

Agnostic at the Altar

Searching for Transcendence
in the Story of the Prophets

JOHN VAN HAGEN

Foreword by Thomas Sheehan

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

Foreword

WITH THIS, HIS SECOND book, John Van Hagen continues to disprove F. Scott Fitzgerald's claim that there are no second acts in American lives. In fact, there may even be third acts.

John Van Hagen began his career as a Roman Catholic priest in San Francisco. After serving in ministry for two-and-a-half years, he resigned, married, and went on to earn a PhD in psychology at Adelphi University. Now in retirement after over thirty years as a therapist, Van Hagen has been focusing his considerable talents on important, if controversial, questions in religion and biblical scholarship.

His highly successful *Rescuing Religion: How Faith Can Survive Its Encounter with Science* (2012) confronted the crisis of cognitive dissonance within Christianity that has been brought on by advances in archeology, biblical studies, and historical science. Now, with *Agnostic at the Altar*, he tackles the complex issue of the Hebrew prophets and, more broadly, the role that stories—both religious and secular—can play in forging meaning in moments of existential crisis. Those familiar with his first book will find in the present volume the same critical but constructive effort at conjugating science and spirituality to create a viable path into our post-modern future.

In the spirit of Karl Jaspers, Shmuel Eisenstadt, and Robert Bellah, Van Hagen anchors this treatise in what has come to be called the Axial Age (ca. 700 to 200 BCE). Those centuries saw a revolutionary new self-understanding break through decaying

ideologies and exhibit notable commonalities across cultural forms as diverse as Confucianism in China, Buddhism in India, Zoroastrianism in Persia, philosophy in Greece, and ethical prophecy in Israel.

With the collapse of the Bronze Age, the emerging Iron Age witnessed radical changes in the economic, socio-political, and religious configuration of the Near East. Those changes included the invention of the abacus, the first known use of coinage, and a critical revolution in writing. While cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts date back to the mid-fourth millennium, the late Bronze Age invention of alphabets liberated writing from the delimited circles of court scribes and accountants and spread literacy to a wider demographic, including itinerant prophets like Amos, Hosea, and their disciples in the mid-eighth century Palestine.

The Axial Age saw a momentous religious shift away from the archaic cosmo-political ideology in which the king was the representative of the local high god, and sometimes even the god's avatar. The emergence of a new reflexivity—a thinking *about* one's thinking—inspired a radical questioning of received traditions and led to new *universalist* understandings of reality, including alternative models of the relation of the divine and the human. Enter the phenomenon of the Hebrew prophets who flourished from roughly 850 to 550 BCE, with their unique emphasis on ethical monotheism.

The Israelites did not invent prophecy as such. The Hebrew word *nābī'* (plural *nebī'im*) likely derives from an ancient Akkadian term for "one who is sent to speak." With the Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek beginning in the third century BCE, the word *nābī'* was translated as *προφήτης* (*prophētēs*), "prophet" in the sense of someone who speaks

1. in public,
2. on behalf of Yahweh,
3. with regard to urgent present issues.

The prophet's words were directed to *present* crises, whereas the notion of prophecy as predicting the *future* derives from the later apocalyptic literature, for example, the book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible and the book of Revelation in the New Testament. To be sure, the Hebrew prophets often warned of imminent disaster and sometimes imagined a utopian future, but the future, whether dystopic or utopic, was always linked to the present conduct of the prophet's audience: immoral and unfaithful in the one case, ethical and faithful in the other.

Van Hagen focuses on "classical" prophecy, that is, not the pre-monarchical *nebī'im* who proclaimed patriotic oracles against the Philistines during the period of the judges, ca. 1200–1000 (see 1 Sam 10), nor the prophets like Nathan (2 Sam 7 and 12) who worked for the royal court during the Davidic monarchy between ca. 1010 and 970 BCE. Instead, Van Hagen deals with the prophets who labored first in the divided kingdoms that followed the death of Solomon (931 BCE) and then during and after the Babylonian Exile (587–538 BCE), that is, in

1. the Northern Kingdom of Israel, in Samaria (ca. 930–720)
 - Elijah (ca. 870–850 BCE)
 - Amos (ca. 750 BCE)
2. the Southern Kingdom of Judah, centered in Jerusalem (ca. 1030–587 BCE)
 - First (or Proto-) Isaiah (ca. 740–700 BCE)
 - Jeremiah (ca. 625–587 BCE)
 - Ezekiel (? ca. 587 BCE; scholars debate whether his ministry was in Palestine, Babylon, or both)
3. the Babylonian Exile (ca. 587–538 BCE)
 - Ezekiel (? after 587 BCE: see immediately above)
 - Second (or Deutero-) Isaiah (ca. 540 BCE)

4. the immediate post-exilic period (ca. 538–515 BCE; in Palestine, under Persian rule)
 - Third (or Trito-) Isaiah

What Van Hagen finds coursing through all these diverse voices—whether in Elijah’s (often violent) cathexis on Yahweh, Amos’ call for justice, Ezekiel’s hope that God will give his people a new heart, or Jeremiah’s existential suffering—is a search for a radical *transcendence* that would bind the Israelites to a *universal* God who would forge a *new identity* for his people. If there is one figure among these prophets who most exemplifies this Axial Age revolution, it would be Second Isaiah, who breaks through the confines of residual tribism and proclaims a theology of world history centered on an utterly transcendent Yahweh who offers salvation to all nations.

