handbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. Otto Eissfeldt (Tubingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1937), pp. iv-v; Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, III *Das antike Judentum* (Tubingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1921), p. 300. Eng. trans. Hans H. Gerth & Don Martindale, *Ancient Judaism* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952), p. 286; Edward Scribner Ames, *The Psychology of Religious Experience* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1910).
29. "Prophetic Ecstasy," *Expository Times*, XIII (1901-02), p. 225.
30. P. 543.
31. Beryl Cohon, *The Prophets* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939), pp. 9-14.
32. Broome, pp. 291-92.

Es ist nach allem, was wir ausgeführt haben, nicht zu verkennen, dass sich die biblischen Propheten nicht minder wie die heidnischen Seher in einer ἔκστασις befanden.³³

Later he criticized Havernick for being inconsistent in posting visions but denying ecstasy.³⁴ Hengstenberg had something different in mind from some of the definitions given above. He equates ecstasy with vision. Franz Delitzsch employed a similar watered-down meaning when he said:

Jeder tiefe Schlaf ist zwar, inwiefern die Seele aus ihrer Bezogenheit auf die Aussenwelt in ihre Beziehung auf sich selbst und den Geist und durch ihn auf Gott entrückt wird, eine ἔκστασις (LXX für *tardema*), aber es gibt auch eine schlaf- und traumähnliche Verinnerung im Wachzustande, die sich dermassen steigern kann, dass der Mensch über die Grenzen seines diesseitigen Lebensbereiches hinausgerückt wird und mit einer seiner sonstigen Wahrnehmung entzogenen jenseitigen Welt in Berührung tritt. . . Das ist die Ekstase (. . . 2 Cor. 5, 13. . .)³⁵

Another difference prevails between these latter two views and those represented by Holscher and company. Ecstasy arises either from natural or humanly initiated efforts or it is a gift from above. The latter is theo-tropic; the former anthropotropic. We ought to also consider that these citations are from older works, works written before the popularizing of the term "ecstasy."

A third group of scholars dislikes the use of the word in any sense to describe the Hebrew prophets. They represent a far wider circle than evangelicals. Antonin Causse who has several books and articles on prophecy said: ". . . Nous ne croyons pas que l'exstase puisse etre vraiment consideree comme etant 'a' la base de la vie religieuse prophete."³⁶ Moses Bittenwieser, one-time professor of Bible at Hebrew Union College wrote in a similar vein. "The inspiration of the great literary prophets has nothing in common with the ecstasy of the prophets of the older type."³⁷ He was not averse to considering the former prophets ecstatic but categorically denied it in the latter. Heschel, like-

33. P. 174. Eng. P. 361: "After all that has been adduced, it will be impossible to arrive at any other conclusion than that it was in an ἔκστασις that the biblical prophets prophesied, as well as the heathen seers."
34. P. 181. Eng. p. 366.
35. P. 285. Eng. p. 335: "Every deep sleep, indeed, so far as the soul is withdrawn from its relation to the outer world into its relation to itself and the spirit, and through the spirit of God, is an ἔκστασις (LXX. for *tardema*); but there is also in the waking state an internal withdrawing like to sleeping and dreaming, which may arise to such a point, that the man is taken out beyond the limits of the region of his temporal life, and comes into contact with a remote world withdrawn from his usual perception. . . This is ecstasy (. . . 2 Cor. v. 13. . .)"
36. "Quelques remarques sur la psychologie des prophetes," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses*, II (1922), p. 354.
37. *The Prophets of Israel* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1914), p. 138.

wise, is most adamant when the discussion revolves around the literary prophets.

It is strange that in all the discussions of prophetic ecstasy, scholars overlooked the significant fact that in the leading prophetic figures between the time of Moses and the time of Amos, no sign of ecstasy is reported.³⁸

A third Jewish scholar, Yehezkel Kaufmann, noted that the process is reversed in the Bible as compared with heathen prophecy.³⁹ Ecstasy is consequent on the word of God in the Bible. Ecstasy did not effect the word.

We could quote similar statements from such diverse sources as F. James' *Personalities of the Old Testament*,⁴⁰ William Robertson Smith,⁴¹ John Bright,⁴² G. C. Joyce,⁴³ H. Junker,⁴⁴ Aalders,⁴⁵ Micklam,⁴⁶ and Seierstad.⁴⁷ We find anti-ecstatic interpretations as well in numerous evangelical, Roman Catholic, and conservative Jewish authors.

The classic among the conservative protestant contenders for sobriety among the prophets was F. Eduard Konig. (Cf. also Joseph Addison Alexander.⁴⁸) He, in a book worthy of translation, *Der Offenbarungsbegriff des Alten Testaments*, emphasized again and again the mental clarity of the prophets and the self-consciousness which they preserved even in the moment of their call, and denied that ecstasy had any significance for the rise of prophetism.⁴⁹ A briefer English statement of his views appears under "Prophecy (Hebrew)" in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*.⁵⁰

A brief glance at any of the authors who propose an ecstatic explanation for the prophets of Israel will show how much they rest their case on extra-biblical phenomena.⁵¹ Nearly all religions from the ancient

38. *The Prophets*, p. 354.

