

## CHAPTER 1

# The Hebrew Prophets

**T**HE PROPHET NATHAN – HAVING LEARNED of King David’s crime of taking the beautiful young Bathsheba from her husband, Uriah, and then arranging for Uriah to be killed in battle – decides to confront his king (2 Samuel 12). As a court prophet, Nathan is known to David, but still cannot risk a direct confrontation.

NATHAN: Sire, I heard a story that may interest you. There was a man so poor that he owned but one tiny ewe lamb. He loved his lamb so much that he fed it from his own table and raised it like one of his own children. A rich man in the same town owned hundreds of lambs, yet to welcome a visitor one day, he stole the poor man’s only lamb to prepare a feast ...

DAVID: (*erupting in anger*) As the Lord lives, the rich man who has done this deserves to die! He shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and because he had no pity.

NATHAN: You are the rich man! Thus says the Lord God: I anointed you king and rescued you from your enemies, but how have you repaid me? By adultery and murder! You have committed these crimes in secret, but I will disgrace you in public.

DAVID: I have sinned against the Lord!

NATHAN: Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because of your deed, your child by Bathsheba shall die.

Nathan fearlessly speaks moral truth to power because he claims to speak on behalf of God. If God is with him, who can be against him? Even more remarkable is that King David listens to Nathan, as if to God. By comparing the iniquity of a rich man to that of a king – “You are the

rich man!” – Nathan pioneers the prophetic critique of the rich, whose pride and greed mirrors that of kings.

A prophet wields a unique kind of moral authority to check the power of kings and priests. Kings and priests control institutions, wealth, and minions; prophets stand alone, with only the power that derives from respect for God’s word. In Israel, the royal and the priestly offices were hereditary whereas anyone might be commissioned by God as a prophet.<sup>1</sup> Priests were bound by strict ritual protocols while prophetic ministry was free from all fixed forms. God authorizes the establishment of the monarchy and of the priesthood in Israel – and also raises up prophets to check the power of those kings and priests.

The most famous of the Hebrew prophets are those with books of the Bible named for them, from Isaiah to Malachi. These literary prophets pronounce God’s judgment on all of Israel and on the other nations, while continuing to confront individual kings and priests for their abuses of office.<sup>2</sup> Prophets launch a scathing attack not only on the realpolitik of rulers but also on the ritualism of religion. Prophets fight a two-front war against political crimes and religious hypocrisy. Prophetic indictment focuses on the political and religious leaders but extends to the whole people who are complicit in the sins of those leaders (Isaiah 3:14; Amos 2:7; Micah 3:9).

The Hebrew prophets are always reformers rather than revolutionaries: They never call for the abolition of the monarchy or the priesthood.<sup>3</sup> Prophets often stand alone because they attack everyone – kings, the people, other prophets, priests.

We do not usually condemn people unless they know or could have known that what they did was wrong. It seems churlish or worse to

<sup>1</sup> We have first-person reports of these prophetic commissions in Amos 7–9, Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1, Ezekiel 1–3, Isaiah 40, and Zechariah 1–6.

<sup>2</sup> All prophetic judgments in the Books of Kings are directed toward individuals; only in the books of the literary prophets do we also find judgments against social classes and against nations. For evidence, see Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, translated by Hugh Clayton White (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 137.

<sup>3</sup> “In all of the sharp criticism of the kingdom as well as of the priesthood, cult prophesy, and temples, no prophetic speeches have been passed down to us that demanded a total change in the political or cultic spheres. Prophesy, therefore, does not have a revolutionary character in either one of these areas.” Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, 99.

blame someone for doing something that they could not have known was blameworthy. Prophetic denunciation rests on the assumption that the kings, priests, and people could have known that what they did was wrong. How did they know? Not because they possessed a code of Mosaic law – prophetic condemnation may well predate the written Torah.

Prophets do sometimes condemn practices that are also condemned by Mosaic law, suggesting that prophecy and law are drawing on a shared body of religious norms.<sup>4</sup> Prophets excoriate Israel less because she broke the law and more because she has been unfaithful to her husband, God. Prophets are not judges at law, but marital counselors who use tough love to repair the breach in God's relationship with Israel – a relationship that the prophets often liken to a marriage (Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 31:32; Ezekiel 16:8; Hosea 2:16). Yes, God has a marital covenant with his bride Israel.

In prophetic judgment, God threatens to use the sword, famine, and pestilence to punish his people – a punishment so harsh that the living will envy the dead.<sup>5</sup> Prophetic anger is volcanic because it gives voice to the betrayal of spousal love. Through the prophets, God expresses a husband's violent indignation at the adultery of his unfaithful wife – not a pretty sight (Ezekiel 16 and 23). The biblical God is not a hanging judge but an aggrieved husband. Because of her infidelities, God even threatens to divorce Israel, but relents and promises to take her back (Jeremiah 3:1; Isaiah 50:1). The violence of prophetic denunciation serves to puncture the complacency of those Israelites who think they are being faithful to God, who think they are good spouses. When God is not expressing a husband's anger at a wayward wife, he expresses a parent's bitter disappointment with a rebellious child (Isaiah 1:2).

Through his election of Israel, God gives unconditional and everlasting love to his chosen people. God expects in return similarly unconditional love. A covenant is not a contract and prophets are not lawyers. Prophets insist on more than merely avoiding transgressions; they demand that we “seek good and not evil ... hate evil and love good, and

<sup>4</sup> Some of the later prophets were certainly influenced by the written Torah: Jeremiah is strongly influenced by Deuteronomy and Ezekiel by the Priestly Code.

<sup>5</sup> See, for examples, Jeremiah 6; 27:6; 42:18.

establish justice in the gate” (Amos 5:14–15; cf. Hosea 8:3; Isaiah 5:20; Micah 6:8). Even more than gifts at the altar, God wants “steadfast love” (Hosea 6:6). The role of a biblical prophet is to remind Israel when she has strayed from her promise of fidelity to God. That is why the prophets so often condemn idolatry: Every failure to honor God and his law is an act of unfaithfulness. When a spouse is not properly attentive, we suspect that he or she might be loving someone else. When we fail to honor our commitment to God it is because we have come to honor something else – foreign gods such as Molech, Baal, and Ashtoreth – or put our faith in idols of our own making, such as wealth or power.

