Introduction
Prophetic Strength and Weakness

One of the great poet-prophets of modern Hebrew literature, Haim Nahman Bialik, writing in 1915, likened poets to those who "[cross] a river when it is breaking up, by stepping across floating, moving blocks of ice."[1] As masters of "allegory, of interpretation and mystery," poets flee what is fixed and inert in language.[2] Unlike masters of prose, who walk confidently across a frozen solid river of language, the poet "dare not set his foot on any one block for longer than a moment" and must instead leap from block to block, avoiding the looming abyss.[3] This book focuses on the way modern scholars and poets interpreted and reinvented the figure of the biblical prophet. However, I want to begin by reading a biblical text the way Bialik's poet might, reading prophecy itself not as "ice frozen into a solid block" but instead as an unstable negotiation with an abyss.[4]

In other words, rather than beginning a book on prophecy with a prosaic definition, we could say, paraphrasing Bialik, that the idea of prophecy writhes, flutters, or flickers in the hands of poets. Prophecy does not present a set of stable, fixed, self-assured qualities; to use Bialik's language, it is "extinguished and lit again," alternately "grow[ing] empty and becom[ing] full."[5] Prophets stride with towering authority and speak with majestic resonance, and yet at the same time they also stutter and grow dumb – are emblematic of exile, failure, and alienation. Prophecy "flickers" in this way, constantly moving between emptiness and fullness, authority and anxiety, strength and weakness, often within the same text. Modern representations of prophecy vacillate between emptiness and fullness, strength and weakness, but this instability can be traced to representation of prophecy in the biblical text itself, for example, to the way Jeremiah imagines Moses.

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[1] Haim Nahman Bialik, "Revealment and Concealment in Language," in *Revealment and Concealment: Five Essays*, trans. Jacob Sloan (Jerusalem: IBIS Editions, 2000), 25.
[2] Ibid., 24.   [3] Ibid., 26.   [4] Ibid., 24.   [5] Ibid., 25.

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In one of the most terrible passages in the biblical prophetic corpus, God tells Jeremiah: "Even if Moses and Samuel stood before me, my heart is not inclined to this people. Send them out from upon me and let them go" (Jer. 15:1). At this moment, the prophetic oracle imagines a divinity so angry, so hard-hearted, that he is unwilling to forgive the people under any circumstances. There is no prayer or petition that can reverse their destiny, which will come, as the oracle goes on to predict, in the form of four kinds of gruesome death: the sword to slay, the dogs to tear, the fowls of the heaven and the beasts of the earth to devour and desecrate the bodies. The evocation of "Moses and Samuel," ancient prophets associated with heroic events from many centuries past, in the midst of oracles just preceding the destruction of Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE, seems to express extreme divine wrath, prophetic hyperbole. However, in this micro-scene, there is also something – if not exactly hopeful – then creative, lively: a glimpse of a counterhistory.

Jeremiah, a weakened prophet, stands before God, unable to petition on behalf of the nation, unable to alter the coming catastrophe. In *this* reality, God is cast as a tyrant, a Pharaoh, and Jeremiah gets the role of a diminished Moses, pleading for his people. All right, "send them out from upon me and let them go," says God-as-Pharaoh, echoing the verbs of the Exodus story. In this distorted, nightmare version of the Exodus narrative, the people do not leave Egypt to go to freedom, but instead go to exile, captivity, and horrendous forms of death. As for Jeremiah, he is later exiled from Judah to Egypt, as if to metaphorically unravel the Exodus narrative.

Still, in the alternate reality conjured up by the oracle, it is not only the failed prophet Jeremiah standing before God, but Moses and Samuel themselves, two of Israel's great prophets of yore, who return from the past to petition on behalf of the people. It's true that God declares he will refuse to heed their prayer, but there are precedents: God already threatened to destroy the entire nation for the sin of the Golden Calf, but eventually Moses was able to "turn [God] from [his] fierce wrath" (Exod. 32:12) and stay the planned punishment. In the phantasmagoric space opened up by the oracle, couldn't Moses and Samuel change God's mind once again?

Against despair, the evocation of Moses and Samuel holds out the glimmer of an alternate reality in which powerful prophets could sway the deity to withdraw his wrath, forgive the people, and defeat their enemies. In evoking these figures from the distant past, Jeremiah is both diminished and paradoxically given greater authority. Unlike Moses and Samuel, who were powerful, successful intercessors, Jeremiah fails to intercede. However, through recalling them, the text inserts Jeremiah into

a line of prophetic transmission, prophets "like Moses."[6] Thus, even as this prophetic oracle grieves the loss of prophetic intercession, along with the coming loss of national sovereignty, it also helps construct a fantasy of prophetic strength, of successful prophetic intercession. The pathos of loss, as Judith Butler puts it, is "oddly fecund, paradoxically productive."[7]

The "paradoxical productivity" of the passage from Jeremiah can also be read in the context of the longer prophetic passage in which it has been positioned. These verses summoning Moses and Samuel are part of a longer prophecy relating to drought, intercession, and war (Jer. 14–15:4). Biblical scholars since the beginning of the twentieth century have come to read Jeremiah as a text made of layers, each with its own distinct style and ideology. Over the years, early oracles were amplified and revised – a composition method William McKane has called a "rolling corpus."[8] Jeremiah 15:1–4 can be read as a more recent layer added or "rolled" into older oracles, which were also concerned with questions of intercession.

The pericope starts with a communal prayer for rain during a drought, but shifts to a more general description of a community in crisis, perhaps during a time of war or famine. This communal crisis also leads to a collapse of social institutions: "For prophet and priest wandered about the land, had no knowledge" (Jer. 14:18).[9] In this early oracle, utter despair afflicts the speaker; in this, it is similar to what Adele Berlin calls the "trauma literature" of the book of Lamentations.[10] In a situation of national crisis – perhaps the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem – the prophetic channel is utterly blocked; the institution of prophecy has

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[6] I've written previously about how Jeremiah 1 creates a "catastrophic" prophetic line of transmission that interrupts a more traditional line of transmission of kings and priests. See Yosefa Raz, "Jeremiah 'Before the Womb': On Fathers, Sons, and the Telos of Redaction in Jeremiah 1," in *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Carolyn J. Sharp (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 86–100.

[7] Judith Butler, "Afterword: After Loss, What Then?" in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 468. See also discussion in Chapter 4.

[8] William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), l.

[9] The primary meaning of the verb *sāḥărû*, translated here as "wandered," seems to be going about in circles, though there may also be a secondary meaning related to trafficking, i.e., continuing on with business as usual, though without knowledge. Also, on the basis of Syriac usage, it could mean "to beg." McKane, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, 331.

[10] Adele Berlin argues that Lamentations "centers on the 'present' – the moment of trauma, the interminable suffering. The book is not an explanation of suffering but a re-creation of it and a commemoration of it." Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 18. See, for example, Lamentations 2:14: "Your prophets envisioned for you [Zion] / illusion and lies / . . . and they prophesied to you oracles of delusion and deception."

broken down. There is no intercession, there is no lineage: there is not even a weakened form of prophecy.

