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False Prophets in Ancient Israelite Religion

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How long halt ye between two opinions?” Elijah asked the children of Israel. “If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.” Despite the seeming simplicity of Elijah’s invitation, the people stood indecisive and “answered him not a word” (1 Kgs 18:21). The scene was indeed a spectacle: there stood Elijah, the last prophet who spoke for the Lord, Yahweh (1 Kgs 19:10), and opposing him not only Israel’s own king but at least 450 prophets representing Baal (1 Kgs 18:19). Who to support, the lone, wild desert-man, or the hundreds of prophets that in addition to strength in numbers held the full authority of the state? Despite these differences in appearance, the record in Kings tells that in the contest that followed Elijah clearly triumphed. “All the people . . . fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, he is the God; the Lord, he is the God” (1 Kgs 18:39). Elijah then commanded the people to slay all the prophets of Baal.

This dramatic encounter between prophets of two opposing ideologies exemplifies an important feature of ancient Israelite religion: the constant struggle of the people to decide which of all the prophets really spoke the divine word that they should follow. The history of the Hebrew Bible is full of such theological warfare and indicates that these choices were both difficult and divisive. While the Hebrew Bible records some tests and guides that were used to help discern between “true” and “false” prophets, they appear to have been inadequate to help the Israelites make proper discernment for every case.

Part I: Prophets and Prophecy

Before examining the role of false prophets among the ancient Israelites some definitions must be made concerning prophets and prophecy. These terms are defined in different ways by different biblical scholars. Before discussing prophecy in his book Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East, Martti Nissinen recognizes the different approaches and offers this definition:
Prophecy, as understood in this volume, is human transmission of allegedly divine messages. As a method of revealing the divine will to humans, prophecy is to be seen as another, yet distinctive branch of the consultation of the divine that is generally called “divination.” . . . Prophets—like dreamers and unlike astrologers or haruspices—do not employ methods based on systematic observations and their scholarly interpretations, but act as direct mouthpieces of gods whose messages they communicate.¹

Nissinen’s approach emphasizes the differences many scholars traditionally place between prophecy and other, more physical forms of supernatural communication. Some observed the stars, some cast lots, and some examined livers—prophecy, on the other hand, came from without and was communicated from within.² Other scholars define prophecy not only according to its process but also its purpose as a divine mandate rather than simply an answer to human questions (such as with astrology or extispicy).³ Herbert B. Huffmon offered this definition:

For our purposes prophecy may be defined as having the following general, but not exclusive, characteristics: (1) a communication from the divine world . . . (2) inspiration through ecstasy, dreams . . . or what may be called inner illumination; (3) an immediate message . . . (4) the likelihood that the message is unsolicited . . . (5) the likelihood that the message is exhortatory or admonitory.⁴

Most definitions will have similar features to these two, usually focusing on prophecy as direct communication with the divine or its role as an exhortatory message. In simple terms, then, prophecy is the communication of a divine message and a prophet is the human agent that both receives and transmits this message. Although modern English sometimes uses prophecy in the specific sense of “a prediction of something to come” and a prophet as “one who foretells future events,”⁵ the biblical usage makes no requirement that prophecy be restricted to revelation about the future. Indeed, many prophets are noted for their roles in promoting social justice within their own contemporary societies,
with little concern for future events.

With these definitions in mind, a question naturally follows: was prophecy an extensive phenomenon in the ancient Near East or was it unique to ancient Israel? Although Israelite prophecy is generally considered unique in many ways, some scholars have argued for cases of prophecy in other contexts. Much of the time, the extent to which other cases can be labeled as “prophecy” depends upon the definitions of prophecy that are employed. Nissinen argues that prophecy belongs to a “common cultural legacy which cannot be traced back to any particular society or place of origin.” However, examples of extrabiblical prophecy are so scant and so debated that he also recognizes that “the huge process of collecting, editing, and interpreting prophecy that took place as a part of the formation of the Hebrew Bible is virtually without precedent in the rest of the ancient Near East.”

To date, the prophetic texts found at Mari have most often been compared to Israelite prophecy, and though they greatly differ in terms of both geography and chronology, some scholars have drawn extensive parallels between them (though not without some criticism). The usual consensus, however, is that employing prophecy as a means of obtaining divine messages was generally unique to Israelite culture.

