

Prophecy and Prediction in Ancient Israel

IN THE MODERN WORLD a prophet is a future teller, someone with supernatural knowledge of future events. But in ancient Israel that was not the essence of prophecy. The most basic description of a prophet in Israel was as an intermediary between God and the people. A prophet therefore had two roles: delivering God's words to the people and interceding with God on the people's behalf. The second role is less emphasized in the Bible, and so I will discuss it only briefly by citing a few examples. Moses, the prophet par excellence, several times pleads with God on behalf of the Israelites, most famously after the incident of the golden calf, when Moses dissuades Yahweh from obliterating his people (Exod 32:1–14). Similarly, the prophet Amos twice intercedes with Yahweh to call off devastating punishments (Amos 7:1–6). The clearest example of this prophetic role has to do with Abraham, who is not usually thought of as a prophet. In Genesis 20, Abraham's wife Sarah, whom he represents as his sister, is taken by a Canaanite king. God appears in a dream to the king and threatens him with death because he has taken a married woman. When the king rightly pleads his innocence, God tells him, "Send back the man's wife now; he is a prophet and he will intercede on your behalf, and you shall live" (Gen 20:7). Notice that Abraham's status as a prophet has nothing whatsoever to do with predicting the future.

Spokesmen for God

The central role of biblical prophets was to be spokesmen for God by delivering his words. That understanding of the prophet's role can perhaps best be seen in two short scenes from the Book of Exodus. In the first scene, God commands Moses to carry his words to Pharaoh. Moses complains that he is

unfit for the task because he is a poor speaker (Exod 4:10). God tells Moses that he will empower Aaron, his brother, to speak on his behalf. Note how concretely this is put:

You [Moses] shall speak to him [Aaron] and put the words in his mouth . . . He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him.
(Exod 4:15–16)

What Yahweh means by Moses serving “as God” to Aaron becomes clear in our second scene when Moses and Aaron are about to confront Pharaoh for the first time.

Yahweh said to Moses, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land.” (Exod 7:1–2)

Aaron’s being a prophet has nothing to do with his predicting the future. He is Moses’ prophet because he is Moses’ spokesman. Aaron will speak to the Pharaoh, but the words he speaks will be Moses’, not Aaron’s. That is the essence of biblical prophecy: to speak on God’s behalf.

This concept of prophecy is also evident in how the prophets delivered their divinely given messages. The prophets frequently preface their declarations with “Thus says Yahweh.”¹ This “thus says X” was a common formatting device in the ancient world, which scholars call the messenger formula. It was used when a messenger needed to make it clear that the words he was about to speak were those of the one who had sent the message, not the personal words of the messenger himself. The messenger formula thus functioned as oral quotation marks. Here is an example, from a highly dramatic scene during the Assyrian invasion of Israel. The king of Assyria had sent a royal official to persuade the defenders of Jerusalem to surrender. As that official stood outside the city wall, he shouted up to the soldiers looking down from the walls:

Thus says the king of Assyria: “Make your peace with me and come out to me; then every one of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree and drink water from your own cistern, until I come and take you away to a land like your own, a land of grain and wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive oil and honey, that you may live and not die.” (2 Kgs 18:31–32)

1. To take Amos, the earliest of the classical prophets, as but one example, see 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6; 3:1, 12; 5:4, 16.

Note that “me” and “I” refer to the king, not the official delivering the message. By opening his declaration with the messenger formula, the official signaled to the soldiers that the terms of surrender came straight from the king himself. The prophets’ constant use of “thus says Yahweh” underlines their sense of being his messengers.

The prophets were speakers, not writers. When Jeremiah dictated his words to his assistant Baruch to be written down on a scroll, it was an exception that proved the rule. Jeremiah could not enter the temple to deliver his divine message, so he had Baruch write it down, which enabled Baruch literally to carry Jeremiah’s words into the temple and read them to the people (Jer 36:5–8). Except in extraordinary situations like Jeremiah’s, the prophets’ words and speeches were written down later in order to preserve them. Even in written form, it is clear that their speeches were meant to be spoken and heard in public, not read in private. Scholars know that because the prophets’ speeches are full of the techniques of effective public speaking, techniques aimed at engaging and challenging listeners.² This is important because it reinforces what common sense tells us: that the prophets wanted their words to have an impact on their audiences, to influence them to believe certain things, experience certain feelings, or act in certain ways.