However, the "summoning" of Moses and Samuel – added to the earlier despairing oracle – offers another way of understanding the breakdown of prophecy during a time of crisis. Scholars have theorized that it is part of a sermonic insertion characteristic of a later layer of the text, linguistically and stylistically similar to the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history.[11] This late addition is radically different in style and ideology. On the one hand, it turns beautiful liturgical passages on drought and war into a scene of inflexible anti-petition. On the other hand, it "rescues" the possibility of prophecy by preserving it as a fantasy about Moses and Samuel, rather than sinking into traumatic despair.

Summoning Moses and Samuel creates an imaginative scenario that preserves prophecy at a moment of crisis. Although Moses, Samuel, and Jeremiah cannot intercede at this terrible moment, an alternate timeline is melancholically imagined in which they could have. When we read the entirety of Jeremiah 14–15:4 together, we see an example of the afore-mentioned "rolling corpus." This composite text ultimately presents a complex and ambiguous statement regarding intercession and the pro-phetic role; though it is bleak and despairing, it creates an imaginary scenario in which the possibility of prophecy is both weak and strong. In this composite text, prophetic authority is ambiguous. Rather than the clear-cut power of a statement like a block of frozen solid ice, it has a power that is "extinguished and lit again, flash[ed] on and off . . . grow[n] empty and become full," to return to Bialik's image. The oracle petitions God during a time of drought and war, sinks into despair, summons the great prophets, even as Jeremiah stands before God, diminished, unable to reverse catastrophe. At the same time, by prophesizing a disaster that comes true, perhaps Jeremiah is the most powerful prophet of all: bringing pestilence, the sword, famine, and captivity in the wake of his terrible word.

On the Modern Reinvention of Prophecy

The passage from the book of Jeremiah shows us how Jeremiah invents his own version of Moses. Post-Enlightenment scholars and poets also

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[11] Moshe Weinfeld suggests that this layer can be more precisely dated to the second half of the sixth century, after the composition of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 7.

invented their own versions of the prophets, who became complex mirrors of their own relation to authority and power. This book focuses on the relations among these modern prophets, poets, and scholars. Through these figures, *The Poetics of Prophecy* tells a complex story about the intertwined genealogies of the biblical text, European Romantic poetry, and biblical scholarship from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century.

Poets and prophets were long associated in antiquity and in medieval literature, linked by common ideas about inspiration, vision, and imagination. A rich archive of texts, figures, and mythologies existed for poets who wished to draw on prophetic models. Beside biblical and classical texts and figures, poets could turn to Sibylline oracles, medieval dream visions, and remnants of pre-Christian European shamanic traditions, such as the Celtic and Scandinavian traditions depicted in the Merlin stories told by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Other models included medieval visionaries such as Hildegard of Bingen and Joachim of Fiore, and inspired poets like Caedmon and Thomas the Rhymer. Medieval poets such as Ibn Gabirol and Dante presented themselves as possessing prophetic power. However, premodern texts were also ambivalent about equating the role of a prophet and the role of a poet. The sura of "The Poets," for example, goes to great lengths to show that Muhammad is no mere poet.[12] Conversely, poets who adopted prophetic affectations had to be careful of overreaching their position, risking blasphemy.

However, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, a new "poetics of prophecy" began to emerge that drew on the visionary strain in European tradition, while fashioning itself as a break from the past. Prophets were no longer speaking only for God or on behalf of a biblical moral code, but could unabashedly declare themselves spokespersons for the revolution, the nation, or the imagination. As William Blake put it in 1790: "As a new heaven is begun . . . Now is the dominion of Edom, & the return of Adam into Paradise" (*Marriage* 3:1,4, E 34).[13] German and British Romantics returned to the figure of the poet as a prophet with new energy, rewriting dialogic call narratives as scenes of poetic inspiration, enthusiastically

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[12] Michael Zwettler, "A Mantic Manifesto: The Sura of 'The Poets' and the Qur'anic Foundations of Prophetic Authority," in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, ed. James Kugel (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 75–120.

[13] Quotations from Blake are, unless otherwise noted, from William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom, newly revised ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), and are cited by title, chapter and line numbers, and page number in that edition.

collapsing the distinctions between the two roles. At times, they drew the poet-prophet stirred by strong emotions, reaching for the heightened aesthetic experiences of the sublime. At others, their poet-prophet was a figure impassioned by the politics of his or her time, calling for revolution or – what would become especially significant in the nineteenth century – national awakening. A range of poets, artists, and philosophers took up a "poetics of prophecy" in opposition to what they perceived as the empty formalism of neoclassicism and its purely technical achievements.

This renewed fascination with prophets was no longer relegated to the domain of secret practitioners of the occult or religious enthusiasts, but was mirrored in the works of biblical scholars and intellectuals, who emphasized the role of prophets and prophecy in their accounts of the literary, historical, and political development of ancient Israel. In *The Poetics of Prophecy*, I show that from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century, poets and scholars have been surprisingly entangled in a joint project of reinventing prophecy. On the one hand, scholars, intellectuals, and artists discovered models of strong prophecy in biblical texts, which they could use to shore up aesthetic and nationalist ideals; on the other hand, a countertradition of a destabilizing, indeterminate – what I will call weak – prophetic power can be traced from the biblical text to modern formulations.

Though the poet-prophet had been a foundational figure in English literature at least since Edmund Spenser and John Milton, a key figure in the creation of the modern "poetics of prophecy" is the English exegete Robert Lowth, one of the first scholars to systematically read the Bible as a literary work, an approach that would become widespread in the nineteenth century as "the Bible as literature."[14] Lowth marks a particularly significant moment in the modern understanding of prophecy: his work classified biblical poetry according to more or less classical categories, which made it easier to popularize in later literature and scholarship. In particular, he introduced the concept of a "parallelism of members" to describe the poetry of the Hebrew Bible, thus enabling biblical prophecy to be formally evaluated as poetry. Lowth's literary approach to the Bible was soon adopted in Germany by figures such as Johann David Michaelis and Johann Gottfried Herder, as well as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Novalis. Following Lowth's work and its popularization by Hugh Blair, poets like William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge,

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[14] For a history of the term, see David Norton, *A History of the English Bible as Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 262–316.

and Elizabeth Barrett Browning took on the persona of the prophet in Britain, as did, in various and idiosyncratic ways, American intellectuals and poets like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. The figure of the poet-prophet continued to shape national literatures throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, remaining an important touchstone for poets such as Alexander Pushkin, Taras Shevchenko, Stefan George, Kahlil Gibran, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), H. N. Bialik – the poet with whom this book opened – as well as Else Lasker-Schüler, Allen Ginsberg, and Mahmoud Darwish.

The description offered here of the evolution of literary engagement with prophecy, from Lowth to Herder and then to various national poets, is fairly common in literary studies. Yet in analyzing the "poetics of prophecy," it is not enough to remain simply within a literary genealogy; "the poetics of prophecy" was also shaped by the development of modern biblical scholarship. As scholars made strides in understanding the biblical text through refining the tools of both higher and lower criticism, the underlying paradigms of the new field of modern biblical scholarship were themselves conversely influenced by Romantic poetry. Thus, rather than focusing only on biblical scholarship or only on literary studies, the chapters of this book toggle back and forth between the two fields, highlighting connections between poets and exegetes, linking Romantic poetry to the development of modern biblical scholarship. Both these processes occurred against a background of the loss of a sense of naïve revelation, of "a unitary Bible" that might seamlessly hold together the past and the future.

