PROPHECY: AN OVERVIEW

The term *prophecy* refers to a wide range of religious phenomena that have been manifested from ancient to modern times. The Greek term *prophētēs* is the etymological ancestor of the English word *prophet,* and it has cognates in most European languages. The indigenous Greek *prophētēs* was a cultic functionary who "spoke for" a god; that is, the *prophētēs* delivered divine messages in association with a sanctuary where the god had made its presence known. However, the word *prophētēs* influenced European languages primarily because early Jewish and Christian writers used the term in translations of the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament to refer to religious specialists in Israelite, Jewish, and Christian traditions. Today comparativists use *prophecy* to describe religious phenomena in various contexts on analogy with the activity of ancient Hebrew prophets and other figures who had a similarly pivotal role in founding world religions in Southwest Asia.

ANCIENT PROPHECY. In antiquity it was commonly believed that gods controlled events in the world and made their intentions known to human beings in various ways. The earliest written records tell of religious functionaries whose responsibility it was to interpret signs or deliver messages from the gods in order to supply information useful in the conduct of human affairs. In early tribal societies the clan leader often carried out these duties, or perhaps some other individual who used a variety of divinatory and visionary techniques to gain access to special knowledge about divine intentions. These activities usually included intercessory functions, whereby the leader or "prophet" petitioned spirits or a god or gods for special favors for their group.

However, this picture of such figures (such as the *kāhin* of pre-Muslim Arabia or the *kohen* of patriarchal, presettlement Israel) is only inferential. They were active in nonliterate societies that left no linguistic records of themselves except by the transmission of oral traditions that eventually were written down by later, literate generations. The groups that did leave written records had more complex forms of religious and political organization, suggesting that adepts in religious knowledge had correspondingly more specialized functions.

From the records of ancient cultures in Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean region there is knowledge of a large number of religious specialists who sought out and interpreted messages from the gods. Their access to the world of the gods came through two different means. In the first place, there were diviners who practiced a variety of studied techniques to interpret symbolic messages in the natural world. Some techniques were manipulative (such as the casting of lots, the incubation of dreams, and the examination of the entrails of sacrificial animals); others were more purely observational (such as the interpretation of animal movement and the cataloguing of auspicious, often horrible, events). Second, the gods were also believed to communicate their will through oracles, that is, in human language through the mouth of an inspired person. The behavior of these divine spokesmen is often thought to have been ecstatic, frenzied, or abnormal in some way, which reflected their possession by the deity (and the absence of personal ego) at the time of transmission. Some groups used divination to test the accuracy of oral prophecies (e.g., prophecies at Mari), while others gave priority to oral prophecy, with only marginal appeal to divination (e.g., in Israelite religion).

Within general categories the nature and function of divine intermediation was diverse. Oracles and signs could appear without request; but more commonly, especially in the Greco-Roman world, cultic officials provided answers to specific questions asked to the sanctuary's god. Ecstatic oracular behavior seems to have been the most common form of intermediation among figures not connected with recognized sanctuaries (e.g., the Akkadian *muhhu*), but it was also acceptable among those who did have such official legitimacy (e.g., the Akkadian *apilu* and various Greek mantic figures). The terminology applied to intermediaries is often ambiguous or vague, as with the Greek term *prophētēs,* which at times denotes the oracular mouthpiece for divine speech and at others refers to the official interpreter of divinatory signs within a sanctuary. The diversity is immense. But it is clear from the complexity that the need for knowledge about divine activity was perceived at various social levels; ancient societies often maintained a large and varied staff of religious functionaries to keep such knowledge alive.

PROPHETIC FOUNDERS OF RELIGIOUS TRADITION. Throughout ancient Israel's history as an independent state (c. 1000–586 BCE), the religious orientation of a large segment of its population was polytheistic, and as such, it shared in the general worldview of its neighbors. But even in the monotheistic elements of Israelite culture, there were different functionaries who transmitted the will of the same god, Yahveh, to the people. During the earliest part of this history, it appears that the Yahvists relied on at least three different figures for divine communication: (1) cultic officers who performed certain techniques (like casting lots), maintained cultic implements (like the Ark), and occupied sacred space; (2) seers (Heb., *ro'eh* and *ḥozeh*), whose function is rather unclear, but may be designations from different periods of visionaries and diviners (cf. *1 Samuel* 9:9); and (3) ecstatics (Heb., *navi',* commonly translated as "prophet"), whose unusual behavior was stimulated when Yahveh's spirit came upon them. As Yahvism evolved, the *navi'* came to be its predominant intermediary, though as this occurred the activity of the *navi'* came to include functions that were previously within the province of the other two specialists. Accordingly, the *nevi'im* depended less exclusively on ecstatic oracles for their identity, and many came to be (in some cases) cultic functionaries and inspired interpreters of ancient tradition. The evidence indicates, however, that prophetic legitimacy depended primarily on their acceptance within a given group as oracular vehicles for the communication of Yahveh's word, regardless of whether the *navi'* was an ecstatic, a cultic official, an independent critic, or some combination of these roles.

By at least the eighth century BCE the Hebrew prophets or their scribes commonly wrote down their oracles, and the

prophetic writings of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) contain, in part, a modest literary residue of this extensive oracular activity. Historians have reached no consensus about why this development took place, nor about how these writings in particular came to be accepted among later generations as eternally authoritative. Yet, that oracular revelation came to be regarded as having an enduring value, and that followers of prophets could disseminate their written oracles among various groups with whom the prophets originally had no connection, was a major change in the history of religions. Within the religious worldview that permeated the time of the first Hebrew prophets, messages from the gods were seen as portentous for only the particular audience, time, and place attendant to the moment when they had been revealed on earth. Thus, it was necessary to maintain a retinue of religious specialists to prophesy anew and interpret messages that regularly came from the gods. As certain specified written oracles came to be accepted in Israel as the repository of normative divine instruction, the nature of prophecy itself began to change, as did the character of religious tradition.

What happened among the Hebrew prophets occurred more generally within several religious traditions in Southwest Asia. The following figures can be classed with the Hebrew prophets as intermediaries whose oracles became, at least in part, the revelational basis of a major world religion. Zarathushtra (Zoroaster), a Persian prophet of the late second millennium BCE, was the founder of Zoroastrianism (Boyce, 1975). Jesus appears in many respects as a prophet, even though Christianity has traditionally portrayed him as a unique messiah. Mani, a Babylonian born in 216 CE, founded Manichaeism, which gained a large following in countries from India to the western Mediterranean. Finally, Muḥammad, like no other, established a believing community around himself as divine messenger, and succeeding generations of Muslims have accepted the oracles written down in the Qurʾān as the unparalleled expression of divine communication.

Defining precisely what these individual prophets share in common is not a simple matter. The social location of their activity differs in each case, and the success of each prophet in gaining a following during his lifetime varied widely, from Muhammad, who led armies and established a moderate-sized empire by the time of his death, to Jesus, who died an ignominious death on a cross. Moreover the message of each prophet, if examined in detail, depends more on the particular traditions to which it was heir and the historical-cultural setting of the prophet's activity than upon a transcendent ideal that applies to every member of the group. Nonetheless, five features are common to all.

1. *They all conceived of their activity as the result of a personal divine commission.* They thought that their supreme deity had appointed them individually to bear a specific revealed message to the human (or some more narrowly defined) community, and this message usually consisted of oracular speech and writing. Even Jesus, who frequently did not use traditional forms of prophetic speech, seems to have regarded his words and actions as communicating the message he was commissioned to bear.

2. *Religious traditions arose that regarded some oracles of these prophets as uniquely heaven-sent, sacred, and binding upon people in perpetuity.* In such cases, the prophets' words became part (or the substance) of a scriptural canon that was regarded as the repository of revealed knowledge; each sacred canon became, in turn, the standard by which the tradition judged all later religious pronouncements and activity. For prophets whose speech or writing was formally oracular (e.g. the Hebrew prophets and Muḥammad), the scripture became, at least in part, a collection of those oracles. Stories about the symbolic activities and miraculous deeds performed by these prophets also found their way into the canons (note particularly the Gospels and the prophetic narratives in the Hebrew Bible), and the members of each tradition regarded this material as having paradigmatic importance.