The prophet’s mission was to tell listeners how their present situation fit or, more often, did not fit, into God’s plans, and to challenge the people to act according to God’s will, usually as expressed in the covenant. The characteristic task of the great prophets who preached before the Babylonian Exile was to indict the kings, the wealthy aristocrats, often the priests, and sometimes the entire nation for serious violations of the covenant. The prophets often pleaded with their audiences to repent, and threatened them with terrible consequences (usually invasion and exile) if they refused. Sometimes these prophets urged rulers to avoid alliances with other nations, and they backed up their messages with analyses of the diplomatic and military situation.³ Occasionally the prophets foretold the blessings that God would send if Israel would repent and live in faithfulness to its covenant.⁴ In a few passages the prophets look beyond the disasters they see coming to describe how God will have compassion on the chastened survivors, bless them with prosperity, and restore the nation.⁵ These latter themes become the primary message of prophets operating after the Babylonian Exile, when

2. See Lundbom, *Hebrew Prophets*, 165–207.

3. For example, Hos 2:14–22; 7:11–16; Isa 7:1–20; 30:1–7; 31:1–5; Jer 27:1–11.

4. For example, Hos 14:1–7; Isa 1:18–20.

5. For example, Isa 4:2–6; 43:1–7; Jer 23:1–8; 31:1–14; 32:26–44; Ezek 36:22–37; Amos 9:11–15.

the nation and its religious institutions had been destroyed. The mission of those prophets was to challenge a conquered and humiliated people to cast off their cynicism and despair, and to dare to hope for a glorious future with the God of Israel.

The Prophets and the Future

Predicting the future was not central to the prophets' task, but it was part of what they did. Their purpose in foretelling the future was to impact their present. For example, announcing that God would send a punishment (such as a drought or an invasion) was meant to emphasize the seriousness of the nation's sins and to give the people a strong incentive to repent. Prophetic threats were usually conditional; the punishments could be avoided if Israel repented. The same goes for many of the divine promises relayed by the prophets; those blessings would come only if the people returned to faithfulness. The future of which the prophets speak in these cases is the *near* future, the future to be experienced by the prophets' living audiences. One could assume as much even without reading actual prophetic passages, because for promises or threats to be meaningful to the prophets' audiences, those promises or threats had to refer to circumstances that would affect the audiences' lives. A prediction that was meant to be fulfilled centuries later would have little relevance to a prophet's mission.

True and False Prophecy

Several passages in the OT wrestle with the problem of false prophecy, and some of these passages prescribe tests for distinguishing true prophets from false ones. These tests are based on the intuition that prophets can be assessed by the accuracy of their predictions. As we will see, these tests are beset with serious problems. Nevertheless, they show one very important thing: the future that concerned the prophets was the *near* future.

Jeremiah's Difficulties

False prophets could be a big problem. Jeremiah, for example, repeatedly issues warnings such as this:

Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are telling you not to serve the king of Babylon, for they are prophesying a lie

to you. "I have not sent them," says Yahweh, "but they are prophesying falsely in my name." (Jer 27:14–15)

The Book of Jeremiah narrates a dramatic confrontation in the temple between Jeremiah and another prophet, Hananiah, whose message contradicted Jeremiah's (Jeremiah 28). Their heated argument devolved into a physical altercation (28:10–11). Here were two men prophesying in the name of Yahweh, and they violently disagreed with one another. What was the audience to make of such a spectacle? Both men acted and spoke like prophets. Hananiah's message was reasonable and hopeful; Jeremiah's was bleak and counterintuitive. How could the people decide which prophet to believe?

Jeremiah asserted, in the middle of his argument with Hananiah, that true prophets prophesy disaster and false prophets prophesy peace (the Hebrew word here, *shalom*, is broader than our English "peace"; it connotes wholeness, health, and well-being).

The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. As for the prophet who prophesies *shalom*, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that Yahweh has truly sent the prophet. (Jer 28:8–9)

Jeremiah's point is that a prophet who tells you what you want to hear should be under suspicion of being a false prophet, unless he can prove otherwise by making predictions that come true. According to Jeremiah, a prophet who predicts disaster has no such obligation, apparently because such a prophet is by definition a true prophet. Obviously, Jeremiah is hardly a neutral party; his criteria put the burden of proof on Hananiah. And while Jeremiah's warning is common sense (beware of those who, in the name of God, tell you what you want to hear), it does not work as an objective test, since nearly all the prophets pronounce both doom and *shalom*, including Jeremiah himself (see Jeremiah 31, for example).