Paradoxically, European culture's heightened fascination with the seemingly religious figure of the prophet and its renewed obsession with the visionary arrived just as the religious authority of the biblical text was being challenged by various processes of secularization. Thus the "poetics of prophecy" is a particular case of what Jonathan Sheehan describes as "the Enlightenment Bible."[15] The Enlightenment has at times been described as a simplistic linear march toward democracy and secularism, in which the Bible gradually diminished in importance from the eighteenth century onwards.[16] With new scientific discoveries in geology, geography, biology – and later, with the theory of evolution – the Bible could no longer function as a source of absolute authority for human knowledge about

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[15] Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
[16] Ibid., xi.

the natural world.[17] Furthermore, biblical scholars, starting with Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth century, introduced great uncertainty into assumptions about the Bible's divine authority by pointing out contradictions and scribal errors in the holy text. As philological and archeological evidence emerged, they threw the historical veracity of the biblical text into doubt. Together with scholarly doubts about the authority of scriptures, various iterations of Deism, rationalism, and freethinking questioned the notion of religious revelation, unsettling miraculous prophetic narratives; more broadly, a worldview in which all biblical texts as well as extrabiblical historical events could be read as elements in a great unfolding prophetic-apocalyptic drama became difficult to sustain.

Sheehan argues, though, for a nuancing of this simplistic secularizing narrative. As part of a generation of scholars critiquing what Talal Asad has called "the triumphalist history of the secular," Sheehan claims that as the Bible "became strange" to the faithful, an eighteenth-century counter-reaction took place that restored biblical authority.[18] Through projects like translation, scholarship, literature, and pedagogy, the authority of the Bible was recuperated and transformed into "an essential element of that transcendent moral, literary, and historical heritage that supposedly holds together Western society."[19] I propose to read prophecy as a particularly vivid case of this recuperation. In addition to recuperating the prophetic texts from archaism, irrelevancy, and doubt, the scholars and poets who created a "poetics of prophecy" often had to redeem prophecy from an over-literalist reading. Literary or aesthetic readings of prophetic texts attempted to regulate earlier waves of religious enthusiasm that had swept through Europe, particularly German pietism and radical English Protestant movements, both of which put a more literal reading of prophetic and apocalyptic texts at their center.[20]

Post-Enlightenment, interpreting prophecy was no longer exclusively limited to discerning the true word of God. As prophetic texts were charged with new meanings by readers of the Bible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, prophetic authority took on a different valence. Exegetes, philosophers, artists, and poets tried to define what made a prophet strong and successful, hoping to find new models for artistic

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[17] Ronald Hendel describes two key discoveries that challenged a naïve belief in the biblical text: the New World and the geological antiquity of the earth. Ronald Hendel, *The Book of "Genesis": A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 176–78.

[18] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.

[19] Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*, ix.   [20] See my discussion of Jon Mee's work in Chapter 1.

inspiration and political and national leadership, as well as personal integrity and authenticity.

Though these attempts to locate prophetic models and authority often stemmed from contemporary concerns, they were also affected by the instability of the biblical texts, which, as we saw in the case of Jeremiah, tended to represent prophetic strength and weakness as a set of shifting relations, rather than absolute qualities associated with any particular figure. As a result, when modern biblical scholars and intellectuals sought ideal prophetic models in the biblical text, they often had to impose these ideals upon inconsistent and formally difficult texts. At times, modern attempts to define and fix the qualities of an ideal prophet were destabilized by the biblical texts, in which avowals of strength cover over anxiety and trauma. At the same time, occurrences of weakness in the biblical texts could also be generative of new forms of religious and literary imagination.

We can trace a countertradition of poets who mine the biblical text for its moments of failure and weakness, utilizing the destabilizing qualities of the prophetic texts to their advantage. In the hands of these writers, the poet-prophet is not bolstered up into a towering "strong" ideal, but is often consciously represented as a more complicated, ambiguous figure. To return to Bialik's set of images, rather than trying to cross a solid block of frozen ice, the poet-prophets who utilize this countertradition leap nimbly across the moving, floating blocks of ice on the thawing river. Rather than trying to find heroes, create hierarchies, and systematize the biblical text, they use prophecy's basic instability – its weakness – to enliven and enrich their own texts. They actively exploit the fissures of both ancient and modern prophecy to create stirring, innovative, and often radical literary works from prophetic weakness itself.

On the Method of Reception History

Religious texts are often used to invoke authority, and thus the study of these texts allows us to trace the way power is both constructed and unraveled through them. Erin Runions has suggested the term "critical biblical studies" as a way to characterize a "theorized analysis of the way that scriptures are formed, given authority, and made to respond to or uphold power."[21] In this book, I pay particular attention to the question of authority and power in the prophetic texts of the Bible and in their

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[21] Erin Runions, "Critical Biblical Studies is Here to Stay: Erin Runions Responds to Essays on *The Babylon Complex*," *The Bible & Critical Theory* 11, no. 2 (2015): 97–105.

afterlives, expanding on Runions's formulation to consider the way the power of scriptures is dialectically formed as a response to failure, anxiety, and weakness.

In order to understand the power of "critical biblical studies," it is helpful to situate this kind of approach, what Runions defines as a subset of reception studies, within the paradigms of biblical studies, which has traditionally been reluctant to examine the biblical text in this way. Rather, historical-critical scholarship emerging in nineteenth-century Germany used, and often still uses, archeological metaphors to describe the philological study of the biblical text.

Though biblical texts in general – from Genesis to Chronicles – might need a good dusting off, the prophetic texts are especially susceptible to what Robert Alter calls the shifting sands of "preconception and misconception."[22] Because many of the prophets "have a queer way of talking," as Martin Luther puts it, employing archaic language, cryptic utterances, and strange juxtapositions, the prophetic texts are especially prone to scribal errors.[23] Furthermore, prophetic texts are often redacted by different communities at multiple points in time and glossed according to changing ideologies and theologies. So just as New Testament scholars embarked on a search for the historical Jesus at the turn of the twentieth century, scholars of prophetic texts in the first half of the twentieth century metaphorically "excavated" the Masoretic text to unearth the *ipsissima verba* (the very words) of the prophet, as if the beautiful and vivid words of the prophet were buried under layers of editorial dust, or "swarm[ing] with . . . clichés" inserted by later redactors, as one scholar put it.[24]

In recent decades, however, the "controlling archeological metaphor" of biblical scholarship has been recognized as itself belonging to nineteenth-century fantasies about origins.[25] The notion of an original kernel of prophecy, which must be unearthed or discovered, like a valuable artifact buried in the ground, is an illusion. Rather, upon examination, the prophetic text itself becomes a discursive object with an unstable origin. Let us return to the example of the book of Jeremiah. Historical-critical

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[22] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 204.

[23] Martin Luther, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, Vol. 19 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883), 350. Quoted in Herbert Marks, "On Prophetic Stammering," in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 60.

[24] Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 27.