From the litany of prophetic indictment, one might think that Israel was the least righteous of nations. Nothing could be further from the truth. God chastises those whom he loves most. That is the price of being God’s own beloved bride.

### TRUE AND FALSE PROPHETS

Anyone can claim to speak for God. What proof can a prophet produce? God speaks to prophets in private, not through a voice broadcast to the public. Why should I believe that God spoke to you? In the Bible, prophets were often expected to produce public miracles as a warrant for private revelation (Deuteronomy 13:2; Judges 6:17). If God could produce a visible miracle through a prophet, then surely he could also speak through a prophet. The most dramatic examples of these miracles were the “signs and wonders” produced by Moses in Egypt, including the plagues and the parting of the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 4:8; 11:9–10). Some of the older prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, were also known for miraculous healings and even raising the dead (1 Kings 17:22; 2 Kings 5:14; 13:21). Jesus also performs “signs and wonders,” such as healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead (John 4:48). But Jesus also sometimes forbids those whom he heals from publicizing their cures; and when asked to produce a “sign” or miracle, Jesus refuses (Mark 1:44; 8:11–12).

Miracles are not a reliable index of prophetic power. Yes, prophets do produce miracles, but so do other people. Moses and Aaron try to impress Pharaoh by turning a staff into a snake and by turning the waters of the Nile into blood; but Pharaoh’s court magicians are able

to replicate those wonders (Exodus 7). According to the Bible, not only magicians but false prophets and even Satan can work “signs and wonders” (Mark 13:22; 2 Thessalonians 2:9). God’s prophets repeatedly defeat pagan magicians in the biblical stories.<sup>6</sup> Signs and wonders are neither necessary nor sufficient to prove prophetic credentials. Many of the literary prophets produce no signs and wonders; or, rather, the miracles they produce take the form of seeing the future.

A few years before the conquest of Jerusalem by Babylon in 587 BC, two prophets address the people of Israel.

**JEREMIAH:** Thus says the Lord your God: Long ago, I rescued you from captivity in Egypt and gave you the land of Israel as an everlasting possession. All I asked of you was not to serve other gods, to practice justice, and to obey my law. How have you repaid me? By whoring after false gods, by oppressing widows and orphans, by ignoring my law. Because you have disobeyed me, you must drink the cup of my wrath. I will make use of my servant, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, to utterly destroy you, to make of you an object of horror and of hissing, and an everlasting disgrace. After I turn your promised land into a ruin and a waste, you will be deported as slaves to Babylon for seventy years (Jeremiah 25).

**HANANIAH:** Thus says the Lord your God: Spare me your tiresome jeremiad! Because you are my chosen people, I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years, I will return to you all the treasure and all the exiles taken into Babylon. Rejoice: you have nothing more to fear from your enemies. I bring tidings of peace (Jeremiah 28).

The conflict between these two prophecies is dramatized in a bizarre piece of street theater. Jeremiah walks the streets of Jerusalem wearing a yoke around his neck, symbolizing the coming enslavement. Then, suddenly, the prophet Hananiah accosts Jeremiah, breaking his yoke, and symbolically freeing the Israelites. At God’s prompting, Jeremiah replaces his broken yoke with one of iron, symbolizing the strength of God’s promise of punishment (Jeremiah 28).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Moses defeats the Pharaonic magicians; Daniel defeats the Babylonian magicians; and Balaam the prophet defeats Balaam the magician.

<sup>7</sup> Street theater is common among prophets: Isaiah walks the streets of Jerusalem naked (Isaiah 20:3) and Zedekiah wears iron horns on his head (1 Kings 22:11).

Jeremiah and Hananiah cannot both be true prophets – one prophesies disaster and the other prophesies immediate victory. If to prophesy means to predict, then Jeremiah is the true prophet in the sense that his prediction largely comes true: The ruling classes of Jerusalem and the surrounding Judah are indeed soon to be enslaved and deported to Babylon. One simple way of distinguishing a true from a false prophet, says the Bible, is to see whether the predictions of a prophet come true (Deuteronomy 18:21–22). For example, Jesus would again predict the destruction of the temple, Socrates predicted that Athens would regret killing him, and Joan of Arc predicted the expulsion of the English from France. Prophets continue to make predictions, and we continue to use the accuracy of those predictions to discern true from false prophets.

A biblical prophet, however, is no fortune-teller, seer, or soothsayer; indeed, the Bible condemns these professions (Exodus 22:17; Leviticus 19:31; Deuteronomy 18:10–14).<sup>8</sup> The Bible strongly contrasts the act of speaking for God with the magical arts of conjuring the future.<sup>9</sup> A magician or seer attempts to manipulate divine power for his own purposes; a prophet speaks and acts on behalf of God's purposes.<sup>10</sup> A true prophet, says the Bible, is God's emissary to his people – through his words and deeds, a prophet proclaims God's saving love. True prophets never charge money, as do seers and soothsayers (Micah 3:5).

Someone who teaches us to follow other gods is a false prophet, says the Bible, even if he can use magic to make accurate forecasts

<sup>8</sup> The prophets condemn divination at Isaiah 44:25; 47:9, 12; 57:3; Zechariah 10:2. However, the Bible does provide legitimate means of obtaining oracles from God: the Urim and Thummim (Numbers 27:21), the ephod (1 Samuel 23:9), lots (Numbers 26:55), dreams (1 Samuel 28:6).

<sup>9</sup> "Pagan prophecy is thus not necessarily dependent upon divine revelation; it may equally well represent a human faculty of sensing things irrespective of the gods." Some Greek gods, such as Dionysus and Apollo, engage in prophecy; yet it would be absurd to call the biblical God a prophet. See Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 49–50.

<sup>10</sup> When the Hebrew Bible was first translated into Greek (the Septuagint), the Hebrew word for prophet (*nabi*) was translated not by the Greek *mantis*, which refers to a seer or soothsayer (as in our word "necromancy"), but by the Greek word *prophetēs*, which originally meant to speak for someone, namely, God. Still, like the Hebrew *nabi* and the English *prophet*, the Greek *prophetēs* could also refer to someone who makes forecasts. See Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 22–23.