Understanding that prophecy for the most part is limited to (or at least best documented within) ancient Israel, are there any extrabiblical sources that shed light on prophecy? Unfortunately, like with so much of our information about ancient Israel, we are almost entirely limited to what has survived in the Hebrew Bible text. One notable exception is the inscription found on Lachish Ostracon 3, which contains a letter written by one military leader to another. One line reads: “I am also sending to my lord the letter (which was in the custody) of Tobayahu, servant of the king, which was sent to Shallum son of Yada from the prophet and which begins ‘Beware.’” Although this fragmentary conversation is not a lengthy text, it is interesting that it confirms the idea that prophets gave exhortatory declarations and that these were considered important enough that they were noticed by military leaders.

6. Nissinen, Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East, 4–5. See pages 4–8 for his discussion of prophetic roles in other ancient Near Eastern cultures and how they relate to the biblical usage.

7. The Encyclopedia Judaica makes such a connection, even noting that “Before the discovery of Mari the Hebrew phenomenon of apostolic prophecy had tended to be viewed in isolation, and often treated as a unique phenomenon” (Abraham Malamat, “Mari,” Encyclopedia Judaica 13:540). Abraham Malamat, who had written extensively on the Mari texts, observed: “Indeed, [Mari] is the earliest such manifestation known to us anywhere in the ancient Near East. . . . [Prophecy] at Mari places biblical prophecy in a new perspective” (Mari and the Bible [Leiden: Brill, 1998], 60–61).


If prophets, then, receive direct communication from a divine source and if the study of prophecy is to be largely confined to the Hebrew Bible, what then are false prophets? This, of course, is a matter of theological interpretation. “False prophet” itself is not a term found in the Hebrew Bible. Nabi’, or “prophet,” is used by biblical authors and redactors to refer both to prophets considered legitimate spokesmen for Yahweh as well as those that falsely claimed such authority. The veracity or falsehood of any given prophet depended on the ideology of the one giving the label, and biblical writers make it quite clear that they considered some prophets to be authentic and others usurpers.

With this background about prophecy in ancient Israel, we can proceed to examine what the Hebrew Bible says about those prophets it condemns as “false.”

**Part II: What the Hebrew Bible Says about False Prophets**

Both archeological finds and the biblical text attest to the fact that ancient Israel’s religious life was far more diverse than that with which the Deuteronomistic laws tolerated. Perhaps simply because of the nature of prophecy, one of the features of popular religion was the reality of multiple prophetic voices. Scholar R. R. Wilson noted:

> The possibility of false prophecy is inherent in any society that tolerates the existence of prophets. This is so because prophecy is essentially a process by which an intermediary (the prophet) facilitates communication between the human and divine realms. In various ways the prophet receives divine messages and then delivers them to human recipients. However, the prophetic experience is basically a private one, even though the prophet may describe it publicly. In the end the prophet’s audience can never be sure that the experience took place as described or that the prophet is accurately reporting the divine message. Therefore, the reliability of any prophecy can be questioned, and the threat of false prophecy is always present.

Whatever the real motives or inspirations of the Hebrew Bible’s “false prophets,” it is clear that the biblical redactors opposed them vehemently. On several occasions the “true” prophets singled out their competitors as a source for Israel’s apostasy from true worship of Yahweh. Jeremiah 23, for example, is largely a condemnation of the false prophets and teachers who led the people astray. Some highlights of the chapter include:

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10. For more examples, see Gen 12:1; 28:11–15; Exod 3:4; Josh 1:1; 1 Sam 3:4; Isa 1:1; 6:1; Jer 1:4; Ezek 1:1; Dan 2:19; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1; Hag 1:1; and Zech 1:1. Many prophecies are prefaced with such introductions as “The word of the Lord which came . . .” or “Thus saith the Lord . . .”

“Folly in the prophets of Samaria . . . caused my people Israel to err” (13).

“The prophets of Jerusalem . . . commit adultery, and walk in lies: they strengthen also the hands of evildoers” (14).

“From the prophets of Jerusalem is profaneness gone forth into all the land” (15).

“The prophets . . . make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart” (16).

“They are prophets of the deceit of their own heart; which think to cause my people to forget my name” (26–27).

“Behold, I am against the prophets, said the Lord . . . behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams . . . and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies” (31–32).

Jeremiah, of course, was particularly sensitive about this subject as his ministry included several confrontations with opposing prophetic voices. Several other prophets also blamed false teachers and prophets for much of Israel’s wickedness.