[25] See James L. Kugel, "The Bible in the University," in *The Hebrew Bible and its Interpreters*, Vol. 1, ed. William Henry Propp, Baruch Halpern, and David Noel Freedman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 156.

studies of Jeremiah in the twentieth century were concerned with discovering the *ipsissima verba* of the prophet within a faulty, corrupted text. Scholars hypothesized multiple historical layers of composition, attempting to uncover the kernels of prophetic text buried under layers of later additions.[26] They posited an early source (source A) consisting of poetic oracles, where the original words of the prophet might still be preserved. Source B included prose narratives about the life of Jeremiah, which were composed some decades later. Source C consisted of prose sermons that share the didactic vocabulary, style, and ideology of the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history. In the passage with which this book started (Jer. 14–15:4), we saw a poetic oracle, ostensibly from source A, overlaid with a sermonic insertion seemingly belonging to source C.

However, the plot thickens: besides these utterly hypothesized compositional layers, manuscript study suggests further layers: the standard Masoretic text in Hebrew is much longer than the Septuagint translation into Greek. It seems that the Septuagint translation was based on a shorter, Hebrew version of Jeremiah, with a different chapter order, a hypothesized *vorlage* now lost.[27] Indeed, fragments of scrolls discovered in the caves of Qumran bear out this theory. However, if we assume that the shorter, differently ordered version is the more authentic book of Jeremiah, what are we to make of additional, alternate fragments at Qumran, which reveal an additional robust literary tradition involving the prophet Jeremiah that completely diverges from the biblical text? Rather than unearthing a singular origin, the archeological and philological evidence suggests a network of texts and oral traditions. Furthermore, the narratives of Jeremiah continue to bifurcate in apocryphal books, through the further adventures of his scribe Baruch, that have entered later Christian canons.[28] In the welter of texts and versions and editions, what then is the true and authentic book of Jeremiah?

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[26] See Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia* (Tübingen, Leipzig: J. C. B. Mohr [P. Siebeck], 1901), ix–xxii; Sigmund Mowinckel, *Zur Komposition des Buches Jeremia* (Kristiania: J. Dybwad, 1914); and Sigmund Mowinckel, *Prophecy and Tradition: The Prophetic Books in the Light of the Study of the Growth and History of the Tradition* (Oslo: Jacob Dybwad, 1946).

[27] The LXX (Septuagint) translation is one eighth shorter and contains meaningful variations from the MT (Masoretic text). See Emanuel Tov, *The Greek and Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 363–84. The *vorlage* of edition 1 has been confirmed by the discovery of 4QJer[b] and 4QJer[d]. See also Frank Moore Cross, "The Contribution of the Qumran Discoveries to the Study of the Biblical Text," *Israel Exploration Journal* 16 (1966): 82.

[28] See discussion of 1 Baruch, 2 Baruch, 4 Baruch, and 5 Ezra in Konrad Schmid and Hindy Najman, *Jeremiah's Scriptures: Production, Reception, Interaction, and Transformation* (Boston: Brill, 2017).

The book of Jeremiah is only one particularly thorny example of the complex composition and reception, or "afterlife," of a biblical text. Similar narratives could be told about many biblical texts. James Kugel suggests that categories like "original text and later accretion, true meaning and later interpretation" and "biblical and postbiblical" are not scholarly and rigorous, but are themselves culturally constructed. Rather than thinking of later additions as interference or static, sand or dust to be cleaned away in our search for the kernel, recent biblical scholarship has shifted to take interest in and value the afterlives of texts. Instead of mourning our distance from an "original text," these approaches assert that it is in its "afterlife" that a text acquires a new vitality. This life stage of the text, what Walter Benjamin calls the *Überleben* or *Fortleben*, in the decades and centuries after it is composed, when it is literally and metaphorically translated – copied, interpreted, and written into new literary forms – is when the text undergoes "a transformation and renewal of something living."[29]

Not only are our objects of study – such as "Jeremiah" – less solid than a "controlling archeological metaphor" suggests, but it is also difficult to regard them objectively, scientifically, since scholars too are shaped by their scholarly genealogies. To be specific, biblical scholars' idea of prophecy is shaped by the Romantic genealogy I describe in this book. Timothy Beal proposes, after Michel Foucault, that rather than thinking of ourselves as moderns who can disinterestedly examine a text from antiquity, we should instead think of "biblical texts, the Bible, and the biblical as discursive objects that are continually generated and regenerated within particular cultural contexts in relation to complex genealogies of meaning that are themselves culturally produced."[30] In attending to the afterlives of biblical texts, or what has more recently been called "reception history," our objects of study need to include our own assumptions and preconceptions, which also comprise the vital afterlife of the text.

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[29] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, *1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 256. Though *Fortleben* has usually been translated into English as "afterlife," Caroline Disler points out that the rare German term does not contain a destructive association, as if the original is somehow dead, but rather "the compound can suggest continuity like *Weiterleben* . . . . It also suggests progress (*Fortschritt*), separation (*Fortgehen*), complementarity, supplementation, futurity, transformation." Caroline Disler, "Benjamin's 'Afterlife': A Productive (?) Mistranslation in Memoriam Daniel Simeoni," *TTR* 24, no. 1 (2011): 189.

[30] Timothy Beal, "Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures," *Biblical Interpretation* 19, nos. 4–5 (2011), 371.

The reception of prophetic texts in the nineteenth century is a powerful example of the way the Bible functions as a discursive object: on the one hand, the prophets served as objects of projections about the past; on the other hand, they served as figures for generating new possibilities and meanings within new cultural contexts. Though many scholars have discussed the way the biblical texts influenced the Romantics, Yvonne Sherwood's "Prophetic Scatology" points out how the Romantics have, counterintuitively, influenced our reading of the prophetic' texts.[31] Sherwood argues that a Romantic lens has led us to "misread" these texts, resulting in a watered-down "liberal Bible." The Romantic bias toward eschatology, grandeur, and sublimity overlooks and disavows the "scatology" of the prophetic texts: their attention to materiality, shame, filth, bodily leaks and fluids. Sherwood's argument beautifully demonstrates the dialectic movement of interpretation, the way the Romantics invented the very prophets they seemed to be discovering in the biblical text. As I will show, though, something of the unruliness and instability of the prophetic texts was irrepressible and did survive into Romantic poetry – despite the best regulating efforts of British and German gentlemen scholars – traveling like an enthusiastic virus through European culture.

Rather than employ the familiar archeological metaphor of dusting off pots, Sherwood calls her work "a new kind of slow motion biblical interpretation, foregrounding the acts of choice and negotiation by which we sift the spirits."[32] The phrase alludes to Amos's prophecy that Israel will be shaken or sifted among the nations, like grain sifted through a sieve (9:9), as well as to Jesus telling the apostles that Satan will sift them like wheat (Luke 22:31). Sherwood's notion of "sifting the spirits" thus recalls a more revelatory – if not to say dangerous – process of discernment and self-transformation. In this metaphor we, the readers and scholars, become both object and subject of inquiry. Through this careful movement between the biblical text and its later "reception," remaining constantly sensitive to our own intellectual preconceptions and misconceptions, we may be able to wake up to the categories and narratives that frame our own culture and analysis.