Van Hagen takes one further step, and a very controversial one, by interpreting Yeshua of Nazareth as a latter-day prophet in the mold of Elijah and Amos. Van Hagen calls for a “minimalist” view of Yeshua/Jesus, neither as the long-awaited Messiah of the Synoptic Gospels nor as the divine Son of God of Johannine theology, but rather as an itinerant preacher of justice and mercy among the poor of Galilee, who were oppressed from without by Roman imperialism and crushed from within by the country’s ruthless economy. As for what transpired after the death of Jesus, Van Hagen underlines the would-be universalism of Pauline theology and the gentile-friendliness of Luke’s Gospel. However, in the supercessionism of the Christian apologist Justin (fl. ca. 130–160 CE)—for all its efforts to universalize Jesus into the Logos of the entire cosmos—he finds the seeds of two millennia of anti-Jewish violence and murder.

But what about Van Hagen the agnostic? And with reference to the title this volume, what altar is he standing at, and what kind of transcendence does he think possible?

His book is both fully informed by contemporary biblical scholarship and sensitively attuned of the post-religious culture of the present day, and thus his reading of the prophets is both deeply

appreciative and acutely critical. Their efforts to craft a story of community, hope, and social survival is one that he seeks to retrieve and refashion for today—but without its religious pathologies, its fixation on an all-powerful and often violent deity who dispenses rewards or punishments depending on the obedience or not of his subjects, not to mention the authoritarianism exercised by his religious representatives on earth. Van Hagen characterizes the God of the prophets *and* of Christianity as “a character in someone else’s story”—in fact, a character in a *fiction* that both Hebrew prophets and Christian theologians have tried to pass off as *history*.

In the shadow of this book lies Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God: the final demise of a supernaturally transcendent realm, and the bending of the axis of transcendence from the vertical to the horizontal, from eternity to history, from a timeless and ever-stable Beyond to an open-ended and very uncertain future. Van Hagen finds the locus of personal and social meaning to reside in communally shared stories: no story, no meaning. In stories, as in life, context is all, and context is social, dynamic, and open-ended. Stories are about a “whole,” not a complete and self-enclosed totality that encompasses everything, but an ever-changing and relatively coherent network of references and referrals—among persons, things, events, whatever—that lets us make tentative sense of a past whose origin we cannot see, a present whose depths we cannot fathom, and a future whose final outcome we will never see. “*Homo abyssus est*,” St. Augustine wrote: human being is a bottomless abyss. And whereas Augustine and other believers may hold that God encompasses that abyss and holds everyone in loving security, the agnostic has no experience of that, whether by faith, reason, hope, or intimation. And yet even the agnostic needs a story.

Nietzsche labeled Christianity as nothing more than “Platonism for the masses,” and his proclamation of the death of God was really an obituary for all such Platonisms. Van Hagen makes his own Nietzsche’s claim that in our own day the so-called “true world”—the supernatural Beyond of religions, the Absolute Truth

Foreword

of traditional philosophy—has been proven itself a fable. Nietzsche's hope was that, with the demise of that fable, "all who are born after us will be part of a higher history than all history up to now."

With this book the author invites us to exchange that fable—or whatever Big Story with its Deep Backup and Happy Ending that we may wrap ourselves in—for the *biggest* of big stories, the "Universe Story" of contemporary cosmology: evolution as the scientifically explainable (yet ultimately unfathomable) history of some fourteen billion years thus far and unknowable billions yet to come. Van Hagen reads the Universe Story, at least in its present moment, as a *human* story, not least of all because it is we who tell that story (we are evolution become conscious of itself) and because it is we who are *living* that story. With such telling and living there comes the call to *make* that story our own. It is ours to become, and the call is to actually make it a *human* story—that is, a moral story—in the best and most inclusive way.

The prophet Amos's millennia-old call for justice, above and beyond all forms of religion, resonates emphatically in the powerful final chapters of this book. The challenge that echoes from that call concerns the "how" of such an immense task: how to live together and carry forward as a community the economic, social, and political struggles that might justify Nietzsche's hope of a "higher history" for those who come after us.

Evolution is the reality of the universe and of ourselves: a constant, on-going emergence of energy become matter become human become (we may hope) *truly* human: transcendent towards a universality in which no one is really free until all are free. The call is to become as radical as reality itself.

THOMAS SHEEHAN
Stanford University