What was the motivation and origin of the men that made up this hated group? On a few occasions the Hebrew Bible accuses them of seeking wealth. Other times they are called liars. Sometimes blame for false prophecy is placed upon the people themselves, who seek out leaders who will condone their iniquity (a simple case of providing a product that meets the demands of the market). Other times still the false prophets are described as evildoers who teach wickedness to help support their own riotous living. In other cases the goal of the false prophet is described simply as trying to turn the people away from Yahweh, although we might assume that some of these other motives drove such teachings.

On many occasions where false prophets appear they are tied to a royal court. Such an observation is what we would expect. Since the biblical record

12. For more examples of false prophets contributing to the wickedness of the populace, see Isa 9:14–16; Ezek 22:25, 28; and Mic 3:5, 10.
13. For examples, see Num 22:7, 17, 37 and Mic 3:11.
14. For examples, see 2 Chr 22:22; Jer 14:14; 23:14, 16, 26; Ezek 22:25, 28 and Mic 2:11.
15. For examples, see 1 Kgs 22:7–8; Isa 30:9–11; Jer 23:17–18 and Mic 2:6, 11.
16. For examples, see Isa 28:7 and Jer 23:14.
17. For examples, see Deut 13:5 and Jer 23:27.
18. For examples, see the 450 false prophets of Baal and 400 false prophets of Asherah “which [ate] at Jezebel’s table” (1 Kgs 18:19); Zedekiah and the false prophets of King Ahab (1 Kgs 22); and the false prophet Shemaiah who had open communication with the high priest (Jer 29:24–32). Even Moses in Pharaoh’s courts had to contend with the state magi-
condemns most of the kings of Israel and Judah as apostates it would make sense that these kings would financially support a prophetic class that supported them ideologically. Simple economics also dictates that if one decided to get into the false prophet profession, it would be most lucrative to do so in the service of the monarchy. Not every false prophet is given a direct royal connection in the text, of course, but it appears in several cases that wicked kings and wicked prophets went hand in hand.

Given that these deceiving prophets were so terrible, what fate does Yahweh give them? Deut 13:5 is very clear: “that prophet shall be put to death” (see also Deut 18:20). It is with this authority that Elijah slew the 450 priests of Baal. Often in Israel’s history the false prophets had popular support and thus were not executed; however, the “true” prophets prophesied that Yahweh himself would execute judgment.19

Similar fates are pronounced upon those that hearken to false prophets. Jeremiah’s warning that people who listen to false prophets walked a path “as slippery ways in the darkness” (Jer 23:12) was probably the lightest example; most of the time, destruction was the promise.20

**Part III: Distinguishing between True and False Prophets**

Obviously, the issue of false prophecy was of great concern to the authors of the Hebrew Bible. Not only was it a capital crime, but a host of other apostate practices came in its wake. These observations lead to one overarching question: how does one distinguish between true and false prophets?

The text suggests a few different characteristics of a true prophet. Foremost among these is the requirement that he must prophesy in the name of Yahweh; if he is promoting any other god he is false by default (Deut 18:20). Another characteristic is suggested when Miriam and Aaron tried to justify their resistance to Moses’ decisions by pointing to their own prophetic gifts; Yahweh told them that though He makes Himself known to many people in visions and dreams, Moses was different in that he received revelation “mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord [doth] he behold” (Num 12:8). Jeremiah also taught that false prophets do not teach the people to repent of their evil ways and return to Yahweh’s commandments, clearly implying that a true prophet would do so (see Jer 27:21–22).

Frequently, true prophets are characterized by the miracles or signs they perform. Upon receiving his prophetic call Moses asked: “But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee” (Exod 4:1). God instructed Moses to perform a series of miraculous signs, and upon doing so “the people believed” (Exod 4:31).

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20. For examples, see Isa 9:16; Jer 14:16; 23:19; and 27:15.
The classic test in the Law to discern a true prophet is found in Deut 18:21–22:

And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the Lord hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him.

Thus, if a prophecy turns out to be untrue, it can be certain that the prophet who gave it is false.

It should be noted that none of these standards and tests by themselves are completely definitive. Speaking in the name of Yahweh, for example, is necessary for a true prophet but is seen several times coming from false prophets.21 The Pharaoh’s magicians performed some of the same miracles performed by Moses (Exod 7:11, 22; 8:7). And even the test of predicting the future from Deut 18 is only certain if the test fails; Deut 13:1–4 makes it clear that a true prediction may come from a false prophet and does not necessarily mean his teachings are correct.22

So of all these indicators of a true prophet, which ones did the Israelites utilize in the heat of theological warfare? It appears that by far the most common methods of discernment that people put into practice were the use of signs and the experiment outlined in Deut 18:22, that is, see if what the prophet predicts actually happens. These two concepts are often tied together, as prophets would prophesy that some sign would take place, after which the people could watch and see if the sign occurred. By prophesying of the future (and often imminent) occurrence of some supernatural event, the prophet’s audience could apply Deut 18:22 and see if the prophet was really communicating heaven’s will.