Whether these prophets were themselves the founders of traditions is not a question to be answered easily. Both Muḥammad and Mani organized the early Muslim and Manichaean communities, respectively, and they promoted their own writings as perpetually relevant revelation. But in the other three cases (Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity), the historical prophets had little or no influence on the organization of the later religious tradition, and others determined the content and organization of the sacred scripture. In fact, the authors and compilers of the Hebrew Bible shaped the words and actions of Moses to such a degree that his biblical portrait probably has little in common with the historical person. Nonetheless, because these prophets all had an important role in founding religious tradition, and especially because later generations revered them as the fountainheads of divine revelation, this group shall be called the "founding prophets."

3. Though the content of their messages differs significantly from one prophet to the next, depending on historical circumstance and inherited tradition, *all of the founding prophets proclaimed what their later tradition regarded as universal truths.* The theological development of these prophetic, revealed religions tended toward conceptions of a deity or deities (Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism) that transcended tribal, geographical, national, and cultic boundaries. While it would be too ambitious to attribute to these prophetic figures alone the creation of universal religious claims, the writings of such prophets as Amos, so-called Second Isaiah, and Muhammad are among the most radical innovations in the history of religious thought.

4. *The founding prophets were, in their own individual ways, social critics,* even though their ideas about society were quite different from one another. Muhammad, for example, seems to have been a great deal more concerned with the structures of society on this earth than Mani, who addressed

social issues primarily in order to help promote gnosis (the salvific knowledge of ultimate things). Still, all of them considered moral behavior to be central in complying with the wishes of their supreme deity. Particularly in the Judeo-Christian and Muslim traditions, prophetic teachings have been seen as attempts to denounce injustices practiced against the weak and powerless. In the prophetic writings of these traditions questions of social morality have such prominence that scholars have often characterized the religion of the prophets as "ethical monotheism."

5. Finally, *the founding prophets helped both to maintain and to reform religious tradition.* They regarded their demands for change as having a basis in ancient tradition, but they insisted that their contemporary religious situation be reshaped in accordance with that tradition. Naturally, these demands met stiff resistance from those contemporaries of the prophets who wanted to maintain other traditions or the status quo. As a result each of the founding prophets suffered indignities, sometimes even torture and death. Typically, prophets who met with resistance saw popular rejection as proof of their legitimacy, since earlier prophets had been similarly despised.

Just as these prophets constitute a group because of their mutual similarites, they are also distinct from other figures in the history of religions. They are different from the various intermediaries who preceded them in that the revelation they communicated has an enduring relevance in religious tradition and remained intimately connected with their individual personalities. Revelation had previously been relevant only for a limited time, and, with a few minor exceptions, the personality of the prophet had been of relatively little significance in the mediation of divine messages. The roles of these prophets often stood in sharp contrast with priestly functions. The innovative and reforming messages of the prophets were accepted within the religious community and tradition on the basis of their personal charisma. Priests, however, are typically those who maintained the dominant, received tradition by virtue of their position within an established religious institution.

Finally, the founding prophets are distinct from others who founded major religious traditions (such as Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, and Taoism). The founders of these traditions originating in India and China were not divinely chosen messengers bearing a revealed message to humankind, but rather teachers and sages who had developed new philosophic insight and practical discipline as a way of addressing religious problems. These teachers, like the prophets, were often missionaries and social critics, but the basis of their words was the perfection of their own intellectual, spiritual, and moral talents, rather than their election by a deity to bear a specific message.

PROPHECY UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF CANON. One of the most outstanding features of the founding prophets was the special importance that their personal communication of revelation had for succeeding generations of their religious communities. Just as the Hebrew prophets and Zarathushtra were influenced by the traditions that preceded them, so too were the prophets who came later. But for Jesus, Mani, and Muhammad the traditional inheritance included the message of the Hebrew prophets (and Zarathushtra), as well as the model they had established as prophets whose messages were canonized within scripture.

It was rarely easy for a person bearing revelation to effect basic reforms in the structure of religious life. Among the biblical prophets themselves, the active mediation of fresh revelation had been an accepted part of religious life. However, once prophecy became written and canonical, the revelation of these same prophets attained a special status that inevitably lessened the importance and limited the scope of active mediation generally. The guardianship and transmission of prophecy—now newly conceived as the substance of prophetic oracles within the canon—moved from the ecstatics and visionaries who originally created it to the inspired sages, priests, and scribes who maintained and passed along the scriptures.

The evolution of Hebrew prophecy into received written tradition became the cornerstone upon which all subsequent prophetic constructions were built. By 350 BCE the last of the canonical prophetic writings to find acceptance in the Hebrew Bible had been written. And by the time of Jesus' ministry (c. 25–30 CE) the preeminence of these canonical prophets was generally accepted within Judaism, even among prophets such as Jesus. Within the context of this religious tradition it became necessary for contemporary prophets who did not consider their calling subordinate to any earlier prophet to claim a special status for themselves. Therefore, Jesus on occasion appears as an eschatological prophet who proclaimed the imminent arrival of the "kingdom of God." In this way his message and character could fit the traditional conception of prophets in early Judaism, where it was believed—in certain quarters, at least—that God would send prophets (who would be of equal stature with their canonical predecesors) to announce the end of the world.

By the time of Mani (216–276) and Muḥammad (580–632), several canonical religions had come to prominence. Both these prophets understood themselves explicitly as successors to a line of prophets that included (though variously) Abraham, Moses, Elijah, other Hebrew prophets, Zarathushtra, Jesus, and even the Buddha. Moreover, they each wrote down their oracles as a self-conscious attempt to form a canon that would be authoritative for their own communities. Indeed, early Muslims distinguished between two terms for prophet: *nabi,* a generic Arabic term denoting anyone who has a vision or audition of God, and *rasū,* the Arabic word referring only to those special "messengers" (such as Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad) who founded a religious community and transmitted their messages with a sacred book. In Islam "religions of the Book" are the highest form of religious expression.

As the words of these historical prophets attained reverential status within scriptural canons, the book replaced the living religious specialist as the primary agent of revelational mediation. The history of surviving religious traditions with a prophetic scripture (now Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) has depended in no small measure upon this development. Exegetes of various sorts replaced prophets as the maintainers of the revelational tradition, and often those who safeguarded the sanctity and purity of the written scriptures were suspicious of, even hostile to, those who claimed to have visions not mediated through the scripture. Since textual interpretation has gained the dominant socio-political position within all three traditions (probably because this mode of religious inquiry responded better to the increasingly complex social organization within which the traditions flourished), the ecstatic elements common to the earliest prophetic activity played a diminished role in later tradition. Since Muḥammad there has been no prophet to form a religious tradition with a stature equaling that of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

Even so, while contemporary prophetic inspiration lost influence at the center of religious authority, it was never eliminated entirely. Throughout history, in pre-Christian Judaism, in early Christianity, and in pre-Muslim and early-Muslim Arabia, prophetic figures were active alongside (though often in competition with) the rationalized institutions of canonical religion. Within the exegetical tradition itself inspirational interpretation has been a perennial source of innovation in theological thinking. In early Judaism, some of those who collected and arranged sacred writings within the Hebrew Bible conceived themselves to be prophets, for example, the levitical priests Korah and Asaph, who claimed prophetic inspiration for their hymnology and arranged the psalter in a structure that gives special prominence to a prophetic interpretation of psalms. And later, during the medieval period, qabbalist interpretation of the Bible elevated not only the revelational experiences of the biblical authors, but also the necessity for inspiration among exegetes. Similar attitudes are present among Christian (e.g., Jerome and Bonaventura) and Muslim (e.g., al-Hallāj) interpreters.

More generally one can speak of mysticism within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as being analogous with prophecy in earlier tradition. Insofar as mystics define religious knowledge as the immediate (i.e., unmediated) perception of the divine, the nature of their experience and epistemology is similar to earlier prophets. However, their activity is to be distinguished sharply from earlier prophecy, since the canonical traditions had no recognized need for specialists in mediating divine revelation. Each tradition accommodated spontaneous outbreaks of inspirational, ecstatic, visionary behavior, but each also maintained strict controls, lest the ultimate authority of canonical revelation be undercut.