(Deuteronomy 13:1–5). The greatest of all Hebrew prophets, Moses, was known not for his predictions but for his intimacy with God – a God who spoke with Moses face-to-face (Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 34:10). A true prophet is a friend of God who conveys God’s exhortations and consolations to his people.

At the same time, because a true prophet speaks on behalf of God, what he says will generally come to pass. God, after all, is sovereign over history – every event is either willed or permitted by God. By saying that an event will happen, God thereby makes it happen. Although the classical Hebrew prophets do make many accurate forecasts, some of their predictions notoriously fail.<sup>11</sup> Correctly seeing the future is one simple but far from adequate test of a true prophet.

The danger of false prophets is not that they make bad forecasts, but that they lead the people away from God and into perdition. Instead of turning the people from their evil ways, false prophets preach complacency (Jeremiah 23:22). That is why false prophets must be put to death (Deuteronomy 18:20; cf. Jeremiah 14:14–16). Indeed, Jeremiah prophesies that Hananiah will die within a year, as he does (Jeremiah 28:16–17).

Our verb “to prophesy” has two distinct meanings: to predict the future and to proclaim God’s word. Is a prophet someone who foretells or who forthtells? Now we can see the relation between these two senses of prophesy – if one genuinely proclaims God’s word, then one usually forecasts events correctly. But proclamation trumps prediction: What matters is that the prophet conveys God’s desire to save his people. The Bible compares God’s relation to a prophet with Moses’s relation to Aaron – just as Aaron speaks for Moses, so a prophet speaks for God (Exodus 4:15–16; 7:1).

Prediction is the wrong way to think about biblical prophecy. The reason why the Bible condemns all fortune-tellers and diviners is that the art of prediction rests on the assumption that history unfolds by necessity or fate (Numbers 23:23). If I cannot change my future, then I at least want

<sup>11</sup> According to Gerhard von Rad: “One could say that Isaiah 7:7; Jeremiah 22:10–12, 24–30; 25:11–12; 28:15–17; were fulfilled and Isaiah 20:1–6; Jeremiah 22:18, 36:20–31, 44:29–30, 43:8–13; Ezekiel 29:17–20 were not fulfilled.” See *The Message of the Prophets*, translated by D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 267.

to know what it holds. But, according to the Bible, God decides what is going to happen, not some impersonal fate or doom. And what God decides to do in the future rests in part on what we do now. Prophets want us to change our future, not merely to know it.

Biblical prophecy does not forecast doom but proclaims God's promise that God will punish us if we do not return to him. Prophecy is always a hypothetical prediction: Here is what will happen *if* we do not reform. A prophet aims to scare us straight: If we heed his warning, we might avert the doom. Jeremiah does not merely forecast doom, he also begs his people to return to God and be forgiven (Jeremiah 3:12–18, 22–25; 4:1–4). Jeremiah promises that Israel will survive Babylonian exile and, after seventy years, return to Jerusalem (Jeremiah 29:10). But even this promise is conditional on the decisions of the Israelites to return to God. Before the literary prophets, Israel looks back to God's saving acts in history; after the prophets, Israel also looks forward to the promise of redemption in the future.

Ancient Israel had many enemies. Perhaps the most terrible of them was Assyria, whose armies so thoroughly destroyed the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC that ten tribes of Israel disappeared from history. God sends his prophet, Jonah, to pronounce God's judgment on Nineveh, the Assyrian capital (Jonah 1–4): "Go tell the Ninevites, that unless they cease their wicked violence, I will overthrow Nineveh in forty days." Jonah is understandably reluctant to bring this message into enemy territory, but he looks forward to seeing the evil Assyrians punished by God. So Jonah proclaims God's doom in Nineveh. But then, much to Jonah's surprise, the Ninevites immediately repent and reform; in response, God lifts his threat of punishment – much to Jonah's disappointment, who was looking forward to the pyrotechnics of divine retribution.

To understand Jonah's disappointment, imagine a Jewish rabbi being sent into Nazi Germany to pronounce God's judgment. Miraculously, all the Nazis repent and renounce violence. Only a saint would not feel some disappointment. Divine mercy, when directed to our enemies, is very hard to swallow. God takes no pleasure in the death of sinners but wants them to repent and return to him (Ezekiel 18:23). The Hebrew prophets tell us what will happen – but only *if we do not change*.



Hananiah is a false prophet not because his prediction of immediate victory is disproven by events, but because he tells the people what they want to hear. Where Jeremiah offers terrifying truth, Hananiah offers comforting illusion. During his lifetime, a true prophet is hated by his own people, whereas a false prophet is loved (Luke 6:26). People can only bear the truth in small doses. Whereas Hananiah blames the Babylonians, Jeremiah blames the Israelites themselves. No wonder Jeremiah is accused of being a traitor and an agent of the hated Babylonians.

If God's people need a moral reformation, then a true prophet cannot tell them what they want to hear. God loves his people and wants what is best for them, which is to obey God. Punishment, according to the Bible, is an essential form of moral education: God, like a good parent, disciplines his children for their own good. Tough love is also love. True prophets give the people everything they need and nothing they want. The biblical God treats his people like a good father treats his children, by disciplining them (Deuteronomy 8:5). False prophets give the people everything they want and nothing they need. True prophets warn that the time is three minutes to midnight; false prophets announce that it is always morning in Israel.

A false prophet, says the Bible, is a wolf in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7:15). Does this mean that a true prophet must be a sheep in wolf's clothing? Must true prophets always frighten people for their own good? Not always. After the desolation, prophets bring God's consolation (Isaiah 40; Ecclesiasticus 49:10). Oracles of disaster are often followed by oracles of salvation (Zephaniah 3). Prophets always mix threats with promises.

The biblical distinction between true and false prophets underlies our common distinction between demagogues and statesmen. A demagogue flatters the people and promises them easy victories, knowing what they want to hear. Like a false prophet, a demagogue proclaims "peace" when there is no peace (Jeremiah 6:14; 14:13; Ezekiel 13:16). Like Hananiah, a demagogue assures us: "mission accomplished." False prophets speak smooth words of comforting illusions (Isaiah 30:10).<sup>12</sup> By contrast, a statesman, like Jeremiah, promises nothing more than blood,

<sup>12</sup> False prophets promise the people peace and prosperity (Micah 3:5; Jeremiah 4:10; 8:10; 14:13; 23:17; Ezekiel 12:24; 13:10).

toil, tears, and sweat. A false prophet intoxicates the people with empty falsehoods (Micah 2:11). A statesman tells us what we need to hear not what we want to hear.