In contrast to Sherwood, though, I do not view the entanglement of prophets, poets, and scholars as an instance of misreading; there is no need

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[31] Yvonne Sherwood, "Prophetic Scatology: Prophecy and the Art of Sensation," *Semeia* 82 (2000): 183–224. See also Yvonne Sherwood, *Biblical Blaspheming: Trials of the Sacred for a Secular Age* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[32] Yvonne Sherwood, "Introduction: Derrida's Bible," in *Derrida's Bible: Reading a Page of Scripture with a Little Help from Derrida*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 14.

to "clear away" Romantic preconceptions from the biblical text, or to achieve a more "correct" understanding of prophecy. Ultimately, "prophecy" is not a term that must be firmly fixed, but rather a suggestive and fluid cultural figure: a set of questions about the nature of revelation and imagination, the authority of the poetic voice, and our experience of historical time and futurity. These questions became especially urgent in the long nineteenth century, and they continue to reverberate, or in Benjaminian language, to "flash up," today.[33]

Strong Prophecy

Even if we relinquish the search for a prophetic kernel – the *ipsissima verba*, the perfectly excavated pot – it remains a great temptation to reduce the multi-centuried, multi-genred anthology of prophetic texts to a basic principle, essence, spirit, or gesture, a block of frozen solid ice we can cross over safely and steadily. In fact, one way to characterize the reception of prophetic texts is through the ongoing attempts to pin down the inconsistency of prophetic texts and systemize them. Much of this book will be about the post-Enlightenment attempts to impose such a system – whether it be an aesthetic mode, a moral code, or a singular formula that explains prophetic behavior – on the unruly and contradictory prophetic texts.

In fact, the Bible contains various contradictory criteria for the task of the prophet. This is, to a large extent, because the biblical text is comprised of divergent textual traditions, merging texts composed by groups with conflicting interests in Israelite society, composed over many centuries and changing historical circumstances. Sometimes the same text will radically revise a prophetic role, as we saw in the text of Jeremiah, containing complex representations of prophetic weakness and strength in the same passage. Rather than valorize a single figure as a successful or strong prophet, we can consider a number of prophetic functions or tasks that are ascribed to different prophets at various moments in the text. What follows is a short, non-exhaustive list of prophetic roles or tasks that recur in the biblical texts discussed in *The Poetics of Prophecy*, each of them subsequently picked up by modern exegetes and poets. As we will see, the

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[33] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, *1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003), 390.

criterion for prophetic success or strength is hardly ever unambiguous, both in the biblical text and in its modern interpretation.

First, let us begin with the most commonplace understanding of the function of prophecy. Predicting the future, especially the destiny of kings and the outcome of battles, was an important basic function of Near Eastern and Israelite prophets. "Evil will come out from the North," says Jeremiah, studying the sign of a pot boiling over in a certain direction (Jer. 1:14). "Should I go against Ramoth Gilead or not?" (1 Kgs 22:6), the king of Israel inquires of four hundred prophets, trying to decide if he should go to war against Aram; he is finally told the truth by Micaiah Ben Imla, who prophesizes disaster. "The dogs will lick up your blood," Elijah tells the evil Queen Jezebel, accurately predicting her death (1 Kgs 21:19). A passage in the book of Deuteronomy attempts to regulate the institution: prognostication becomes one of the primary indicators of prophetic success and authenticity (Deut. 18:22). At the same time this "charter" in Deuteronomy forbids divination methods such as augury, casting spells, and consulting ghosts (18:9–14), as if to differentiate prophetic ability from mere magic.[34]

While millenarians, tub preachers, and religious enthusiasts of the seventeenth century may have read the predictions of the prophets quite literally, this is precisely the place where the poets and intellectuals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries differentiated themselves from such "vulgar enthusiasts."[35] The poet-prophet's relation to the future was rewritten in more complex, metaphorical terms. Percy Bysshe Shelley writes, famously, that poets are "the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present."[36] Shelley's poets don't simply foretell events; they mirror futurity in an indirect way. In his theses "On the Concept of History," Walter Benjamin embroiders on the Deuteronomistic prohibitions and goes so far as to suggest that the predictive turn is not native to the Hebrew prophetic tradition. Rather than turn directly toward the future, Benjamin's prophetic figures turn toward the past in order to redeem the future. Ian Balfour's work is

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[34] Carroll writes: "It is a strangely narrow view of prophecy and one which fits the deuteronomistic movement toward producing canonic forms of torah governing the community, to which has been added (hastily?) a brief, but inadequate, guideline for determining authentic prophecy." Robert Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant: Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 187.

[35] Robert Lowth, *A Sermon Preached at the Visitation of the Honourable and Right Reverend Richard Lord Bishop of Durham* (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1758), 5. See the discussion of enthusiasm in Chapter 1.

[36] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defense of Poetry* (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1891), 46.

indicative of a dialectic turn that reads the failures of prediction as a creative force. He writes that "in tracking the peculiar temporality of prophecy, we shall see that the dream of prophecy tends not to be fulfilled in any definitive way, certainly not immediately … . . That very lack of fulfillment turns out to be a driving force behind the prophetic tradition."[37]

Although these limitations on prophecy as prediction may seem very modern, the Bible itself already contains a critique of the idea of prophecy as prediction. Jonah tells the people of Nineveh, "Forty days more, and Nineveh is overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4 NRSV). The king, the people, and the barnyard animals all quickly don sackcloth and repent of their evildoing, thereby averting their punishment. Although in some sense he is wildly successful, Jonah feels that he has failed miserably, because his prophecy of disaster did not come true. In his discussion of Jonah, Terry Eagleton points to a basic clash in prophetic functions: "the only successful prophet is an ineffectual one, one whose warnings fail to materialize. All good prophets are false prophets, undoing their own utterances in the very act of producing them."[38] Eagleton's formulation sketches the way in which the predictive and what we could call the transformative function of prophecy do not always have the same goal. Reacting to the same paradox of Jonah, William Blake also points to the problem of reading prophecy as merely predictive: "a Prophet is a Seer not an Arbitrary Dictator" (E 617). The prophet, according to Blake, creates a condition: "If you go on So / the result is So," leaving room, as Jonah does, for repentance (E 617).

Even more than predicting the future, then, the prophet's task is transformation. This second prophetic function has its roots in early mantic prophecy. For tenth- and ninth-century figures like Elisha and Elijah, prophecy is close to magic: they revive children from the dead, miraculously fill empty pots with oil, purify water and stewpots, cure and cause leprosy, strike enemies with blindness, bring rain. We could read intercession as a modified version of these mantic abilities; Jeremiah too tries to stop a drought and prevent a war. Moses and Abraham, who is also called a prophet, can petition God and help stop divine punishment. Finally, as in the case of Jonah, bringing about repentance is also a form

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[37] Ian Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 2. On the way that failed predictions are reincorporated into the tradition, see also Robert Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury, 1979).

[38] Terry Eagleton, "J. L. Austin and the Book of Jonah," in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 233.

of prophetic efficacy: changing the cause of divine anger indirectly leads to the end of divine punishment.