Sufism (Muslim mysticism) first appeared within one hundred years of Muhammad's death. While some Ṣūfīs who quietly made claim to personal revelation or mystical vision could coexist peaceably with those nearer the center of religious power, others met violent repression when they threatened the structure and cohesion of the Muslim community. So, while Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī, a Persian Ṣūfī (d. 875), encountered some opposition for his claims of achieving unity with God, it amounted to his being labeled an eccentric. He died peaceably, and afterward his tomb became the object of some veneration. However, al-Hallāj was executed (in 922) when he translated his visions and miracles into a political following that threatened the dominant order.

Within European Christianity (from the time of Constantine, at least, until well into the modern period) the orthodox were closely connected with the ruling political groups. Christian mystics, like their Muslim counterparts, were accepted by the orthodox as long as their revelational claims were subordinated to the authority of the church and Bible (e.g., Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Ávila). Yet, wherever claims of fresh revelation threatened the ecclesiastical and political power structure, the authorities responded—and violently, as with Joan of Arc, whom the English burned for heresy when she transformed her revelational claims into a potent military force. It is easy to understand why few Christians claimed to be prophets, and why, at the same time, accusations of false prophecy were leveled at those whose voices one wanted to silence.

Since fairly early in the common era, Jews have been outside the dominant power structure in cultures where they lived. Only if the prophetic claims of a messianic hopeful threatened the dominant social order of the host society was there any likelihood of political repression. Such was the case with Shabbetai Tsevi (1626–1676), whose messianic movement was perceived as a threat by his Turkish (Muslim) overlords. Tsevi recanted under threat of death. Otherwise, tensions between the more rationalist orthodoxy and mystical visionaries was something to be settled among Jews. Since Jewish orthodoxy had no power greater than rational persuasion, its ability to control mystical elements was minimal. Hence the Besht (Yisra'el ben Eliʿezer, 1700–1760) was able to generate a massive following despite the detraction of his orthodox opponents.

In no case, however, could visionaries or mystics claim for themselves a mediational status equal with the founding prophets without subverting revealed canons and the traditions that rested upon them. Those who made such claims founded new traditions (i.e., Jesus, Mani, and Muḥammad) or failed in the attempt. Otherwise prophetic and mystical vision was subordinated to the revelation that had already been canonized. In all three traditions the canonical revelation, once defined, resisted internal challenges and remained the touchstone of religious truth for well over a thousand years.

PROPHECY IN MODERN TIMES. During the modern period in Europe public recognition of biblical prophecy has dwindled along with certain other aspects of European religion

that had supported its primacy. The importance of prophets as the mediators of revealed truth declined sharply as the Enlightenment demolished confidence in the truth of revelation generally and enshrined a new standard of knowledge arrived at on the basis of observation and critical reasoning. At first these changes affected only the intellectual elite who had considered the impact of philosophical developments upon conceptions of God, religious truth, and divine mediation. Some philosophers (such as Hume) denied altogether the importance of revelation (and, therefore, prophetic mediation) as a source of knowledge. Others tried to accommodate revelational truths within a philosophical framework (e.g., Descartes and Kierkegaard). But others, such as Blake and Nietzsche, considered themselves to be prophets, though in their writings it is clear that they had redefined concepts related to inspiration, revelation, and truth to suit the needs of people living in post-Enlightenment civilization.

The discussion of such ideas among philosophers, scientists, and literati was contained within a minuscule portion of European culture, and the effects of their writings upon the general population materialized only very slowly. Of greater significance for popular religious culture was the diminished authority of the church. In some cases the reduction in ecclesiastical power was a direct outgrowth of Enlightenment thinking, as in the United States, where religion was consciously and explicitly separated from the centers of political power. But for the most part it seems that reductions in the power of the church to enforce its dogmas allowed for greater religious diversity (as during the Reformation), so that Enlightenment thinkers, and others, could express their religious views openly. Within this religious environment a new set of prophets arose to proclaim themselves as messengers bearing the divine word, and some have found success in founding new sects that revere their writings as sacred canon. Joseph Smith (1805–1844), for example, established the Church of Latter-Day Saints upon the claim that he had received revelations from Jesus Christ and from an angel who entrusted him with the *Book of Mormon.* Those who profess Christian Science regard the writings of Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910) as sacred and inviolable. Others, notably the members of the international Pentecostal or the later charismatic movements, are modern ecstatics who consider themselves capable of receiving the spirit and speaking as divine agents.

As Europe exported culture during its colonialist expansions, it came to affect and discover religious traditions elsewhere. Among Muslims, for example, critical thinking about the status of Muḥammad has had some impact under the influence of and on analogy with Western reflections about religious origins. However, more important for the study of prophecy has been the impact of imperialism and modern Western culture on the indigenous tribal societies of the Americas, Africa, and maritime colonies (see bibliography, especially the entries on the ghost dance among Native Americans and cargo cults in Melanesia). As colonists en-

croached on territory inhabited by tribal peoples, they often found among the native religious specialists figures who showed a marked similarity to the traditional image of prophets within the major Western canonical religions. Anthropologists and comparative religionists have studied such modern prophets and their religious environment, where truths revealed through the mouths of inspired speakers remain a dominant influence in all aspects of social and personal life. Through direct observation of such religious systems scholars now understand the dynamics of prophecy with some specificity, and detailed research has dispelled various myths about its nature. It is known, for example, that ecstatic behavior among religious specialists can help maintain the structure of society, whereas scholars had long thought that ecstasy destabilized social order through its irrational influence. Likewise, the widespread opinion that ancient prophets were individualists crying to deaf ears from the loneliness of the desert now seems to be a romantic ideal. Rather, groups tend to support prophets who express their interests, while prophets acting entirely on their own rarely find a significant audience.

CONCLUSION. Though comparative theorists working with modern evidence have not yet established a single dominant interpretation of prophecy, a variety of complementary approaches now challenges the exclusivistic confessional interpretations that characterized the earlier period. Some scholars (e.g., I. M. Lewis—see bibliography) consider ecstatic religious behavior a means of expression used by disenfranchised groups who find standard channels of communication closed to them. Those studying religious behavior among shamans, Pentecostals, and other modern prophetic figures have found "deprivation theory" useful in showing how ecstatic persons support the position and structure of groups whose position in society is outside the normal channels of power and influence. Others (e.g., Victor Turner—see bibliography) interpret prochecy within a framework of social evolution. These scholars see prophets as appearing in periods of transition between societies organized along lines of kinship and clan affiliation and those structured according to more highly complex groupings that accompany the rise of states, class stratification and institutional religion. Either interpretive model applies consistent evaluative criteria to both the ancient evidence and the modern anthropological data without elevating the status of any one religious tradition over another. In this they are distinctively modern interpretations of prophecy, in contrast with canonical views, which persist in granting special recognition to the prophet(s) of a single confessional tradition.

SEE ALSO Canon; Divination; Oracles.

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ography concerning their specific precursors. Such are Robert R. Wilson's *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia, 1980); David L. Petersen's *The Roles of Israel's Prophets (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament,* supp. 17; Sheffield, 1981, which surveys the evidence for Israelite intermediation in the ancient Near East, and David E. Aune's *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Ancient Mediterranean World* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1983), which gives a thorough discussion of Greco-Roman prophecy as well as its forms among the first Christians. Many critical works on Hebrew prophecy approach the subject from within the confessional community of Jews (e.g., Martin Buber's *The Prophetic Faith,* New York, 1949, and Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Prophets,* New York, 1962 or Christians (e.g., Gerhard von Rad's *The Message of the Prophets,* London, 1968. Most treatments of prophecy ignore the significance of Zarathushtra and Mani, since they both have few, if any, modern followers to proclaim their value. Mary Boyce's *A History of Zoroastrianism,* 2 vols. (Leiden, 1975–1982), and Kurt Rudolph's *Gnosis* (San Francisco, 1983) provide useful bibliographies and discussions of the life and time of these prophets, respectively. The books on Muḥammad are many; the most readable and intelligent is Maxime Rodinson's *Mohammed* (New York, 1971), which contains a critical evaluation of the works that preceded it. Toufic Fahd's "Kāhin," in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam,* new ed., vol. 4 (Leiden, 1978), pp. 420–422, is a short peculiarly lucid account of the difficulties inherent in reconstructing Arab divination during the pre-Islamic period.

Regrettably, no book discusses prophecy within a framework as broad as that suggested in this article. Hence, we suggest that the reader consult other articles within this encyclopedia for detailed bibliographies on such topics as mysticism, ecstasy, canon, scripture, and the Enlightenment, as well as on individuals that we have mentioned in the text.