A true prophet is someone who never wanted to be a prophet but is drafted into service by God. Prophets are called by God; no one can make himself a prophet. Nor is anyone born a prophet: Priesthood and kingship were hereditary offices in ancient Israel, but there are no families of prophets (Amos 7:14). Isaiah feels unworthy of the vision he is given of divine glory, and of being a prophet: "I am a man of unclean lips." But God sends an angel with a hot coal to cauterize Isaiah's lips, thereby purifying him (Isaiah 6). Jeremiah pleads that he is too young and cannot even speak fluently, but God touches his mouth (Jeremiah 1). Ezekiel is forced to eat a scroll, so that he can digest God's word (Ezekiel 3). When God's word comes to the prophets, they are sometimes thrown into convulsions, tremors, or paralysis (Jeremiah 20:7; 23:9); Ezekiel is borne through the air (Ezekiel 8).

That God can make anyone a prophet is evident in the story of Balaam: If God can speak through Balaam's donkey, then surely God can speak through any human being (Numbers 22). Prophecy displays God's wisdom and power, not human wisdom or power. Major medieval philosophers, including Alfarabi and Maimonides, argued that true prophets must be paragons of moral and intellectual virtue – indeed, true prophets must be philosophers. Maimonides even insists that philosophers who achieve moral and intellectual perfection can make themselves prophets, just so long as God does not actively stop them. Yet the fact that the biblical God chooses to speak through uneducated shepherds like Amos, not to mention a donkey, is the ultimate rebuke to the pride of philosophers. No one can raise herself to prophetic powers, but God can raise up prophets anywhere. If the prophets have anything in common, then surely it must be the humility of Balaam's donkey.

Most of God's direct speech to human beings in the Bible is through the prophets.<sup>13</sup> Yet it is a mistake to suppose that the prophets were mere mouthpieces for God's speech. A prophet does not open his mouth and

<sup>13</sup> The expression "thus says the Lord God" appears 241 times in the Old Testament; 221 of these occurrences are related to a prophetic oracle. See Von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, 66.

let God speak; rather, a prophet reports what God told him in the past. A prophet first consumes the words of God, and then utters them.<sup>14</sup> In the words of Abraham Heschel, a prophet is “not an instrument, but a partner, an associate of God.”<sup>15</sup> A prophet is no mere oracle, but an interpreter of the divine oracles he or she has received (Amos 3:3). Prophecy is the product of the friendship between God and a prophet. The divine light is refracted through the medium of the prophet; the divine voice assumes the timbre of its instrument.

In the case of Jeremiah, we can see the prophet struggling with the divine message he has received. Jeremiah reports being distressed by having to bring his beloved people bad news; he even says that he wishes he had never been born (Jeremiah 15 and 20). No one wants to be “despised and rejected by others,” as true prophets often are (Isaiah 53:3). Far from being mere puppets of God, many prophets actively challenge God in defense of their people, as do Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Jeremiah. As we shall see, Socrates, Jesus, Joan of Arc, Thomas More, and Martin Luther King, Jr. all give eloquent voice to the suffering they endure as prophets. They all say in their own ways that they wish they had never been born.

The Jewish rabbis have distinguished three kinds of true prophets: (1) those who advocate only for God (Elijah); (2) those who advocate only for Israel (Jonah); and (3) those who advocate both for God and for Israel (Jeremiah). The greatest prophets, say the rabbis, are those who proclaim God’s judgment on Israel, but who also talk God down from some of his threats, such as Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 12:1; Habakkuk 1:2).<sup>16</sup> The best prophets bring out the best in their God. Prophecy grows out of conversation and even argument between God and his prophet (Micah 6:1–3).

<sup>14</sup> As Kaufmann says: “The figure of eating the words of prophecy, then speaking them forth (Jeremiah 15:16; Ezekiel 3:1) illustrates the two stages nicely – first the primary revelation, and then the prophet’s embodiment of it in his utterance.” See *The Religion of Israel*, 97.

<sup>15</sup> See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 25.

<sup>16</sup> On this division of prophets, see the *Mekhilta*, quoted in Barry L. Schwartz, *The Path of the Prophets: The Ethics-Driven Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 201. Heschel observes of Jeremiah: “Standing before the people he pleaded for God; standing before God he pleaded for his people.” *The Prophets*, 154–155.

True prophets do not rejoice at the prospect of divine punishment; they lament the suffering imposed even by just divine retribution. True prophets appreciate that they too fall under divine judgment: Jeremiah parades around in a yoke and Isaiah walks the streets of Jerusalem naked for three years (Isaiah 20:3) to symbolize the coming enslavement they will share with their people. Those who are gleeful about the coming day of the Lord or who think that punishment comes only to their enemies reveal themselves to be false prophets. A true prophet is a person of grief, who mourns for the sins of his country. Martin Luther King, Jr. often channeled Jeremiah's lament: "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick" (8:18).<sup>17</sup>

Virtuous and conscientious Israelites could discern the difference between Jeremiah and Hananiah without waiting to see whose predictions would pan out. They would ask: Which prophet best represents God's saving love as reflected in the whole history of our relation to God? Do the earlier prophets generally offer us comforting promises of easy salvation? Or do true prophets challenge us to repent with dire warnings? True prophets uphold our duties to God rather than attempt to please their audience.

True prophets warn us of the dangers of false prophets (Jeremiah 23:9–15; 1 John 4:1). Every true prophet stands in a long line of prophets stretching back to Abraham (Genesis 20:7). A true prophet fits into that tradition and offers the best interpretation of his predecessors. When Jeremiah is condemned for announcing the destruction of Jerusalem, he is saved by citing the precedent of Micah's earlier prediction (Jeremiah 26:18; cf. Micah 3:12). God's true prophets consistently tell the people that if they do not live up to their covenantal obligations, they will be punished. God's love is eternal and unconditional, but that love requires God to discipline and educate his chosen people. God chastises those whom he loves most (Proverbs 3:12; Hebrews 12:6).