These roles, as we saw, can also be denied or weakened. Jeremiah is told that he cannot pray on behalf of the people, while Isaiah, in a passage we will discuss in detail in Chapters 1 and 2, is told to prevent his message from being understood by the people so they cannot repent. In the case of the modern poet-prophet, the power of prophetic transformation is imagined as a force awakening artistic inspiration, revolutionary zeal, or nationalist sentiment and action. This power, though, is often given a melancholic structure; a mantic power was once possible but today, as W. H. Auden laments in his elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," "poetry makes nothing happen."[39] Indeed, it can become haunted by what it could once make happen. Still, as Auden continues, "it survives, / A way of happening, a mouth," perhaps in this like Benjamin's notion of *Fortleben*, which grants literature another stage of life, an ambiguous, fluid, power of survival.[40]

A third way of framing prophetic strength has to do with relative proximity to God, in the way that courtiers are more powerful the more access they have to a monarch. The last lines of the book of Deuteronomy eulogize Moses by creating a hierarchy of prophets: "Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10 NRSV). Other passages in the Pentateuch repeat this theme: Miriam and Aaron are told (Num. 12:6-8) that God speaks to other prophets in dreams and visions, but to Moses mouth to mouth. According to Exodus 33:11, the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as to a friend, but later in the same chapter we are reminded that no one can see God's face and live, so that Moses must see God from the back, concealed in the cleft of a rock. Elijah does not see God, but hears a "still small voice" (I Kings 19:12). Isaiah sees God on his throne, but describes only the hems of the divine garment filling the temple (Isa. 6:1). Ezekiel sees a fantastic vision of a divine chariot, but it seems indirect, its language refracted like light glinting on water (Ezek. 1). Later prophetic texts contain mediating figures, such as angels and men, who stand between the prophet and the direct vision of God.

In modern texts, questions of vision, intimacy, and mediation are related to both the content and the form of the prophecy. The vision itself is often particularly dark, blurry, or unclear; doubt covers it like a film. For example, within a deep chasm, amid the sounds of the tumult of water being forced through a magical fountain, Coleridge's Kubla Khan hears

[39] W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage International, 2007), 88.
[40] Thanks to Adriana X. Jacobs for this insight.

"Ancestral voices prophesying war!" Literary prophecy itself is written in the form of an echo, a fragment, an interruption: a copy, rather than an origin. Unmediated, face-to-face prophecy is often an unattainable fantasy: we are in the realm of hems, refractions, dreams, and visions.

Finally, a fourth way of evaluating prophetic strength is related to the prophet's voice or rhetorical ability. As the mouthpiece of God, the prophet's own voice may directly represent divine power. The book of Amos begins with a set of images that reflect the power of the divine voice; they also establish and authorize the prophetic voice as his representative:

> The LORD roars from Zion,
> from Jerusalem, gives voice;
> the pastures of the shepherds mourn,
> and the summit of Carmel dries up.
>
> (Amos 1:2)

The voice of the prophet, though, can also stand in contrast to the message he is to deliver. Ezekiel's voice is beautiful – he sounds like a singer of love songs – but the content of his utterance is punishing and sharp. Furthermore, many of the prophets have a speech problem or impediment, which highlights the contrast between the human voice and the divine voice. Moses is "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (Exod. 4:10); Jeremiah protests he cannot speak well (Jer. 1:6); Ezekiel goes dumb for the first half of the book. Isaiah cries, "Woe is me for I am gone dumb" (Isa. 1:5). Jeremiah interrupts his "confessions" with incoherent cries – "my bowels, my bowels" (Jer. 4:19). The message is too difficult, too bitter, too overwhelming. But paradoxically, it is the prophet's human, flawed speech that bears witness to God's awesome power. Modern interpretations emphasize both the highly crafted poetic compositions of the prophets as well as the moments of stutter, breakage, and incoherence. After all, the prophetic texts are sublime because they are composed by a force "which strikes and overpowers the mind."[41] Prophetic speech becomes a model both for a grand eloquence, for an ability to summon tremendous rhetorical authority and control, and at the same time for speech that stutters, for a speech which "snap[s] the spine of time" and howls.[42]

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[41] Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. George Gregory (London: Thomas Tegg, 1835), 149.

[42] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 141.

Prophetic Weakness

Barbara Johnson claims, paraphrasing Auden, that the trace of poetry is not "a trace of clarity but of darkness . . . poetry makes nothing happen. Poetry makes *nothing* happen."[43] Poetry's power outside the world of the text is in what John Keats has called its negative capability: its ability to make present a tentative, unsettling undecidability. Johnson's essay, following in the footsteps of Keats's "negative capability" and Wordsworth's "wise passiveness," suggests the possibilities of a poetic power outside the certainties of faith and of ideological speech. We can take Auden's line as a motto for this book – and consider how prophecy makes *nothing* happen.

Even as biblical prophecy is rooted in Near Eastern divination, its bond to the future is unraveled by its many other functions, such as the call for repentance. For Maurice Blanchot, prophecy speaks from an impossible future, from an interruption in history, with a "voice where catastrophe hesitates to turn into salvation."[44] Blanchot claims that instead of creating authoritative strength, prophecy marks a loss of assurance and stability: "when speech becomes prophetic, it is not the future that is given, it is the present that is taken away, and with it any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence."[45] Returning to the notion of the prophetic voice, specifically the stutter of the prophet and more broadly the "stutter" of the text, Herbert Marks argues that lack of clarity is an intrinsic part of prophecy. Marks describes the experience of prophecy as defined by "obscuration," which "corresponds rather to the moment of blockage that marks the mind's defeat before the unattainability of the object."[46] In other words, the key element in prophecy is not the transmission of the message, but rather the (near) impossibility of its transmission.

Blanchot and Marks are emblematic of a critical tradition that reads prophecy against the grain, as marking instability, uncertainty, and fissure. This critical tradition is, to some degree, based in Romanticism. As Christopher Bundock explains in a recent survey of the field of British Romanticism, reading the prophetic mode as a way to generate authority does not seem to describe the range of possibilities that prophecy offered the Romantic poets. While an earlier generation of critics limited prophecy to a "historical will to harmony . . . a secular theodicy that

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[43] Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 30.
[44] Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 81.
[45] Ibid., 79.   [46] Marks, "On Prophetic Stammering," 60.

promises a future," Bundock argues that literary criticism has undergone a profound shift in the way that it understands the Romantics.[47] Like Blanchot, Marks, Balfour, and Steven Goldsmith, Bundock reads prophecy as destabilizing rather than authoritative: "prophecy works less to rebuild an edifice of legitimacy than to splay out history's fragmentation."[48] However, while Bundock links Romantic understandings of prophecy to urgent changes in perceptions of time and history at the turn of the nineteenth century, he largely untethers Romantic prophecy from its biblical context. I argue, in contrast, that what Bundock calls "prophetic negativity" is not an invention of moderns like Blake, the Shelleys, or Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, but rather is written into the indeterminate biblical text itself.