Among works that may not be listed in other articles is the anthropological literature on prophecy. Max Weber's work has had a seminal influence on the field; see both *Ancient Judaism* (1922; Glencoe, Ill., 1952) and *The Sociology of Religion* (1922; Boston, 1963). I. M. Lewis's *Ecstatic Religion* (Harmondsworth, 1971) is a sociology of ecstatic behavior based on a broad range of comparative evidence, and though it does not address prophecy per se, it has influenced others (viz. Wilson, cited above) that do. Victor Turner's "Religious Specialists: Anthropological Study," in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences,* edited by David L. Sills (New York, 1968), vol. 13, pp. 437–444, offers analytical categories useful in distinguishing prophets from other religious personnel. A number of books describe the activity of prophets in modern cultures: Peter Worsley's *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo" Cults in Melanesia* (1957; New York, 1968); E. E. Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer Religion* (Oxford, 1956) and *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford, 1949); James Mooney's *The Ghost-Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890* (1896; abr. ed., Chicago, 1965); and Vittorio Lanternari's *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* (New York, 1963).

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PROPHECY: BIBLICAL PROPHECY

Throughout much of the history of Western thought, the biblical prophets have been understood as unique figures whose sudden appearance in ancient Israel had a profound impact on the development of Judaism and Christianity. They have been considered ethical and moral innovators whose views decisively shaped later Jewish and Christian theology. Particularly in Christian tradition, they have been seen as revealers of the future whose oracles predicted the coming of Jesus and whose words may still contain unrecognized clues to the course of world history.

This understanding of the biblical prophets continues to exist today. However, during the past century the traditional view has come under increasing attack from biblical scholars, who have reexamined the biblical evidence and then proposed a number of alternative and often conflicting theories about the nature and functions of Israelite prophecy. Rejecting the common notion that prophecy is concerned only with the future, scholars have portrayed the prophets variously as creators of a highly intellectual form of ethical monotheism, as ecstatics scarcely in control of their own actions, as religious officials with regular duties in the Israelite cult, as shrewd political advisers, as isolated mystics, and as guardians of Israel's religious traditions. The Hebrew Bible contains evidence to support all of these interpretations, and for this reason the scholarly debate on the nature of prophecy continues with no sign of an emerging consensus.

However, scholars have increasingly recognized that an adequate understanding of Israelite prophecy can be achieved only by using extrabiblical evidence to supplement the narratives about prophetic activity and the words of the prophets that have been preserved in the Bible. The most important extrabiblical evidence comes from two different sources. The first source provides additional documentary evidence on the nature of prophecy in antiquity. During the past century archaeologists have uncovered a number of ancient Near Eastern texts that challenge the traditional notion that the Israelite prophets were unique religious figures in antiquity. In the Mesopotamian city of Mari on the Euphrates, excavators have found letters from the eighteenth century BCE describing the activities and messages of several different types of oracle givers who bear some resemblance to the later Israelite prophets. The Mari oracles come from various gods and do not seem to have been solicited by the person to whom they are addressed. Some of the oracle givers described in the letters are ordinary individuals, but others have special titles, which indicates that these figures exhibited characteristic behavior and filled a recognized religious role in the society of Mari. Among the specialists mentioned are

the "answerer" (*apilu*), the "ecstatic" (*muhhu*), the "speaker" (*qabbatum*), and a member of the cultic personnel of the goddess Ishtar, the meaning of whose title (*assinnu*) is uncertain. Later texts from the time of the Assyrian kings Esarhaddon (r. 680–669 BCE) and Ashurbanipal (r. 668–627 BCE) record the oracles of Assyrian contemporaries of some of the Israelite prophets. In addition to the ecstatic, the texts mention the "shouter" (*raggimu*), the "revealer" (*shabru*), and the "votary" (*shelutu*).

Religious specialists resembling the biblical prophets also existed outside of Israelite territory in other areas of Palestine. Inscriptions from the eighth and ninth centuries BCE refer to a "message giver" (*'dd*) and a "visionary" (*ḥzh*), a title also given to some of the biblical prophets. This evidence suggests that prophetic activity was going on elsewhere in the ancient Near East before and during the time when prophets were active in Israel. Furthermore, the apparent diversity of these non-Israelite specialists suggests that prophecy in Israel may have been a more complex phenomenon than scholars have previously thought.

This suggestion is reinforced by extrabiblical evidence from the second source, the studies that sociologists and anthropologists have made of contemporary oracle givers. These specialists form a highly diverse group that includes various types of mediums, diviners, priests, and shamans, but like the biblical prophets they all see themselves as intermediaries between the human and divine worlds. In spite of obvious differences, these figures often exhibit similar behavioral characteristics and interact with their societies in much the same way. This interaction has been analyzed extensively by anthropologists and shown to be highly complex. By delivering messages from the divine realm, oracle givers are capable of bringing about changes in their societies, but at the same time societies play a direct role in accrediting oracle givers and shaping their behavior.

The modern anthropological evidence indicates that the phenomenon of prophecy can be adequately understood only when the dynamic relationship between prophet and society is fully explored. This means that any account of prophecy in ancient Israel (c. 1200–200 BCE) must see the prophets in particular social contexts rather than treating them as ideal figures abstracted from their historical settings. For this reason it is necessary to avoid making too many statements about biblical prophecy in general. Each prophet occupied a unique place in the history of Israel and was part of a complex interaction between prophecy and society in a particular time and place. The history of Israelite prophecy is the history of a series of such interactions. However, once the uniqueness of each prophet is recognized, it is possible to outline some general features that characterized Israelite prophecy as a whole and to isolate some characteristics that were peculiar to particular groups of prophets.

THE PROPHETIC EXPERIENCE. Direct information about Israelite prophecy comes from two sources: the oracles of the prophets themselves, now preserved primarily in the fifteen prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, and the narratives describing prophetic activity, found mainly in the books of the Deuteronomic history (*Joshua, Judges, 1* and *2 Samuel, 1* and *2 Kings*). Both of these sources are difficult to interpret because of their unusual character. At least until the exile (587/6 BCE), the prophets seem to have composed and delivered their oracles orally. Only later were their words collected, written down, and finally arranged in small collections, or books. This work was done either by the prophets themselves or by their disciples. Some of the written collections were then further edited by later generations of writers and editors, who were interested in preserving and above all interpreting the prophets' original pronouncements. As a result of this long process of transmission and composition, it is often difficult to separate genuine prophetic material from the interpretive work of later editors. A similar sort of problem exists in the case of the prophetic narratives of the Deuteronomic history. Some of the stories, such as those concerning Elijah and Elisha (*1 Kgs.* 17–*2 Kgs.* 9), probably circulated individually or as collections in oral tradition before being incorporated in the written work of the historian. As part of the incorporation process, the stories were edited at least once, and perhaps several times, in order to express the political, social, and religious views of the writers. For this reason, it is sometimes difficult to use the narratives for historiographic purposes.

Because of the nature of the sources from which a description of prophecy must be derived, any attempt to reconstruct a picture of prophetic activity must necessarily involve a great deal of interpretation, and the results will often be incomplete and tentative. This is particularly true of attempts to describe the prophets' supernatural experiences, which by their very nature were private and not open to public scrutiny. The prophets say very little about their experiences and even in recounting their "calls" to prophesy rarely describe more than the initial vision that they saw (*Is.* 6, *Ez.* 1–3) or the words that they heard (*Jer.* 1:4–10; *Am.* 7:15). Instead, the texts concentrate on the messages that the prophets received during their encounters with God. However, enough clues exist to suggest that Israel conceived of the prophetic experience as one that occurred when individuals were possessed by the spirit of God. "The hand of the Lord" fell upon them (*1 Kgs.* 18:46; *2 Kgs.* 3:15; *Jer.* 15:17; *Ez.* 1:3), or the spirit of God "rested on them" (*Nm.* 11:25–26) or "clothed itself" with them (*Jgs.* 6:34) so that they were no longer in control of their own speech and actions. As is typical in cases of spirit possession in a number of cultures, Israel interpreted the words that the prophets spoke during possession not as human words but as the words of God. The prophets were simply the channels through which the divine word came to the world. Once the prophets were possessed by God, they felt compelled to deliver the message that God wanted to communicate (*Am.* 3:8). The divine word was perceived as a "burning fire" that gnawed at them until it was delivered (*Jer.* 20:9).