Oftentimes such prophecies occurred in the context of a type of prophetic confrontation, in which a true prophet and a false prophet would make opposing predictions to see whose authority was legitimate. Such was the case with the aforementioned story of Elijah and his famous showdown with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. “Call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God.” Perhaps the people recognized the application of Deut 18:22 when they “answered and said, It is well spoken” (1 Kgs 18:24). As Elijah offered his prayer, he requested that Yahweh send down fire for the specific purpose that the people know “that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word”

21. For examples, see Deut 18:20, 22; 1 Kgs 22:11–12; Jer 14:14; 23:17, 31; 27:15; 28:1–2, 4, 11; 29:24–26; Ezek 22:28; and Mic 3:11. Indeed, false prophets appear to have spoken in the name of Yahweh more than they did in the names of foreign deities.

22. This makes sense logically, as even complete guesses could be accurate some of the time. Interestingly, Yahweh explains in Deut 13:3 that sometimes he will allow a false prophet’s prediction to come true as a test for the people to see if they will hearken to that prophet’s false doctrine.
(1 Kgs 18:36). His prophecy was that Heaven would hear him, while the prophets of Baal predicted that it was they who would be heard. The resulting sign was in Elijah’s favor, indicating clearly that the prophets of Baal had “spoken it presumptuously” (Deut. 18:22).

Even Moses set up such a test. When Korah and other rebels accused him of presumptuously taking on a leadership position when “all the congregation [was] holy, every one of them, and the Lord [was] among them” (Num 16:3), Moses had the people separate into groups and proposed a prophetic test. If the rebels lived to a ripe old age and died of natural causes, Moses himself was a liar; but if the earth opened up and swallowed the rebels alive, Moses was right. Almost humorously, the rebels did not have a chance to say if they liked the terms of such a test, for as soon “as he had made an end of speaking all these words . . . the ground clave asunder that was under them” (Num 16:31). Moses’ accurate prediction of the rebel’s death clearly demonstrated his legitimacy.

Another example of a prophetic confrontation occurs with King Ahab, apparently none the wiser after his encounter with Elijah. This time his options were between Zedekiah and the court prophets declaring victory for battle, and lonely Micaiah predicting defeat. As Ahab threw Micaiah into prison for pronouncing the less-favorable prophecy, Micaiah declared: “If thou return at all in peace, the Lord hath not spoken by me” (1 Kgs 22:28), a clear application of the principle found in Deut 18:22. It was Miciah’s prophecy against Zedekiah’s, and Ahab’s death showed the latter was wrong.

The true-prediction test is also key to a dramatic confrontation between Jeremiah and the false prophet Hananiah. Jeremiah declared that Jerusalem would be destroyed by Babylon, whereas Hananiah stood up before all the people and declared, in the name of Yahweh, that within two years Babylon would fall. In response Jeremiah sarcastically declared, “The prophet which prophesieth of peace [that is, Hananiah], when the word of the prophet shall come to pass, then shall the prophet be known, that the Lord hath truly sent him” (Jer 28:9).

Jeremiah then went on his way, but apparently Yahweh felt the need to speed things up a bit (why wait two years?), and so He sent Jeremiah back. Jeremiah prophesied to Hananiah: “this year thou shalt die, because thou hast taught rebellion against the Lord. So Hananiah the prophet died the same year in the seventh month” (Jer 28:16–17). The people observing these happenings should have been able to discern between the prophecies of Jeremiah and Hananiah by the outcome of their predictions.

There are several other occasions in which, even if a test was not formally proposed, Hebrew prophets used signs as a means of validating their authority. These were often preceded by prophecies that predicted the occurrence of the sign. For example, in 1 Kgs 13 a “man of God” prophesied to Jeroboam of the birth of Josiah through the House of David. He then explained,
This is the sign which the LORD hath spoken; Behold, the altar shall be
rent, and the ashes that are upon it shall be poured out. And it came to
pass, when king Jeroboam heard the saying of the man of God . . . that
. . . the altar also was rent, and the ashes poured out from the altar, ac-
cording to the sign which the man of God had given by the word of the
LORD. (1 Kgs 13:3–5)

Jeroboam, now recognizing the man as a true prophet, offered him a reward.