Jeremiah's test for true and false prophecy is further complicated by his accusation that God himself had sent false predictions of *shalom*, presumably to prophets.

Ah, Lord GOD, how utterly you have deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, "It shall be well with you," even while the sword is at the throat. (Jer 4:10)

In this strange complaint, Jeremiah blames God for sending a false prophecy. According to Jeremiah, the prophets who passed on this message did

so in good faith, but they turned out to be spokesmen for a lying God.⁶ The betrayal Jeremiah feels at God's duplicity is reflected in his word "deceived"; the Hebrew word here is *nasha'*, the same word Eve uses in the Eden story to describe how the snake misled her (Gen 3:31). (One wonders whether Jeremiah is here reflecting on his own experience. How else could he know that these deceptive messages had truly come from Yahweh?)

In a heartbreaking lament in Jer 20:7–10, the prophet accuses Yahweh of deceiving him (20:7), this time using a different word (*patah*), the word used in 1 Kgs 22:20–22 to describe Yahweh deceiving the prophets with a false prediction. In Jer 20:10 Jeremiah imagines his enemies conspiring against him and hoping that he will be "deceived"—probably by receiving more false prophecies from Yahweh—so that they can denounce and ruin him. In 15:18 Jeremiah compares Yahweh to a "deceitful brook," a desert riverbed that is dry most of the year.

Jeremiah's depiction of Yahweh as a deceiver of prophets is mirrored in a passage from Ezekiel concerning prophets who cooperate with those who worship other gods alongside Yahweh. If such a person approaches a prophet to seek an answer from Yahweh to some question, Yahweh will punish both the inquirer and the prophet. What is interesting here is that Yahweh will deceive the inquirer by sending the prophet a false message.

If a prophet is deceived into making a pronouncement, I, Yahweh, am the one who has deceived (*patah*) that prophet. I will stretch out my hand against him and destroy him from the midst of my people Israel. (Ezek 14:9)

Deuteronomy's Tests

Considering Jeremiah's test for true and false prophecy, but putting aside its flaws, it is telling that a prophet of peace can overcome the suspicion against him by making a prediction that comes true: "As for the prophet who prophesies *shalom*, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that Yahweh has truly sent the prophet" (Jer 28:9). The notion that accurate prediction is the acid test of an authentic prophet is supported by the Bible's most important passage dealing with false prophecy:

Any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die. You may say to

6. Elsewhere Jeremiah insists that prophets who proclaim that all will be well are frauds who do *not* speak for Yahweh (for example, Jer 6:13–14; 14:13–14; and 23:16).

yourself, “How can we recognize a word that Yahweh has not spoken?” If a prophet speaks in the name of Yahweh but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that Yahweh has not spoken. (Deut 18:20–22)

This passage lays out three tests for identifying a false prophet: first, if he speaks in the name of a god other than Yahweh; second, if he gives a prophecy that Yahweh has not given him; third, if his prophecy does not come true.

The validity of Deuteronomy’s first test is, for Israelites at least, obvious. But it is not very helpful. Anyone could claim to speak in the name of Yahweh. Hananiah did. The second test is useless because it is unverifiable. The only one who could use this criterion to spot a false prophet would be Yahweh himself. The third test, on the other hand, seems both straightforward and objective. However, it is neither. Let’s consider three problems:

1. False prophets can deliver true prophecies.
2. Some prophecies do not come true, for very good reasons.
3. Biblical prophets made some false predictions.

(1) *False prophets can make true predictions.* A charlatan, or someone who sincerely, but mistakenly, believed himself to be a prophet, could make a prediction based on prudent analysis that came true because the event he predicted was likely to occur. Or a false prophet might have a prophecy fulfilled out of dumb luck. What is more serious is that—according to the Bible—it is God who sometimes gives true predictions to false prophets.

If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say, “Let us follow other gods and let us serve them,” you must not heed the words of those prophets or those who divine by dreams; for Yahweh your God is testing you, to know whether you indeed love Yahweh your God with all your heart and soul. (Deut 13:1–3)

That warning is unsettling because *true* prophets sometimes give signs just like the ones mentioned in order to validate their credentials (see, for example, 1 Kgs 13:3, 5 and 2 Kgs 20:9, 11). According to Deuteronomy 13, however, the fact that one’s predictions come true does not by itself guarantee that one is a true prophet; the content of the prophet’s larger message needs to be scrutinized. And note that in this passage it is *Yahweh* who arranges for the predictions of false prophets to come true as a way of testing Israel’s faithfulness. When we combine Deut 13:1–3 with Jer 4:10, we get

a disconcerting matched set: Yahweh sometimes sends true predictions through false prophets and false predictions through true prophets.