39. *The Religion of Israel*, trans. from Hebrew and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. 100.

40. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1939), p. 215, n. 4.

41. *The Prophets of Israel* (London: Black, 1902), p. 219.

42. *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), p. 246.

43. *The Inspiration of Prophecy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1910), p. 67.

44. *Prophet und Seher in Israel* (Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1927).

45. *De Profeten des Ouden Verbonds* (Kampen: Kok, 1918).

46. *Prophecy and Eschatology* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1926), pp. 17ff.

47. "Erlebnis und Gehorsam beim Propheten Amos," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, LII (1934), pp. 22-41; *Die Offenbarungserlebnisse der Propheten Amos, Jesaja und Jeremia* (Oslo: Dybwad, 1946). This latter work was challenged by Mowinckel, "Ekstatiske Innslag i Profetenes Oplevelser," *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift*, XLIX (1948), pp. 129-221.

48. *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (reprinted; Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1953), pp. 5-6.

49. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1882), I, p. 48 et al.

50. Ed. James Hastings, Vol. X (1919), pp. 384-93.

51. Cf. Lawrence J. C. Llewellyn Davies, *The Origin and development of early Hebrew prophecy in special relation to the development of Yahwism in Israel* (Bonn: Wilhelms Universität, 1959); George Widengren, *Literary and Psychological Aspects of the Hebrew Prophets*, Vol. 10 of Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift (Uppsala: Lundequistska, 1948).

Babylonian cults to the mystic Eastern faiths as well as certain branches of Christianity have members who become ecstatic. They dance, they lose consciousness, they rave, they even utter prophecy. Most of these features are absent from most of the biblical prophets. What parallels are drawn are quite inconclusive since centuries of years as well as of miles separate the examples cited.

As with many questions that have no clear-cut answers, the reason lies in the insufficiency of evidence. The Hebrews, unlike the Greeks, did not have a word for everything. One of the words they did not have was "ecstasy." In fact, there are very few "psychological" (for lack of a better term) words in the Old Testament. We must deduce our psychology or theology from the concrete terms they used in not-so-concrete ways. How do you explain ecstasy using concrete terms only? We must get our understanding of the Hebrew prophetic mind from such words as *gala*—"reveal," *haga*—"meditate," *hoza*—"envisage" or its cognates, *halam*—"dream," *raah*—"see" or "show" (*hiph'il*), or the various ways in which *ruah*—"spirit" was used.

When we come right down to the positive evidence, there is not one clear instance of a true prophet of Jahweh going into ecstasy—meaning by that term some sort of irresponsible delirium or rage. Saul (1 Sam. 19:24) and the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:26-29) are good examples of the kind of thing the proponents of ecstasy see everywhere. However, even though Saul "prophesied" or "acted like a nab'i" (*yitnabi*), we do not read that he either received or communicated any message from God which functions characterize those we generally classify as true prophets of God.⁵² If we dilute the meaning of ecstasy, eliminating wild enthusiasm, we might fit Ezekiel into the definition. If we further unload the term we might all qualify to join the *habal nazim* ("band of the prophets;" 1 Sam. 10:10).

If, with Holscher and T. H. Robinson, every time we see the expression "Thus saith the LORD" or "The word of the LORD came..." we understand an ecstatic utterance, then we arrive at nearly one thousand instances of ecstasy in the Old Testament.

The first conclusion we arrive at is obvious. There is no adequate and accurate definition of "ecstasy." Hardly any two authors agree although many are of one mind that the prophets were ecstatic.

Since the word generally has derogatory overtones in our language (apart from its Greek etymology) and is used almost exclusively to describe pagan religious action, we do well not to use it to describe the Hebrew prophets. Since neither they themselves nor sympathetic hearers viewed their actions as ecstatic we ought not to so categorize

52. Admittedly 1 Sam. 19:24 is problematical because it implies that it was the regular procedure for the prophets under Samuel to strip off their clothes and lie naked day and night. But here again we can note marked differences between these and other pre-literary prophets such as Balaam or Elijah whose divine messages we have.

them. To us who maintain the *suigeneris* nature of God's dealing with the Hebrew nation and the Christian church, this should be an especially heavy consideration. We read in 1 Corinthians 14:32: "And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets."

There is no good definition of ecstasy. Popular usage has made it into a bad thing. There is no evidence whatever in the Bible for the actions usually denoted by ecstasy. Therefore I propose the Abandonment of the term as one to describe the true prophets of Israel.

Hebrew Union College
Cincinnati, Ohio