As in the field of British Romanticism, critical revisions have taken place in the field of Jewish and Hebrew literatures, revaluing negative affects and attributes, such as melancholia, physical weakness, sickliness, loss, and failure, and using them to destabilize conventional understandings of Jewish nationalism, masculinity, and the Bible.[49] For example, Nitzan Lebovic's recent *Zionism and Melancholy: The Short Life of Israel Zarchi* traces two "voices" in the Zionist settlement of Mandatory Palestine. While the idealistic voice of the settler – which has come to be identified as the voice of mainstream Israeli culture – is secular, utopian, aggressive, and negating of the past, a second, melancholic voice is unable to recover from the loss of Europe, the loss inherent in diaspora, and the loss of religion. Throughout the project of Jewish national revival, Lebovic identifies an ongoing sense of loss and rupture that empties out notions of triumphalist Zionist redemption. Chapters 4 and 5 show how the Bible plays a complex role in the creation and ongoing maintenance of these two voices in modern Hebrew literature: the Bible – especially the prophetic hero – was enlisted as part of this idealistic voice and identified with national language and

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[47] Christopher Bundock, "'And Thence from Jerusalems Ruins': Romantic Prophecy and the End(s) of History," *Literature Compass* 10, no. 11 (2013): 837.

[48] Christopher Bundock, *Romantic Prophecy and the Resistance to Historicism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 21. See also Balfour, *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy*; Steven Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); and Steven Goldsmith, *Blake's Agitation: Criticism and the Emotions* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

[49] See Daniel Boyarin's groundbreaking *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and the pioneering works of Sander L. Gilman on the body. See also Sunny S. Yudkoff, *Tubercular Capital: Illness and the Conditions of Modern Jewish Writing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), and Michael Gluzman, *The Poetry of the Drowned: Sovereignty and Melancholia in Hebrew Poetry after 1948* [Hebrew] (Haifa: University of Haifa, 2018).

territory, yet, at the same time, other parts of the biblical text continued to exert a pull as sites of lamentation, mourning, and woe.

Essentially, I argue that prophetic weakness is not only a modern, secular problem. It is not only modern poets but also the biblical texts themselves that are plagued with "haunting doubts, subtle dichotomies, lurking bathos, ever-present dangers of losing integrity and abusing authority."[50] Read closely, through attention to the efforts of the various hypothesized redactors, it often seems, in fact, that the prophetic texts document Sisyphean attempts to gather up what Dan Miron calls "majestic resonances" in circumstances of doubt, catastrophe, trauma, uncertainty, instability, national, and self-unraveling. Modern poet-prophets from Blake to Bialik come to the biblical text amid the burning crisis of secularism and modernity, and this makes them only more exquisitely attuned to the dialectics of weakness and strength already encoded in the biblical text itself.

In its theoretical underpinnings, *The Poetics of Prophecy* joins a growing body of philosophy and literary theory concerned with the generative and creative potentialities of negative affect, failure, and weakness. Benjamin's notion of "weak messianism" lies at the heart of many formulations of "negative prophecy" (Bundock), "prophetic stutter" (Marks), and "the collapse of apocalyptic totality" (Goldsmith) – what I call "weak prophecy." In place of the forward-striding prophet, Benjamin's recurring image is of a passive figure gazing backwards. In "On the Concept of History," his famous angel of history gazes backwards at the catastrophe of the past. In notes on the essay, Benjamin also imagines a historian-seer facing backwards.[51] He writes that "the historian turns his back on his own time, and his seer's gaze is kindled by the peaks of earlier generations as they sink further and further into the past."[52] For the historian-seer, a direct gaze at the future can lead to a dangerous enchantment with the idea of the future as progress; the indirect gaze, the dialectical gaze, allows one to become

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[50] See Dan Miron's characterization of modern Hebrew poet-prophets in his *H. N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 50.

[51] This image is based on a fragment from Friedrich Schlegel in *Friedrich Schlegel's* Lucinde *and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 170.

[52] Walter Benjamin, "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, *1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 405. Benjamin describes the obscure Latvian-German intellectual, C. G. Jochmann, in similar language: "He turns his back on the future (which he speaks of in prophetic tones), while his seer's gaze is kindled by the vanishing peaks of earlier heroic generations and their poetry, as they sink further and further into the past." Walter Benjamin, "The Regression of Poetry, by Carl Gustav Jochmann," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Vol. 4, 360.

disentangled from this enchantment.[53] This dialectical gaze toward the past ultimately aims to turn toward the future, not merely to predict it, but to transform and redeem it. Thus "weakness" takes on a unique and paradoxical power.[54]

The theoretical revaluation of melancholia in recent decades is also representative of this tendency to reassess negative affects. For Sigmund Freud, melancholia characterized a form of unhealthy, pathological mourning. In contrast to the mourner, who gradually detaches from the lost object until he or she can become connected to a new object, the melancholic's inward-turned grief has irrational and pathological elements.[55] Yet in recent decades psychological and literary theory has emphasized the positive aspects of melancholia, drawing on medieval and Renaissance associations of melancholic humor with artists and creativity. Melancholia theory now emphasizes the agency and creativity, rather than the pathology, of the melancholic subject. Giorgio Agamben discusses the way the mechanisms of melancholia and disavowal form a "topology of the unreal" that is essentially the space of imagination and cultural creativity.[56] We saw this kind of melancholic creativity at work in Jeremiah's imagination of Moses and Samuel. This shift from a pathological reading to a recuperative one parallels a shift from melancholy as a matter of individual psychology to an emphasis on the communal and political stakes of melancholia.

An anxiety about masculinity also drives the construction of strong prophecy. Recent reflections on weak thought or weak theory emphasize the gendered aspect of weakness, tying weak theory to feminism, queer theory, and disability studies. As Paul Saint-Amour observes, "Even the ostensibly non-normative meanings of *weak* – including its earliest sense as – 'pliant, flexible, readily bending' – are tinged with its normative ones, as even the non-gendered meanings (for example) bear some memory of, or association with, the gendered ones."[57] Building on Gianni Vattimo

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[53] See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

[54] Giorgio Agamben traces Benjaminian weakness to a reading of Paul. Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005). See also Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

[55] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 14, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1968), 256.

[56] Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xviii.

[57] Paul Saint-Amour, "Weak Theory, Weak Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 3, no. 3 (2018), https://modernismmodernity.org/articles/weak-theory-weak-modernism (accessed June 3, 2023). Saint-Amour's essay gives an overview of the various genealogies and applications of weak theory,

and Eve Sedgwick, Saint-Amour lists some of the domains of weak thought: the subjective, the speculative, the counterfactual, compassion for unworlded ruins, and weak social ties that enable us to better recognize "multi-directional networked exchanges." Furthermore, weak thought allows us to imagine new critical positions, alternatives to symptomatic readings, which have placed the critic in the position of a kind of archeologist or psychoanalyst, penetrating the text's surface to get at its hidden unconscious meaning – essentially another version of a "controlling archeological metaphor." For example, Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* uses popular culture and animated movies to offer a corrective to a triumphalist, heteronormative, progressive worldview by exploring "futility, sterility, emptiness, loss, negative affect in general, and modes of unbecoming."[58] His aim, though, is not "nihilistic critical dead ends" but rather "a book about alternate ways of knowing and being."[59]

This book, then, is concerned with the interpretive possibilities that open up when biblical literature, as well as literature more generally, is read through its failure and weakness; from this perspective, strength or authority is seen as a symptom of anxiety, a "shoring up" in the face of uncertainty, rather than as an assertion of confidence. I argue that, far from indicating an anomaly or a failure to achieve prophecy – a partial prophecy or a pseudo-prophecy – "weak prophecy" is intrinsic to prophecy as such. Furthermore, although at first glance this weakness may seem particularly modern, its structure is written into the biblical text itself and into the historical compositional process of the prophetic texts. This weakness is rediscovered – or repressed – anew in every generation.