Because of the loss of personal autonomy associated with divine possession, the prophets did not usually view the experience positively. In the accounts of their initial call, they sometimes speak of trying to avoid becoming prophets (*Jer.* 1:6), and some of them report that they repeatedly sought release from their prophetic roles (*Jer.* 11:18–12:6, 15:15–21; cf. *Ez.* 2:1–3:15). However, such attempts at resistance were always futile, and in the end the compulsion to prophesy could not be thwarted.

Although the prophets themselves were apparently reluctant to describe the process through which they received their oracles, additional information on the nature of the prophetic experience can be deduced from the various titles given to these individuals and from the descriptions of their characteristic behavior. This evidence suggests that the prophetic experience was not the same for all prophets and that the prophets' characteristic behavior and social functions varied enough to require more than one title or role label.

Prophetic titles. The English word *prophet* is ultimately derived from the Greek *prophētēs,* a noun that means both "one who speaks forth" or "one who proclaims" and "one who speaks before" or "one who speaks of the future." The Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible used this word to render several Hebrew titles and apparently understood it to be a general term capable of being applied to various types of religious specialists. However, in ancient Israel the different types of prophetic figures bore distinctive titles, although the understanding and usage of these titles varied with the group that used them and the time in which they were used.

The most common prophetic title used in the Hebrew Bible is *navi'.* Extrabiblical occurrences of the word are extremely rare, and its etymology is uncertain, although scholars normally relate it to the Akkadian verb *nabu,* "to call, to announce, to name." The title may thus mean either "one who calls" or "one who is called," but this etymology sheds little light on the precise characteristics of the figure so designated. In preexilic times the label *navi'* was particularly common in northern Israel (Ephraim), where it was a general term for any prophetic figure and was the only title given to legitimate prophets. In Israelite literature produced in the north or influenced by traditions originating there (the Deuteronomic history, *Hosea, Jeremiah*), the *navi'* played a central role in religious life and was associated with the preservation of ancient theological traditions. To the south, in Judah and particularly in Jerusalem, the title was also in use as a general role label, but it appears much less frequently in Judahite literature and is often used in negative contexts. After the exile navi' was used by all biblical writers as a general prophetic title and seems to have no longer been recognized as a distinctive role label.

While *navi'* was the most common prophetic title in the north, in Judah and particularly in Jerusalem the term "visionary" (*hozeh*) was the preferred designation. This role label appears primarily in texts originating in the south (*Amos, Micah, Isaiah, 1* and *2 Chronicles*), and when it does

not, it refers to figures located there. Judahite historical traditions suggest that visionaries were particularly active during the period of the early monarchy (during the reigns of David, Solomon, and Rehoboam), when some of them were part of the royal court in Jerusalem, but references to them in the writing prophets indicate that they persisted at least until the exile (1 *Chr.* 21:9, 25:5, 29:29; 2 *Chr.* 9:29, 12:15, 19:2, 29:25, 30; cf. 2 *Sm.* 24:11). The title "visionary" clearly refers to the distinctive means by which these figures received their revelations, and indeed three of the Judahite prophetic books explicitly speak of the visionary origin of their oracles (*Am.* 1:1; *Mi.* 1:1; *Is.* 1:1), while a fourth (*Ez.*) contains numerous descriptions of revelatory visions. This particular mode of divine-human communication was apparently not well regarded in the north, where prophets preferred to speak of their oracles as the words that they heard rather than the visions that they saw (*Hos.* 1:1, *Jer.* 1:1–4). In some circles outside of Judah, visions may have been considered an inferior form of revelation (Nm. 12:6–9; cf. *Dt.* 13:1–6), a fact that may help to explain the northern priest Amaziah's derisive characterization of the Judahite prophet Amos as a professional visionary (*Am.* 7:12–15).

In addition to the *navi'* and the *hozeh,* the biblical writers mention three other prophetic titles, which were apparently not widely used. In *1 Samuel* 9:9 Samuel is called a "seer" (*ro'eh;* lit., "one who sees"), a title that the writer affirms was already archaic. If the old story in this chapter is historically accurate, then the seer was a specialist in communicating with the divine world, presumably through visions, dreams, or divination. People who wanted to request information from a deity could go to the seer, who in exchange for a fee would transmit the petitioner's request and return an answer. In the north this particular function was later assigned to the *navi',* while elsewhere various diviners and priests were the agents of intercession (*1 Sm.* 9:9, *Dt.* 18:9–22). Late references to the seer may be archaisms (*2 Ch.* 16:7, 16:10), and it is probable that the title ceased to be used in the early monarchical period.

Better attested is the title "man of God" (*ish ha-Elohim*), which appears in northern sources, particularly in the old prophetic legends of the Elijah-Elisha cycle in the Deuteronomic history (1 Kgs. 17–2 Kgs. 10). This label may have originally been applied to people who were thought able to control divine power and use it in various miraculous ways, but its usage was eventually broadened to include anyone who had a special relationship to God. When the designation "man of God" became an honorific title, any specifically prophetic connotations that it may have had were presumably muted or lost.

In addition to titles normally applied to a single individual, the biblical writers also apply the label "sons of the prophets" (*benei ha-nevi'i*m) to members of prophetic groups. The title is attested only in the Elijah-Elisha stories and seems to have been used for a relatively brief period in northern Israel (c. 869–842 BCE). The sons of the prophets

were clearly members of a prophetic guild that had a hierarchical structure headed by a leader with the title "father." On the death of the leader, the title was transferred to another prophet (*2 Kgs.* 2:12, 6:21, 13:14). Members of the group sometimes lived together and shared common meals (*2 Kgs.* 4:1, 4:38–41, 6:1). It has been suggested that the sons of the prophets were ecstatics, but there is no evidence of such behavior in the narratives about them.

Prophetic behavior. In ancient Israel, as in every society, the behavior of divinely possessed individuals followed certain stereotypical patterns, although these patterns varied somewhat depending on the historical, geographical, and social setting of the prophets' activities. There are two reasons for the existence of this behavior. First, Israelite society set definite limits on the kinds of behavior that its prophets could exhibit. In most social situations violent or uncontrolled actions were not tolerated, and when they occurred, they were considered a sign of mental illness or possession by evil powers. Prophets who wished to be considered genuine therefore had to keep their behavior within recognized boundaries or risk being considered insane. Second, members of social groups in which prophets operated had to face the problem of determining when divine possession was actually present. They needed to have some grounds for assigning a prophetic title to a particular individual. One of the ways in which they solved this problem was to examine the behavior of people in the past who were known to have been genuine prophets of God. Individuals who wished to be accredited as prophets were thus subtly pressed to conform to the group's picture of genuine prophetic behavior.

Prophetic actions. Biblical writers rarely describe behavior indicative of possession, but the existence of stereotypical prophetic actions can be inferred from the Bible's occasional use of the verb *hitnabbe'*, which seems to mean "to act like a prophet, to exhibit the behavior characteristic of a *navi'*." This verb refers to both prophetic words and deeds, but the texts give it no specific definition. It is clear, however, that the prophet's characteristic behavior was evaluated positively by some groups but negatively by others. In some cases it was seen a a sign of divine legitimation and favor (*Nm.* 11:11–29, *1 Sm.* 10:1–13), while on other occasions it was considered an indication of madness or possession by an evil spirit (*1 Sm.* 18:10–11, 19:18–24; *1 Kgs.* 18:26–29; *Jer.* 29:24–28).

It is likely that some of Israel's prophets were ecstatics. The word *ecstasy* is usually understood to refer to a type of trance behavior marked by psychological and physiological symptoms such as a reduction of sensitivity to outside stimuli, hallucinations or visions, a garbled perception of surrounding events, and an apparent loss of conscious control over speech and actions. The intensity of ecstasy and its specific characteristics vary depending on the individual being possessed and the group in which possession occurs. The actions of an ecstatic prophet may range from apparently uncontrolled physical activity to completely normal physical activity, and his speech may range from unintelligible nonsense

syllables to perfectly coherent discourse. Sometimes ecstatic behavior in Israel was incapacitating or dangerous (*1 Sm.* 19:18–24, *1 Kgs.* 18:26–29), but at least in the case of those prophets who wrote, ecstasy appears to have involved controlled actions and intelligible speech (*Jer.* 4:19, 23:9; *Ez.* 1:1–3:15, 8:1–11:25).