(2) *Some predictions of disaster do not come true*, for good reasons: the people repent, or God changes his mind. Why should prophets who relay those messages be considered false prophets? Here I'm not referring to prophetic *warnings*, which are conditional (if you don't repent, a terrible thing will happen) but to unambiguous declarations that divine punishment is coming.

A good example is the centerpiece of the story of Jonah. After fleeing from Yahweh's command to prophesy to the Assyrian city of Nineveh, being thrown overboard during a storm at sea, surviving seventy-two hours in the digestive tract of a giant fish, and then being barfed up on an Assyrian beach, Jonah makes his way to Nineveh and grudgingly announces over and over again to its inhabitants, "Forty days more and this city will be destroyed" (Jonah 3:4). There's nothing conditional about Jonah's message, and he does not call on the Ninevites to repent. But they do, from the king on down to the cattle (Jonah 3:5–9). Much to Jonah's dismay, God calls off the destruction. According to Deut 18:22, that technically made Jonah a false prophet because, contrary to his prediction, Nineveh was not destroyed after forty days. But, of course, neither Judaism nor Christianity regards Jonah as a false prophet. In fact, the Book of Jonah became part of the Bible. The gospels even portray Jesus citing Jonah as a prototype for himself (Matt 12:38–40 and Luke 11:29–30).⁷

Those who argue that Jonah's message really was meant as a warning and not an announcement of doom have to explain away his actual words. And those who argue that God intended Jonah's message to be a call for the Ninevites to repent have no textual evidence for their assertion.⁸ Besides, even if it were the case that the message Yahweh entrusted to Jonah was meant as a warning, Jonah would still be a false prophet according to Deuteronomy's second criterion, because the message he actually delivered would not be the one God had given him.

(3) The final problem with the dictum that a false prediction makes one a false prophet is that *the biblical prophets made some false predictions*

7. This can seem ironic in light of the fact that in Matt 12:40 Jesus himself makes a prediction that does not come true (see pp. 39–41).

8. One of my students defended the truth of Jonah's prophecy by interpreting "Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed" to mean "Forty days more of *your sinning* and Nineveh will be destroyed." Her reasoning was that Jonah's prophecy must have had that meaning because God does not lie. While I admire the ingenuity of this argument, it is based on theological beliefs, not on textual evidence. If Jonah meant "forty days more of your sinning," that was not, according to the text, what he said.

of their own. A counterintuitive claim like that needs to be demonstrated, not just asserted, but to pursue it here at the length it deserves would derail this chapter's train of thought, so we will take it up in the next chapter. The important point here is that the ancient Israelite scholars who collected the words of the prophets and edited them into books we have today in the Bible knew about these false predictions but did not delete them from the written record. Apparently, those scholars did not judge Jeremiah, for example, to be a false prophet even though events proved him wrong, for example, about the circumstances of a certain king's death.⁹ The Jewish tradition accepted those writings of the prophets as sacred scripture even though their scholars were aware that they contained some false predictions.

Conclusion

The test that a true prophet is one who makes accurate predictions is beset with serious problems. No matter how appealing that test might be in theory, it is unreliable in practice.

Leaving all that aside, however, and accepting the test at face value—that is, in the spirit in which it was intended—it presupposes something crucial: prophetic predictions concern the near or immediate future. Fulfillment of prophecy, as a test for a true prophet, is useless unless that fulfillment is intended in the near future. This presupposition should be clear enough if we reflect on the reason for having such a test in the first place. People needed to be able to distinguish true from false prophets in order to know which prophets to take seriously and which to ignore. That is why prophets whose predictions did not come true quickly were met with skepticism (see Isa 5:19 and Jer 17:15). What good would it do to have a test for distinguishing true from false prophets if the outcome of that test could not be evaluated until centuries later? So, no matter what we think about the viability of fulfillment of prophecy as a test for sorting out true from false prophets, the test itself surely demonstrates that the people of the OT understood prophetic predictions to refer to their own near-term future.

9. See the analysis of Jer 22:19 on p. 28.