From the Heavenly Court to the Stinking, Eviscerated Innards of Prophecy

This book stages three encounters between scholars and poets, each exploring a different aspect of prophecy and prophetic power in modernity and European culture. Chapters 1 and 2 consider prophecy as an aesthetic achievement, an outgrowth of reading "the Bible as literature"; they pay particular attention to the relation between prophecy and the eighteenth-century language of the sublime, which paved the way for the Romantic

from Benjamin to Sedgwick, and it provides an introduction to a special issue of *Modernism/modernity* devoted to weak thought in 2018.

[58] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 23.
[59] Ibid., 24.

link between prophets and poets in Britain, Germany, and beyond. Chapter 1 focuses on Lowth's eighteenth-century lectures on the poetics of the Hebrew Bible. Lowth initiated and represented an important new way of regarding the Bible as great literature, one which we encounter through his construction of Isaiah as a strong prophet. At the same time, examining the fissures in Lowth's ideal version of Isaiah can also help us think more critically about the literary study of the Bible. In Chapter 2, Lowth's work enters into conversation with that of the visionary poet William Blake. As opposed to Lowth's emphasis on harmony and balance – epitomized by the song of the seraphs in the heavenly court – Blake's literary prophecies constantly unsettle symmetries. Blake's prophecies have long been read through the teleological system of Ezekiel's chariot. However, in Chapter 2 we refract Blake's prophecies through Isaiah's more dim vision. In the multiple versions of Isaiah's initiation in Blake's work, we encounter a prophecy of stutter, glitch, and weakness, and a flickering, partial vision. Furthermore, rather than presenting a single bombastic image as a method to unlock a biblical allegory, Blake offers Isaiah's prophetic walking as the motion of interpretation of the difficult, irregular biblical text.

Chapter 3 shifts from aesthetics to history: from the origins of the literary study of the Bible to the origins of the historical-critical approach to biblical studies. It reads prophecy as a stage in conjectural history, and a cornerstone in the foundation of German biblical scholarship. For Julius Wellhausen, best known for formulating "the documentary hypothesis," prophecy served as a marker of religious authenticity. Ezekiel, the denigrated, deceitful, weak prophet, became the linchpin in the story of the transformation of ancient Israel from tribal vitality to priestly fossilization. Wellhausen's history of ancient Israel is structured through Romantic dichotomies; he maligns scribal culture while evoking a nostalgia for an imaginary oral culture. I argue that Wellhausen's ideas regarding oral and written prophecy are directly drawn from Goethe's orientalist fantasies. Further, Goethe and Herder's melancholy about European writing culture continues to influence biblical scholarship's (mis)understanding of prophecy post Wellhausen. Finally, the chapter poses an alternate way of reading Ezekiel's weakness, specifically through his face-turning prophecies – not as "diminished" gestures of once-powerful mantic acts, but as creative acts in their own right, which expand the possibilities of the prophetic genre.

Chapters 4 and 5 show how historical conjecture led to nationalist fantasy, and how a Protestant idea of prophecy came to epitomize the spirit of the nascent Jewish nation. These chapters focus on the relations

between a severe political thinker and his devoted poet-disciple, who was fated to surpass him in influence. Chapter 4 concentrates on Asher Ginsberg (Ahad Ha'am), a reclusive, self-taught intellectual, active in a small circle of Hebraists in early twentieth-century Odessa. Though born to a wealthy Hasidic family, he reinvented himself as a secular rationalist and modeled himself after a prophet-hero he identified in biblical, rabbinic, and Kabbalistic traditions. Ahad Ha'am's monumental prophetic persona, though, carried within it demonic forces that he couldn't shake: ever-present anger, despair, and failure. As Ahad Ha'am, then, takes up a Romantic prophetic figure to convey a strong nationalist ideal, his multivalent allusions to Jewish and European culture expose his personal anxieties and weaknesses – as well as those of the secular Hebrew culture he hoped to create.

Chapter 5 turns to Haim Nahman Bialik's poetry, written as a response to Ahad Ha'am's call for new Jewish prophets. If Ahad Ha'am tried to construct a strong prophetic spirit as an educational tool, Bialik paradoxically uses prophetic failure and weakness to summon and goad his audience into a new kind of subjectivity. Reluctantly crowned the national poet of the nascent Jewish state, Bialik wrote a series of influential poems of wrath in the prophetic mode that have famously been read as the expression of a crisis of secularism. In Bialik's most affecting prophetic poetry, the almost imperceptible "wobble" in Ahad Ha'am's style turns into a great storm of doubt, rage, sorrow, fragmentation, and loss. Reading Bialik's crisis of secularism in a new light – countering the canonical Israeli reading, which fetishizes the authority of the biblical text – I argue for a weak prophecy common to both Bialik's poems and the biblical text.

The Afterword asks what prophetic prophecy looks like now, in the first decades of the twenty-first century. It counters a nostalgic model, one which might read contemporary prophecy through the framework of an "anxiety of influence" regarding the great poet-prophets of the past, whether these are taken as Romantic poets or biblical prophets. It offers no graph upon which poets are judged progressively less prophetic as they lose their parallel syntactical structures, shed their flowing white beards, and become stranger and more eccentric on the page. Rather, the poets with whom the book closes – Rob Halpern, Hezy Leskly, Anne Carson, and M. NourbeSe Philip – use prophecy to turn toward the past. They turn toward what is weak and ungainly, torn, stuttering, glitchy, and leaky in order to "untune" (as Halpern calls it) national melodies, to reach into the "stinking, eviscerated innards" (Philip) of the language of oppression, to suggest a new way of organizing what is inside and outside, "another

human essence than self" (Carson).[60] Their prophetic untuning does not represent (only) a lack or a loss; it is not merely the expression of the poverty, violence, and suffering of the contemporary moment. By marking this poetry as "prophetic," we can say that it means, through its very weakness, to use a dialectic gaze to actively redeem the past together with the future. In this sense, these texts have figured out the secret power of biblical prophecy, which already does all these things.

A Note on Translations and Transliterations

Since this book covers a range of time periods and different moments of biblical reception, it uses a number of biblical translations and systems of Hebrew transliteration. In this introduction, I have provided my own biblical translations unless otherwise noted. In Chapters 1 and 2, which discuss the English literary tradition in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I quote the King James Bible, using the *Norton Critical Edition* edited by Herbert Marks, unless otherwise noted. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I quote the New Revised Standard Version, which is clear and easy to follow, and seemed like the most ecumenical choice for a meeting place between Christian and Jewish scholars and writers. In the Afterword, which discusses contemporary poetry, I quote Robert Alter's recent, gorgeous, contemporary translation. As for transliterating Hebrew: in Chapters 1–3, the Hebrew quoted is mostly biblical, so I follow the Society of Biblical Literature's transliteration system. In Chapters 3–5 and the Afterword, the sources are modern Hebrew or the Bible through the eyes of modern Hebrew, so I have transliterated according to the Library of Congress Hebrew and Yiddish Romanization table.

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[60] Rob Halpern, *Music for Porn* (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2012), 49; Philip, *Zong!*, 193; Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound," in *Glass, Irony and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 136–37.