As part of their characteristic behavior, some of Israel's prophets accompanied their oracles with symbolic acts, although this practice was by no means common even among the prophets who employed it. In most cases these acts seem to have been designed to provide the background for an oracle or to dramatize the prophet's words. Thus Hosea and Isaiah gave their children symbolic names that foretold the fate of the nation (*Hos.* 1:4–9; *Is.* 7:3, 8:1–4). Isaiah reportedly walked naked through the streets of Jerusalem for three years to drive home the point that the Assyrians would lead the Egyptians into captivity (*Is.* 20). Jeremiah smashed a pot before his listeners to dramatize the destruction what would soon occur in Jerusalem, and he later wore a wooden yoke before the king to reinforce an oracle counseling surrender to the Babylonians (*Jer.* 19:1–15, 27:1–28:17). A few of these acts seem to move beyond symbolism into the realm of magic. When Elisha commanded the Israelite king Joash to strike the ground with his arrows, the number of times that the king struck the ground determined the number of victories that Israel would have over Syria (*2 Kgs.* 13:14–19). Similarly, Ezekiel's elaborate drawing of the besieged Jerusalem actually seems to bring the siege into existence (*Ez.* 4:1–8). However, in spite of these examples of sympathetic magic, the working of miracles was not normally a component of prophetic behavior in Israel.

In addition to performing certain characteristic actions, some of Israel's prophets wore distinctive clothing and bore a special mark that identified them as prophets or as members of a prophetic guild (*1 Kgs.* 20:35–41, *2 Kgs.* 1:8, *Zec.* 13:4). However, this practice does not seem to have been widespread.

Prophetic speech. As part of their characteristic behavior, some prophets may have used stereotypical speech patterns and shaped their oracles in certain traditional ways. The existence of a distinctive northern oracle pattern is suggested by the fact that the Deuteronomic history and the prophetic literature dependent on it (*Jeremiah*) often quote prophetic oracles that have a tripartite structure. The oracle begins with the commissioning of the prophetic messenger and then moves to an accusation against an individual who has violated Israel's covenantal law. Following the accusation, an announcement of judgment is addressed directly to the accused. The announcement is usually introduced by a stereotypical "messenger formula," such as the following: "Thus says the Lord"; "Therefore, thus says the Lord"; or "For thus says the Lord" (*1 Sm.* 2:27–36, 13:11–14, 15:10–31; *2 Sam.* 12; *1 Kgs.* 11:29–40, 13:1–3, 14:7–14, 17:1, 20:35–43, 21:17–22, 22:13–23; *2 Kgs.* 1:3–4, 1:6, 20:14–19, 21:10–15; *Jer.* 20:1–6, 22:10–12, 22:13–19, 22:24–27,

28:12–16, 29:24–32, 36:29–30, 37:17). If this pattern is not simply a literary convention of the Deuteronomic authors, then what is often called the "announcement of disaster to individuals" may have been a characteristic feature of the speech of Ephraimite prophets. Other Israelite prophets also announced disaster to individuals and to the nation as a whole, but their oracles did not conform to rigid patterns.

Judahite prophets may have once used stereotypical forms of speech, but if so, the patterns had broken down by the time the oracles were recorded in writing. Early Judahite writing prophets such as Amos, Micah, and Isaiah seem to have favored distinctive judgment oracles beginning with the cry "alas" (Heb., *hoy*) and followed by one or more participles describing the addressee and specifying his crime. This introduction was followed by an announcement of disaster in various forms (*Am.* 5:18–20, 6:1–7; *Is.* 5:8–10, 5:11–14, 5:18–19, 5:20, 5:21, 5:22–24, 10:1–3, 28:1–4, 29:1–4, 29:15, 30:1–3, 31:1–4; *Mi.* 2:1–4). However, even if the "alas oracles" were once characteristic of southern prophetic speech, they were later used by prophets outside of that tradition.

The Hebrew word massaʾ, traditionally translated "burden," may have once designated a specialized type of Judahite oracle against foreign nations (*Is.* 13:1, 14:28, 15:1, 17:1, 19:1, 21:1, 21:11, 21:13, 22:1, 23:1, 30:6; *Na.* 1:1; *Hb.* 1:1; *Zec.* 9:1, 12:1; *Mal.* 1:1). However, if so, the original characteristic form of the oracle has not been preserved, and its distinctive function has been lost.

In addition to using speech patterns that seem to be primarily prophetic, Israel's prophets employed specialized language drawn from various spheres of Israelite life. For example, from the courts they took legal language and formed trial speeches that mirrored judicial proceedings (*Is.* 1; *Mi.* 6; *Jer.* 2; *Is.* 41:1–5, 41:21–29, 42:18–25, 43:8–15, 43:22–28, 44:6–8, 50:1–3). From the Temple they took priestly instruction and liturgical fragments and incorporated them into prophetic oracles. However, scholars have not usually succeeded in uncovering widespread structural patterns in oracles of this sort, and it is probably best not to understand them as characteristic of the behavior of prophetic possession in general.

PROPHECY AND SOCIETY. In the past there has been a tendency to portray the Israelite prophets as isolated individuals who appeared suddenly before a particular group, delivered an uncompromising divine message, and then disappeared as quickly as they had come. It was assumed that this individualism set them at odds with their society and inevitably brought them into conflict with rival religious professionals, particularly the priests. However, more recently scholars have recognized that the prophets were integrally related to the societies in which they lived. These individuals played many social roles, not all of which were related to their prophetic activities. Because in ancient Israel there were apparently no restrictions on the type of person who could be possessed by God's spirit, and because possession was not a

constant experience for any given person, many of the prophets participated fully in other areas of communal life. Thus, for example, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were both priests who were possessed and transformed into prophets (*Jer.* 1:1, *Ez.* 1:3). Some priests may have delivered prophetic oracles as part of their regular cultic activities, while in the postexilic period Levitical singers in the Temple also had prophetic functions (*1 Chr.* 25:1–8; *2 Chr.* 20:1–23, 34:30). Some prophets, like Gad, seem to have earned their living through prophecy and were members of the royal court (*1 Sm.* 22:1–5, *2 Sm.* 24:1–25), while others, like Amos, engaged in other occupations and prophesied only occasionally (*Am.* 1:1, 7:14–15).

Prophetic authority. Discussions of prophetic authority normally focus on the prophetic-call narratives (*Is.* 6, *Jer.* 1, *Ez.* 1–3) and on the "charisma" that these extraordinary individuals are thought to have possessed. It is assumed that because the prophets were endowed with supernatural power, they were automatically accorded authority and viewed as divinely chosen leaders. To be sure, the prophets did sometimes cite their initial experiences of possession in order to gain support for their message, and they may be accurately described as charismatics, although they were certainly not the only ones in Israelite society. However, these two factors must not be stressed at the expense of recognizing the role that Israelite society played in creating and sustaining prophets.

The process by which ancient Israel recognized and accepted the authority of genuine prophets was subtle and complex, but at least some of its elements can be identified. One element concerned a prophet's conformity to certain standards of behavior. At least those Israelites who created and carried the biblical traditions recognized as authoritative only those prophets who stood in a recognizably Israelite prophetic tradition. This meant above all that the only legitimate prophets were those who were possessed by Yahveh, the God of Israel. Prophets possessed by other deities were not to be taken seriously, and the Deuteronomic writers went so far as to decree the death penalty for prophets who spoke in the name of other gods (*Dt.* 18:20). However, outside of these circles, possession by other gods was accepted, and for a brief time prophets of Baal and Asherah were part of the religious establishment in the northern kingdom of Israel (Ephraim) (*1 Kgs.* 18:19–40).

Prophets who wished to be considered legitimate also were pressed to make their behavior conform to what various Israelite groups recognized as traditional prophetic behavior. Canons of acceptable behavior varied from group to group within Israel, and for this reason prophets who were considered legitimate by one group might not be considered legitimate by other groups. Thus, for example, shortly before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, Jeremiah and the group that supported him condemned those prophets who predicted the salvation of the city, even though they were accepted as legitimate prophets by powerful groups within the royal

court. In the eyes of Jeremiah and his supporters, these prophets were illegitimate because the form and content of their oracles and the means by which they received them did not conform to the patterns that Jeremiah's community accepted (*Jer.* 23:9–40). Isaiah and his disciples, too, had rejected the authority of some of the prophets in Jerusalem because of their aberrant behavior (*Is.* 28:7–10), and in Babylonia the exilic community of Ezekiel denied legitimacy to those prophets who were still active in the Temple in Jerusalem (*Ez.* 13:1–23).