The significance of the Hebrew prophets lies not in their gifts for predicting the future, but in their gifts for explaining the past. Ancient Israelites suffered catastrophic defeats by their enemies, yet their faith in

<sup>17</sup> On King's laments, see Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word That Moved America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 183–184.

God, paradoxically, seems to have been strengthened.<sup>18</sup> Instead of only feeling abandoned by God, they felt chastised by their God. By interpreting defeat as divine punishment and by offering hope for eventual redemption, the prophets helped their fellow Israelites to make sense of these national disasters – and making sense of a disaster is often the first step toward learning to accept it.

The Hebrew prophets saw history as the story of the growing wisdom of Israel under the sometimes harsh tutelage of God. Even national disasters were thought to be educative, at least for a remnant. As Israel learns from her experience, she grows closer to God and abandons her hankering after other gods. Indeed, after the Babylonian exile, prophetic condemnation of idolatry all but ceases – lesson learned. By interpreting history as a story of the education of Israel, the prophets lay the foundation for the modern view of history as progress. To the extent that we look for things to be better in the remote future, we are children of the prophets.

### PROPHETS, PRIESTS, AND KINGS

The earliest prophets, such as Moses and Deborah, were also political leaders, but after the establishment of the monarchy, prophets ceased to exercise political office.<sup>19</sup> Some of the literary prophets may have also been priests. Prophets were sometimes attached to either the court or the temple.<sup>20</sup> And yet, despite this attachment, court and temple prophets were scathing critics of both kings and priests.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Despite the defeat of Israel's God by the Babylonian gods, despite the destruction of God's temple in Jerusalem, Israel's faith in God triumphs: "Even the priests, the nobility, and the royal household, who were the constant object of prophetic reproaches for their backsliding, forsake their idols and cleave to YHWH forever." Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, 133.

<sup>19</sup> "After the rise of the monarchy, prophets ... apparently ceased to play a role in the central cult and had no voice in governmental affairs." Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 252.

<sup>20</sup> Von Rad denies that the literary prophets were ever "temple prophets," because of their scathing attacks on the cultic prophets; see *The Message of the Prophets*, 32.

<sup>21</sup> "The officials within [Jerusalem] are roaring lions ... its priests have profaned what is sacred" (Zephaniah 3:3–4). "Being a part of the royal court did not prevent the prophets from criticizing the king, the government, or the cult." Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, 302.

Prophets are not lone wolves at the periphery of society; some of them even belong to a prophetic guild.<sup>22</sup> Prophets are insider-outsiders, both connected to and detached from their communities – not unlike modern whistleblowers. There was no permanent prophetic office, just God’s promise to raise up future prophets (Deuteronomy 18:18).

The kings of Israel like to believe that God’s promises to the Davidic dynasty are unconditional; they are reminded by the prophets that even kings are accountable to the King of Kings (Isaiah 6; Zechariah 14:9). Some prophets even go so far as to announce publicly that God rejects the sitting king (1 Samuel 15). No one is permitted to censure the king except for a prophet – and sometimes not even a prophet. Jeremiah sends a scroll criticizing his king, only to have the king then order his arrest (Jeremiah 36). As a sign of divine favor, biblical kings are customarily anointed by prophets – just as medieval and modern European monarchs are anointed by the pope or the Archbishop of Canterbury. Kingly power cannot be trusted unless checked by prophetic power.

Nathan confronts King David indirectly through a parable; the prophet Elijah, by contrast, confronts King Ahab without the indirection of a parable (1 Kings 21).

ELIJAH: Thus says the Lord: Have you and your wife, Jezebel, killed your neighbor, Naboth, so that you might take possession of his vineyard?

AHAB: How did you, my enemy, find out?

ELIJAH: Does not God see all your deeds? You have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. Here is God’s judgement: I will bring disaster on you. In the same place that dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will lick up your blood. Dogs will also eat Jezebel.

AHAB: I will tear my clothes, wear sackcloth, and walk in dejection from now on.

ELIJAH: Thus says the Lord: because you have humbled yourself before me, I will not bring disaster on your house in your lifetime but wait until your son’s lifetime.

Nathan and Elijah both bravely confront their kings, risking their lives to do so. By repenting, David and Ahab escape the doom pronounced

<sup>22</sup> A guild known as “sons of the prophets,” at 1 Kings 20:35; 2 Kings 2:3; 6:1.

on them – showing that prophets proclaim God’s desire for reconciliation rather than reveal some inexorable fate.

The earliest prophets were wartime soothsayers because kings and generals desperately needed to predict the outcomes of battles.<sup>23</sup> This explains why the later Hebrew prophets often serve as advisors to kings about matters of international relations and war. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah were tiny states caught between regional superpowers, such as Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. Like modern Poland, Israel and Judah were in constant threat of being partitioned or worse by their larger neighbors. The kings of Israel and Judah attempted to retain their fragile independence by forging ever-changing alliances with regional superpowers, on the premise that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.”

What is the role of the prophets in this game of thrones? Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah denounce many of the proposed alliances as “covenants with death” (Isaiah 28:15). Why? Because allying with Egypt, Assyria, or Babylon means hosting not merely their embassies but also their gods, who always accompany those embassies. Forming an alliance means tolerating foreign gods – a toleration the prophets see as a threat to Israel’s unique commitment to the one true God. Instead, the prophets argue that it is safer to rely on God than on any idolatrous ally (Isaiah 30 and 31). King Manasseh’s alliance with Assyria leads him to sponsor idolatry throughout Judah, even in the temple itself – confirming the worst fears of the prophets (2 Chronicles 33).

Many British subjects and American citizens had a similar fear of alliance with Soviet Russia to confront Nazi Germany. And indeed, our wartime alliance with Soviet Russia made Britain and America complicit in Soviet war crimes. Winston Churchill, however, defended an alliance with Stalin: “If Hitler invaded hell, I would make at least a favorable reference to the devil in the House of Commons.” Not surprisingly, Isaiah and Jeremiah harshly condemn any pacts with the devil.