Another example is Pharoah’s demand to “shew a miracle for you.” In re-
sponse, Aaron “cast down his rod before Pharoah, and before his servants, and
it became a serpent” (Exod 7:9–10). Although the Egyptian magicians were
able to imitate a few plagues, they finally confessed to Pharoah that “this is the
finger of God” (Exod 8:19).

A particularly interesting case is that of Gideon, who proposed a test in
order to confirm to he himself that he was called of God! Doubtful because
he considered himself the “least” of all, Gideon asked: “shew me a sign that
thou talkest with me” (Judg 6:17). After the first sign was given, Gideon later
proposed: “If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said, Behold, I
will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it
be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know” (Judg 6:36–37). After the
test was successful, Gideon proposed a second, in which the conditions were
reversed. After the second test succeeded, Gideon went forward and did indeed
lead the Israelites to victory.

The prophet Isaiah also used signs to demonstrate the veracity of his proph-
ecies. After declaring to King Ahaz his prophecy that the northern kingdom
of Israel and Syria would shortly be destroyed, he asked the doubting king to
pick a test whereby he would know that Isaiah’s prophecy was true: “Ask thee
a sign of the Lord thy God; ask it either in the depth, or in the height above”
(Isa 7:11). When for whatever reason the king refused to suggest his own test,
Isaiah responded:

Will ye weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself shall give you
a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his
name Immanuel. . . . For before the child shall know to refuse the evil, and
choose the good, the land that thou abhorest [the northern kingdom and
Syria] shall be forsaken of both her kings. (Isa 7:13–14)

Part IV: Applying the Test

As all these examples demonstrate, the principle of Deut 18:22 was applied
throughout Israelite history to test prophetic claims. But despite the frequency
with which it was applied, how good of a test was it really? The idea is simple
enough: if predictions come to pass, the prophet is likely to be true, and if pre-
dictions don’t come to pass, the prophet is definitely false. However, one can
quickly begin to think of situations where such a test has limited practicality.
As one scholar noted:
Ancient Israel was fully aware of the difficulties involved in assessing the truth of prophetic claims, and the Old Testament records several suggestions for dealing with the problem, none of them completely satisfactory. In Deut 18:22 Moses tells the Israelites that a false prophecy can be recognized when it does not come true. . . . [B]ut unfortunately this test can only be applied retrospectively, long after the time for public decision about the truth claim has passed. . . . This test is useful as far as it goes, but it is not applicable to many prophetic oracles.23

If one considers, for example, the case of Jeremiah and Hananiah, it was true that one could wait and see who’s predictions came true. However, that doesn’t help the average Jerusalemite when he discovers too late that Jeremiah was right because a Babylonian soldier is breaking the front door down! In cases where prophecies dealt with future (and sometimes, distant future) events, the test of Deut 18:22 would have been insufficient to help make a decision in a timely manner. It was perhaps for this reason that on some occasions the prophets proposed a more immediate, here-and-now test, such as Elijah did with the prophets of Baal. In those instances where the tests and signs were not immediate, however, the people would have had to find other ways to discern between truth and falsehood.

So what to do? How could the average Israelite distinguish? As has been mentioned, there are a few characteristics of true prophets that are described in the law of Moses, such as speaking in the name of Yahweh, exhorting people to follow Yahweh’s commandments, speaking true predictions, etc. But if the biblical redactors are to be believed in even half the claims of apostasy with which they accuse the people at any given point their history, the variety of religious practices within Israelite society would be great indeed. With so many overlapping forms of worship, with so many diverging and converging extra-Israelite religious practices, with so many theological voices screaming to be heard, did the Israelites have a sure way to determine who was right and who was wrong? The answer, according to the evidence that exist in the text, is: maybe not.

The history of ancient Israel, as preserved in the Hebrew Bible, actual suggests this difficulty. There were occasions, to be sure, in which Yahweh demonstrated in some earth-shaking or fiery way who had authority and who should be followed. But if such Moses or Elijah experiences occurred every day there certainly wouldn’t have been the apostasy that is recorded. That this apostasy to one degree or another was such a common feature of biblical history suggests that for most of the time either people were so wicked they openly rejected the clear evidences in front of them or they simply were not quite sure who to follow, and chose poorly. We do not know if they had other tests available to them, but according to the present texts it appears that many people may have been just as confused and indecisive as the crowd that stood before Elijah, and “answered him not a word.”