A second element involved in the process of prophetic authentication was the degree to which the prophet fitted into a recognized Israelite theological tradition. This did not mean that the prophet was not free to innovate or criticize the tradition, but he had to remain rooted in it. Thus, for example, in Deuteronomic tradition any prophet who advocated the worship of other gods was considered to have placed himself outside of the tradition by violating its overarching monotheistic principle, and the prophet not only was considered unauthentic but, like the prophet who spoke in the name of another god, was to be put to death (*Dt.* 13:1–5).

Because Israel's theological traditions were not always in agreement with each other at every point, what was acceptable prophetic behavior in one tradition might not be acceptable in another. When such theological disagreements occurred, a particular prophet might be an authoritative figure in his own tradition but would not be taken seriously elsewhere. Clear cases of this phenomenon can be seen in some of the writing prophets. The prophet Amos, a native of Judah and presumably standing in the tradition of the theology developed by the royal theologians in Jerusalem (which saw the establishment of the northern kingdom of Israel as a revolt against the Davidic dynasty), prophesied against the north and predicted the destruction of the Ephraimite royal sanctuary at Bethel. Such behavior was not acceptable in the north, and Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, accused Amos of treason and refused to recognize his prophetic authority (*Am.* 7:10–13). A later case is that of the prophet Jeremiah, who was influenced by Deuteronomic tradition that saw as conditional the election of Jerusalem as the dwelling place of God. He delivered oracles in the Jerusalem Temple that predicted the destruction of the city and the Temple unless the people reformed their conduct and obeyed God's covenantal law. To the officials of the royal court and the Temple, who believed that God had chosen Jerusalem as an eternal dwelling place, such words were treasonous and deserved the death penalty (*Jer.* 26). Although Jeremiah was not killed, many of the officials of Jerusalem refused to recognize his prophetic authority and considered him to be insane (*Jer.* 29:24–28).

A final element involved in the process of accrediting prophets can be seen most clearly in the Deuteronomic literature, which held that authentic prophets were those whose words always came to pass. This was particularly true of prophets said to be "like Moses," a special class of prophets

in Deuteronomic theology. These prophets had more direct communication with God than did ordinary prophets and for this reason were more effective intercessors and gave more reliable oracles. The words of a Mosaic prophet would inevitably come true, according to the Deuteronomists, and when these figures appear in the Deuteronomic history, the fulfillment of their oracles is always noted (*Nm.* 12:1–8; *Dt.* 18:15–22; *1 Kgs.* 11:30–39, 12:15, 14:7–11, 15:27–30, 16:1–4, 16:9–13; *2 Kgs.* 1:15–17). This criterion for recognizing authentic prophets was not always useful, for oracles might only later be fulfilled, in the distant future, and the reliability of a particular prophet's predictions could not always be determined.

Once a prophet was considered authentic by a particular group in Israel, he seems to have been at least tolerated by the rest of the society. Some of the prophets had free access to the king, the royal court, and the Temple and could carry out their activities without being harassed. Prophets were generally not held responsible for their words or actions because they spoke a divine word and not their own (*Jer.* 26:12–16). However, there were some limits to this freedom, particularly when the prophet criticized the king and the priesthood, and some of the prophets were killed because of their oracles (*Jer.* 26).

Because of the way in which prophetic authority was assigned, prophetic conflicts were common. When a prophet supported by one group gave oracles that conflicted with those of a prophet supported by another group, the conflict was often resolved only when one group simply refused to recognize the authority of one of the other group's prophets. Thus, for example, Jeremiah fought his prophetic opponents not by attacking their theological position but by accusing them of being false prophets (*Jer.* 23:9–32, 28:1–17, 29:15–32; cf. *Ez.* 13:1–23). When false prophecy led to the imposition of the death penalty, as was the case in Deuteronomic law, such accusations were effective tools for social control, whether they were used by the prophets themselves or by a government seeking to suppress troublesome critics.

Social locations and functions. In ancient Israel prophets carried out their activities in all parts of the society. However, because the prophets' functions to a certain extent depended on their social location, it is useful to identify prophets according to their relationship to the society's centers of social, political, and religious power. At the center of the social structure were prophets who may be identified as "central prophets." They carried out their activities in the context of the royal court or the central sanctuary, and individually or as part of a prophetic group they performed the functions considered necessary by the establishment. Because of their central social location, they enjoyed a certain amount of prestige and were considered authoritative by Israelite leaders. At the other end of the social spectrum were prophets who were located away from the centers of power and carried out their activities on the fringes of society. They were considered authoritative only by the small groups of support-

ers who shared their social location and theological views. Peripheral prophets were usually dispossessed individuals who were tolerated by the religious establishment but enjoyed little social status or political power. In Israel prophets were located at various points on the continuum that stretched between the society's center and its periphery, and some prophets changed their position on the continuum when there were alterations in the social structure.

Locating a particular prophet in the social spectrum was sometimes a subjective process, particularly in the case of peripheral prophets. Because prophets with small support groups and little status had minimal power, they could easily be classified as peripheral by the establishment, and their messages could be ignored. However, to the members of the prophets' support groups they played the crucial role of articulating group values and concerns. For this reason the prophets could be considered central by the groups that supported them. Biblical views on the social location of prophets thus often depended on the social location of the people articulating those views.

All Israelite prophets shared a single basic task. They were to deliver to individuals and groups the divine messages that had been transmitted during their possession experiences. In addition, Deuteronomic prophets served as intercessors who were responsible for communicating the people's questions and requests to God. Beyond these primary tasks, however, the prophets' social functions varied somewhat depending on their social location. Central prophets were normally concerned with the orderly functioning of the society. If they were active in the cult, they were responsible for providing oracles whenever the religious, political, or social occasion required them. They also represented God in state affairs and in general helped to preserve public morality. Such prophets were interested in maintaining and preserving the existing social order. They felt free to criticize existing conditions and structures, but they were generally opposed to radical changes that might make the society unstable.

In contrast, peripheral prophets by definition represented positions that were at odds with the majority views and practices of the society. Being possessed by God and becoming prophets gave marginal individuals an authority that they did not previously have and allowed them to bring their messages to the attention of the political and religious establishment. Peripheral prophets normally advocated basic reforms in the social structure and thus served as agents of rapid social change. Their reform programs often aimed at restoring older religious and social values and practices that the society as a whole had rejected. At the same time, the prophets were concerned with improving their marginal social position and moving their support groups closer to the centers of power. However, there were limits on the degree to which they could advocate major social changes. Up to a point, their views were tolerated, but if they became too vocal in their demands, then they ran the risk of being considered enemies of the society and having their activities brought to a halt

through accusations of false prophecy or legal sanctions that would physically remove them.

PROPHECY IN ISRAELITE HISTORY. Because most of Israel's prophets were active during the monarchical period (c. 1020–587/6 BCE), it is sometimes argued that prophecy and monarchy were coeval and interdependent. However, biblical traditions coming from northern Israel speak of the existence of prophets well before the rise of the monarchy, and there is no reason to doubt their accuracy. Similarly, prophets played a role in Israel's restoration after the exile (c. 538–400), so it is probably safe to suppose that prophecy played a role in Israelite society from its origins to about 400 when, according to orthodox Jewish tradition, prophecy ceased. Prophets certainly existed in Israelite society in later times and played a minor role in early Christian communities, but they do not seem to have had major social functions and have left few traces in the biblical record.

Although prophecy existed in Israel for a fairly long period of time, it is impossible to trace a comprehensive history of the phenomenon. Earlier attempts to trace an evolutionary development from "primitive" ecstatic prophecy to the high ethical principles of the writing prophets are now generally discredited. However, it is possible to describe the complex roles that prophets played at various points in Israel's political and religious development.