When the prophets are not denouncing the realpolitik of their kings, they are actively promoting defeat. Isaiah and Jeremiah tell their kings that they should fear God more than Assyria or Babylon, that Israel and Judah deserve to be punished at the hands of their enemies. According

<sup>23</sup> It was prophets who gave the command to attack, at 1 Kings 20:13–15; 22:6; 2 Kings 3, 6.

to the prophets, the only possible way to avert disaster is to repent and return to God – military or diplomatic resistance to God’s judgment is futile. Trust in God, say the prophets, not in your own horses and chariots.

Imagine Franklin Roosevelt listening to a preacher who condemned an alliance with Stalin and denounced military measures against Japan and Germany. The kings of Israel and Judah may not heed the warnings of their prophets, but they do listen. Still, Isaiah and Jeremiah are denounced as defeatist and even as traitorous agents of Israel’s enemies; Jeremiah is arrested, flogged, jailed, and nearly executed (Jeremiah 37–38).

The Hebrew prophets do not attempt to usurp the authority of kings or to second-guess their political decisions. But the prophets do not hesitate to denounce the deeds of kings when those deeds seem to fall short of Israel’s covenantal obligations. The Bible expresses suspicion of the arrogance and power of kings; kingship is tolerated only if kings respect and obey divine law (Deuteronomy 17; 1 Samuel 15). Kings David and Ahab each violate basic biblical commandments against murder and adultery, while other kings form alliances that risk bringing foreign gods into Israel, violating the commandments against idolatry (Deuteronomy 5). Prophets tell kings what *not* to do; they attempt to enforce divine moral and religious limits on statecraft.

Not content with challenging kings, the prophets also denounce the priests (Amos 7:10–17). There is an undeniable tension throughout the Bible between prophetic and priestly religion – a tension we already see between Moses and Aaron (Exodus 32) – even though some of the prophets may also have been priests, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In every religion, there are experts who manage the rituals. In ancient Israel, the priests organized and supervised the prayers, hymns, and sacrifices of public worship, especially in the temple. All these practices are required by God’s law, so it is rather shocking to see priestly ritual violently denounced by God’s prophets.

Most people are probably not aware that the Bible features a scathing attack on organized religion. Here is what God says through his prophets: Stay away from the temple: “Trample my courts no more” (Isaiah 1:12); eschew all religious festivities: “I hate, I despise your festivals”



(Amos 5:21); do not bother saying prayers: “I will not listen to your prayers” (Isaiah 1:15; Jeremiah 14:11); as for singing hymns, forget about it: “Take away from me the noise of your songs” (Amos 5:23); never presume to bless: “I will curse your blessings” (Malachi 2:2); and don’t even think about offering a sacrifice: “Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?” (Psalm 50:13); “Whoever slaughters an ox is like one who kills a human being” (Isaiah 66:3; cf. Jeremiah 7:22). In short, say the prophets, worship has become an act of transgression (Amos 4:4).

Biblical religion is summed up by the commandment: “Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). But what does it mean to be holy? Within the holiness code of the Book of Leviticus, for example, we find rules about ritual purity (about, for example, clean and unclean foods) as well as rules about moral goodness (prohibiting, for example, cruelty to slaves). But within the Mosaic law, there is no explicit distinction between purity and morality – holiness requires what we would call both ritual purity and moral goodness.

The Hebrew prophets pioneered the idea that holiness must in the first place be moral righteousness. God’s holiness, they say, is above all his righteousness, and to be holy – to be like God – means above all to be righteous (Isaiah 5:16). For the prophets, protecting widows, orphans, and strangers is more holy and more Godlike than any degree of ritual purity.<sup>24</sup> For the first time in history, acting justly became the supreme religious duty. The prophets offer an interpretation of Mosaic law whereby the rules of ritual purity are systematically subordinated to the rules of moral justice.<sup>25</sup> Ritual must serve righteousness; rites must promote respect for rights.

Through the prophets, God rebukes his priests: “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6; cf. 1 Samuel 15:22). Prayer, fasting, and sacrifice easily become substitutes for the hard work of moral repentance and reform;

<sup>24</sup> “The great new doctrine of prophecy was the primacy of morality over the cult.” Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, 160.

<sup>25</sup> Mosaic law could be said to anticipate the prophetic critique of ritual, when Moses says “circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart” (Deuteronomy 10:16), meaning that physical circumcision is merely an external symbol of a moral disposition.

beautiful liturgy is more pleasant than the struggle for personal righteousness and social justice.

The prophets denounce priestly rituals for being, well, ritualistic – for being insincere or empty. God does not want the lip service of prayer; God wants the full service of a life (Isaiah 29:13). The prophets remind us of the spirit that animates the letter of the law: Rites must serve righteousness. The Bible tells us never to approach God empty-handed, but what God wants is not the gift of a lamb but the gift of oneself. According to the prophets, the people were offering prayers and sacrifices to buy divine favor: I give to God so that he will give to me.<sup>26</sup> But God cannot be bribed so easily: “Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness” (Isaiah 1:27).

Rituals are symbols of moral actions: ritual purity is a symbol of moral purity; ritual atonement is a symbol of contrition and forgiveness; ritual offerings are a symbol of gratitude.<sup>27</sup> These symbolic rituals can strengthen our internal moral dispositions, but they can also become a substitute for them. The prophets were certainly not opposed to prayer and sacrifice in principle; they just wanted religious rituals to express genuine moral dispositions of repentance, forgiveness, and gratitude.

Jeremiah observes the worship of people who oppress widows, orphans, and foreigners – they have turned the temple, he says, into a “den of robbers” (7:5, 11). Instead of temple worship cleansing them from their sins, they have polluted the temple with their injustice. God refuses to listen to the prayers of those with blood on their hands (Isaiah 1:15). Righteousness is not the product of ritual; righteousness is the precondition for proper ritual (Jeremiah 7). God prefers the worship of righteous Gentiles over the worship of immoral Israelites (Malachi 1–2). That God permits the destruction of his own house, the temple in Jerusalem, reveals how much he prefers justice to worship (Jeremiah 26:18; Matthew 24:2).

<sup>26</sup> “Do not appear before the Lord empty-handed,” but also, “Do not offer him a bribe, for he will not accept it; and do not rely on a dishonest sacrifice”; Sirach 35:6 and 14. Socrates will also condemn the use of offerings to attempt to bribe the gods.

<sup>27</sup> “Morality [unlike the cult] is an absolute value, for it is divine in essence ... Moral goodness makes man share, as it were, in the divine nature ... cult is sacred only as a symbol, morality is essentially godlike, being a reflection of the qualities of God.” Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, 367.

To understand God's frustration with prayers and sacrifices, imagine that your spouse frequently praises you and brings you presents. Unfortunately, you are aware that your spouse does this out of guilt for being unfaithful. Pretty soon, you will explode and say: Spare me your pathetic compliments and gifts! I want your everlasting fidelity! That is how God addresses his bride, Israel: "for I the Lord love justice" (Isaiah 61:8).

Nothing dramatizes the prophetic insistence on the priority of morality like God's threat to destroy his own temple. The center of Israel's religious life was the magnificent Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem – the locus of all public worship. As the symbol of the wealth and pride of Israel, the temple attracted prophetic warnings of doom. Jeremiah's denunciation of Israel culminates in God's promise to turn Jerusalem into a "plowed field" unless Israel repents and returns to him (Jeremiah 26:18; cf. Micah 3:12). That God expresses a desire to burn down his own house reveals the intensity of his disappointment with his firstborn son, Israel. And indeed, the Babylonians will soon loot, burn, and raze to the ground the Temple of Solomon. Not even the Ark of the Covenant will be necessary when God's law is written on every heart (Deuteronomy 30:14; Jeremiah 31:31–34).

The prophets challenged both kings and priests to redefine national security. The prophets put Israel on notice that she faces divine judgment for failing to protect the poor, the orphaned, and the foreigners in her midst. Not only idolatry but also injustice could lead Israel to become "vomited" out of the promised land (Leviticus 18:28). The "day of the Lord" will not be a day of Israel's victory over enemies, but a day of divine judgment on both Israel and her enemies.<sup>28</sup> Some prophets even denounce Israel for militarism: Trust in chariotry and fortresses is as idolatrous as trust in foreign gods (Hosea 8:14; 10:13–14; Micah 5:10–11).

By denouncing both the kings and the priests, prophets lacked any institutional support and were vulnerable to persecution. Prophets were denounced as both heretics and traitors – a deadly combination. The priests wanted Jeremiah killed as a false prophet, and the king

<sup>28</sup> According to Kaufmann, the prophets "have a new evaluation of social morality: not merely bloodshed and sexual crimes, but injustice, taking bribes, and oppressing the poor and defenseless are crucial for the fate of the nation." *The Religion of Israel*, 345–346.

imprisoned him as a traitor (Jeremiah 20:1–3, 26, 37–38). As we shall see, Jesus would later announce God's judgment on the Second Temple – a prophecy that would lead to his own arrest and condemnation by the chief priests of Israel.

Later prophets were also persecuted by both religious and political leaders. Socrates was condemned for impiety by a combination of Athenian priests and politicians; Jesus was condemned by Jewish priests for false prophecy and blasphemy and by the Romans for sedition; Joan of Arc was tried by Catholic priests and by English generals; Thomas More was condemned by Henry VIII, who was supreme over both church and state; even Martin Luther King, Jr. was attacked by his fellow ministers as well as by government officials. What makes prophecy uniquely hazardous is that it provokes both church and state.

The prophetic focus on righteousness often seems like moral fanaticism. When a prophet walks around a magnificent city, he notices only the slum; when a prophet eats at a splendid restaurant, she talks to the kitchen workers; when a prophet tours an art museum, he wonders whether it is handicapped-accessible; when a prophet attends a party, she asks if the beggars outside were invited.

Israel's prophets are not impressed by the beauty, the wealth, the power, or even the ritual purity of their country. Instead, they excoriate Israel for its cruelty to widows, orphans, and foreigners (Isaiah 1). What most people would regard as minor blemishes on a decent and prosperous society, the prophets denounce as an abomination meriting apocalyptic punishment. From what her prophets say about her, one would assume that ancient Israel was a den of iniquity, a cesspool of vice, a carnival of cruelty. This may not be the case when compared to other nations, but it is true when compared to God's expectations for his beloved bride.

### PROPHETS THINK GLOBALLY BUT ACT LOCALLY

The canonical Hebrew prophets are all Israelites who single out for condemnation mainly their fellow Israelites. Were a Gentile to use similar language about Israel, she would be denounced today as anti-Semitic. A prophet's relentless critique of her own society explains why, according to the Bible, a prophet is honored everywhere except in her own country

(Jeremiah 12:6; Matthew 13:57). The prophets taught Israel to look for salvation only in the shadow of divine judgment.<sup>29</sup>

Although the prophets are concerned above all for Israel, they are also concerned for the whole world. Yes, the Bible does say that Israel is God's chosen people: Israel alone is "a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5–6). But from the moment he chooses Abraham, God promises that in Abraham all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:1–3). God blesses Abraham as a way of blessing the whole human race. The prophets say to Israel: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6; Jeremiah 3:17). Isaiah announces God's plan to bless Israel along with Egypt and Assyria (19:24–25). By being an exemplar of faith and righteousness, Israel will draw the whole human race to the worship of the one true God and to everlasting justice (Isaiah 66:23).

The only thing worse than not being God's chosen people is to be God's chosen people. The prophets are guilty of using a double standard in their moral attacks – they are much more critical of their own country than of their enemies. And that is because of the unique role that Israel plays in global history. God warns the Israelites not to take their favored status for granted: "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel, says the Lord" (Amos 9:7). God's election of Israel is eternal and unconditional, but his covenantal promises to Israel are conditioned on her obedience.

The God of the Book of Exodus could be described as a tribal God: He fights for Israel against her enemies and the gods of her enemies (Exodus 15:3). But the God of the prophets is sovereign over all the nations: Instead of fighting with Israel, he uses Assyria and Babylon to punish Israel and then uses Persia to punish Babylon (Jeremiah 25:12–14). Nebuchadnezzar is God's servant and Cyrus is God's anointed (Isaiah 45:1). All the nations are merely chess pieces to be moved by the global and divine grandmaster.