Premonarchical period. The Elohist traditions of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomic history suggest that prophets were at work in Israel before the rise of the monarchy (c. 1020). Although the narratives describing the activities of these early figures have certainly been colored by later prophetic ideology, there is no reason to deny the existence of prophecy in early Israel. Prophetic phenomena are attested elsewhere in the ancient Near East in the second millennium in roughly the same areas as those thought to have been occupied by Israel's ancestors. There is no evidence to suggest that early Israelites borrowed prophecy from elsewhere, but it may well have appeared spontaneously in some of the tribes that later joined together to form Israel.

The nature and functions of these early prophets are unclear. Biblical references to the prophetic activities of Abraham and Moses are probably retrojections from later times, and certainly the Moses stories were used by Deuteronomists to support their distinctive views of prophecy (*Gn.* 20:7, *Nm.* 12, *Dt.* 18:9–22). In addition to these traditional figures, Miriam and Deborah are both said to have been prophetesses (*Ex.* 15:20–21, *Jg.* 4:4–10), and an unnamed prophet is said to have been sent during the period of the judges to explain why the people were oppressed (*Jg.* 6:1–10). If these references are in any way indicative of the role that prophets actually played in early Israel, then it would appear that prophets had a position in the central social structure and had important functions in the conduct of warfare.

It is more certain that prophecy was well established in northern Israel in the period shortly before the rise of the

monarchy. A band of prophets was part of the cultic personnel at the sanctuary at Gibeah (*1 Sm.* 10:9–13), and there are numerous traditions about the prophetic activities of Samuel. He had prophetic, priestly, and governmental roles at several northern sanctuaries and was clearly a central prophet of major importance (*1 Sm.* 3:1–21, 7:1–12:25). People came to him in order to obtain information from God (*1 Sm.* 9:6–10), and he represented God among the people. Although traditions differ about Samuel's role in the rise of the monarchy, the Deuteronomists saw him as the religious official responsible for anointing and legitimating Saul as Israel's first king (*1 Sm.* 9:15–10:8).

Monarchical period. Throughout the history of the Israelite monarchy, prophets played important religious roles both inside the royal court and on its periphery. The tradition of prophetic participation in government began with Samuel, who continued to advise Saul on cultic matters during his reign. However, Saul's disagreements with Samuel and Samuel's northern support groups over the extent of royal authority eventually broke into open warfare, and Samuel stripped the kingship from Saul and anointed David as the new king (*1 Sm.* 13:1–16:13). The presence of prophets in the royal court continued during David's reign. The court prophet Nathan delivered to David an oracle promising the king an eternal dynasty in Jerusalem and designating Jerusalem as the divine dwelling place forever (*2 Sm.* 7). This oracle became the cornerstone of the Jerusalem royal theology, and it was cited as authoritative by later royal sources (*Ps.* 89, 132). Later in David's reign his royal visionary, Gad, legitimated the building of a temple in Jerusalem (*2 Sam.* 24). David is also said to have installed prophets as religious officials in the central sanctuary (*1 Chr.* 24). Although this report undoubtedly reflects the Temple administration of the Chronicler's own time, it may well be that prophets had central cultic functions in Jerusalem during the monarchical period.

Prophecy does not seem to have been prominent during Solomon's reign, but it emerged in a new form in the time of his successor, Rehoboam. In response to general Ephraimite dissatisfaction with the growing power of the Jerusalem monarchy, the prophet Ahijah, from the old northern sanctuary at Shiloh, established the dissident northern tribes as an independent kingdom by delivering an oracle legitimating Jeroboam as king of Ephraim (*1 Kgs.* 11:29–40). Ahijah was clearly a peripheral prophet representing interests that were not connected with the royal court in Jerusalem, and his newly created state may have been intended to restore his supporters to positions of power. If so, his intentions were thwarted when Jeroboam created in Ephraim a syncretist religious establishment that horrified the Deuteronomic historians. According to the Deuteronomists, Ahijah was the first of a series of peripheral prophets who attempted to reform the northern political and religious establishments (*1 Kgs.* 13–16).

Prophetic opposition in the north reached its height during the time of Elijah and Elisha (c. 869–815), when groups of peripheral prophets appeared to denounce the Ephraimite kings and the heterodox worship that they permitted in the land. This inevitably brought the peripheral prophets into conflict with the prophets of Yahveh, Baal, and Asherah, who were part of the religious establishment in the north (*1 Kgs.* 18, 22). The peripheral prophets finally prevailed and succeeded in overthrowing the northern dynasty and bringing about cultic reforms (*1 Kgs.* 17–*2 Kgs.* 10). However, by the time of the prophets Amos and Hosea (c. 760–746), Baal worship had been firmly reestablished in Ephraim. Both of these prophets, from Judah and Ephraim respectively, continued the activities of their predecessors and predicted the destruction of the evil kingdom. The prophecies were finally fulfilled with the destruction of the northern capital, Samaria, in 721, an event that the Deuteronomic historians traced to the failure of the kings and the people to listen to the warnings that God had sent through the prophets (*2 Kgs.* 17:7–18).

Little is known of prophecy in Judah during the period of the divided monarchy until the very end of that period, when the prophets Isaiah and Micah began their activities. Both reflect an acceptance of elements of the royal theology of Jerusalem and both may be examples of prophets who were more central than periphral. Isaiah in particular seems to have had access to the court (*Is.* 7:3, 8:2, 22:15–16), and he may have played an official role in resolving the crisis caused by the Assyrian invasion of 701 (*Is.* 36–39). However, he was certainly capable of criticizing the abuses of the royal theology and advocated judicious social change to preserve traditional religious values.

Most of the remaining preexilic prophets in Jerusalem were much more supportive of the government than were Isaiah and Micah. Nahum and Habakkuk have both been linked with the Jerusalem cult, and both may have had an official part in it. Both deliver oracles against Israel's enemies and in general behave like typical central prophets.

Toward the end of the monarchical period, peripheral prophecy reappeared in a mild way with the writings of Zephaniah, but it did not become a major force until the work of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (c. 627–571). Jeremiah, a priest who seems to have been heavily influenced by the Deuteronomic movement, launched a series of increasingly harsh attacks on the king and the people, urging them to repent in order to avoid the punishment that God had decreed against Jerusalem. In the final days before the destruction of the city in 587/6, he advocated surrender to the Babylonians, a policy that brought him into conflict with the royal court and the central prophets, who still advocated the old theology of the eternal election of Jerusalem. Jeremiah narrowly escaped with his life, but when the city fell, his prophecies were vindicated. At about the same time, Ezekiel, a priest who had been exiled to Babylon in 597, advocated major modifications of the Jerusalem royal theology held by most of his fellow exiles, but his words had little effect.

Exile and its aftermath. The fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 587/6 created serious authority problems for Israel's prophets. The political and religious institutions that sheltered the central prophets disappeared with the conquest, and those prophets who supported the traditional Jerusalem theology were tragically wrong in their predictions. Peripheral prophets, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, gained new credibility because of the fall; but in their latter days they also gave oracles of promise, and as the exile continued, these oracles too seemed to be false.

The prophets of the exilic and postexilic periods faced this problem of authority in several ways. First, they turned away from oral prophecy and adopted writing as the means of circulating their words. Written prophecies were apparently thought to have more authority because of their concreteness. Second, they often attached their prophecies to those of preexilic prophets in an attempt to borrow the authority of their predecessors. Finally, these last representatives of Israelite prophecy turned increasingly toward the divine world for solutions to Israel's overwhelming problems, a move that brought prophecy closer to apocalyptic. Instead of advocating the reform of human behavior in order to cure Israel's religious and social ills, as earlier prophets had done, the postexilic prophets often looked instead to God's direct intervention in history on behalf of those who waited faithfully for God's plan for Israel's salvation to be realized. Some of these postexilic solutions to the problem of prophetic authority can be seen in the postexilic books of Zechariah, Haggai, Joel, and Malachi, and all of them are visible in the writings of the anonymous prophets ("Second Isaiah" and "Third Isaiah") responsible for the last part of the *Book of Isaiah.*

After the exile, central prophecy was briefly restored in the reconstructed Judahite state, and Zechariah and Haggai in particular had roles in shaping the restored community. However, after Ezra's mission to Jerusalem toward the end of the fifth century, officially recognized prophecy was restricted to Levites with specific duties in the cult of the Second Temple (*1 Chr.* 25). After this point, other types of prophecy disappear from the biblical record.

SEE ALSO Amos; Ecstasy; Ezekiel; Hosea; Isaiah; Israelite Religion; Jeremiah; Levites; Micah.

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