The prophets are neither Hebrew chauvinists nor citizens of the world; they are neither nationalists nor cosmopolitans. The prophets

<sup>29</sup> "The prophets were therefore the first men in Israel to proclaim ... that salvation comes in the shadow of judgement." Von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, 154.

exemplify the maxim “think globally but act locally.” The God of the prophets is the creator and redeemer of the whole world, but the salvation of humanity mysteriously rests on the righteousness of Israel. By saving Israel, the prophets bring every nation to God (Tobit 13:11). That is why God says to Jeremiah: “I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jeremiah 1:5). By their actions, prophets reveal the global reach of the biblical God: Although there are many widows in Israel, Elijah goes to the assistance of the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17); although there are many lepers in Israel, Elisha heals the foreigner, Naaman (2 Kings 5).

The prophets relentlessly pronounce divine doom on Israel, but not on Israel alone. The other nations cannot logically be condemned for being unfaithful to God’s marital covenant because Israel alone is God’s bride. Still, God creates a primordial covenant with the whole human race through Noah; the terms of this covenant forbid killing an innocent human being and eating raw meat (Genesis 9:3–6). This Noahite covenant defines the basic principles of a universal human morality by which God can hold all the nations of the earth accountable. What the prophets call “the day of the Lord” refers to the judgment and punishment of all the nations of the earth, each according to its crimes (Isaiah 13:6; Ezekiel 7:19). Every nation shall be forced to drink the cup of God’s wrath (Jeremiah 25:15). The prophets liken divine judgment to God’s holy war against the Canaanites.<sup>30</sup>

The prophets condemn the other nations not because they are Israel’s enemies, but because of their murderous violence and ethnic cleansing (Amos 1–2; Jonah 3:8). God’s punishment of the nations, like his punishment of Israel, aims to purify and to redeem, not to annihilate (Isaiah 19:25). That is the lesson that Jonah learns when he pronounces doom on the Ninevites, who avert their fate by immediate conversion. Whether they like it or not – and Jonah does not – Israel’s prophets are the instruments of God’s salvation of the entire human race.

In their interpretation of God’s covenant with Israel the prophets demonstrate their ability to think globally. We have seen that the holiness code of Moses includes norms that we would call both moral

<sup>30</sup> Isaiah 9:4 = Judges 7; Isaiah 28:21 = 2 Samuel 5:20, 25.

and ritual.<sup>31</sup> The ritual rules, such as circumcision and dietary restrictions, are intended only for Israel; the point of these rules is to set Israel apart from the other nations. The moral rules, however, are potentially universal, such as “love the Lord your God” and “love your neighbor as yourself.” The prophets, by subordinating specific ritual precepts to the universal moral precepts, prepare the way for Israel to bring every human being to God. The ethical monotheism of the prophets universalizes the local religion of Israel. Where Israelites once looked to the future for military victory over her enemies (Leviticus 26:7–13; Deuteronomy 28:7–13), some of the prophets see the end of idolatry and the global worship of the God of Israel (Isaiah 66:23; Micah 4:2; Zechariah 2:11). Israel has become God’s instrument for the salvation of the entire world.<sup>32</sup>

Socrates was an exemplary citizen of Athens, who sought a way of life worthy of any human being; Jesus was described as the King of the Jews, yet offered healing and hope to people of all nations; Joan of Arc wanted every nation to have its own government, not just the French; Thomas More insisted that the Church of England conform to the rules of the universal church; and Martin Luther King, Jr. compared the caste system in India to segregation in America. All prophets make their stand in a particular place but with a global perspective. For true prophets, the salvation of the whole world depends on what we do here and now.

### PROPHETS AS VISIONARIES

When people think of a jeremiad, they imagine a bitter lamentation, a fierce denunciation, a warning of impending doom. But the prophets were more than critics; they were also visionaries. God will punish Israel and all the nations for their many crimes, but God will also rescue at least

<sup>31</sup> In the holiness code there is an implicit distinction between ritual and morality in the sense that the consequences of ritual impurity are much less severe than the punishments for moral sins.

<sup>32</sup> “Israel, the elect of God, is the arena of God’s self-disclosure to all the nations. The national symbols become supranational, prophecy created the idea of universal history in its conception of the kingdom of God as ultimately destined to extend over all mankind.” Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, 346.

a remnant of his chosen people, who will be a light to the Gentiles and the salvation of the world.

Prophetic expectation is the triumph of hope over experience. Instead of the mostly wicked kings of Israel's history, the prophets promise a splendid messianic king in the future to save his people: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). Such a new and improved Davidic king will usher in a future paradise in which human beings will enjoy harmony with their own desires, harmony with each other, harmony with nature, and harmony with God. God's people will enjoy perfect righteousness and perfect peace (Isaiah 11).

Even in our contemporary secular world, to the extent that we hope for a future of prosperity, peace, and justice, we live in the world of prophetic expectation. Our modern cult of progress grows out of the hope of the prophets for "a new heaven and a new earth" (Isaiah 66:22), where "justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). Our extravagant hopes for future progress are incomprehensible except in relation to the messianic hope of the prophets. But whereas we moderns presume to be capable of improving ourselves, the Hebrew prophets look to God's saving action to bring about the messianic age.

Some of these prophetic visions of a future paradise are directly inspired by our original Paradise, the Garden of Eden: "The Lord will comfort Zion ... and make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord" (Isaiah 51:3). The prophets promise a return to the Paradise that God originally intended for human beings – a Paradise that was our home until we were expelled for disobeying God. In Eden, there is no predation: All animals are vegetarian, symbolizing the harmony among all creatures and our harmony with nature (Genesis 1:29–30). At the center of Eden is the tree of life – promising immortality to those who eat its fruit – a tree which reappears in prophetic visions (Ezekiel 17:24). Eden is also a place where food can be had with a minimum of toil – just pluck the low-hanging fruit. In this vein, the prophets sometimes promise that the land of Israel will similarly overflow with milk and honey (Jeremiah 32:22; Ezekiel 20:6, 15).

The prophetic vision of world peace helped to inspire the founding of the United Nations. When Israel brings all the nations to God, "they



shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4). Not only will nations be at peace, so will the wild animals: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid ... and a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 11:6).

Prophetic visions show God comforting his people. There will be no need for sun or moon “for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended” (Isaiah 60:20; Revelation 21). When God restores Israel to Zion, “I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow” (Jeremiah 31:13). To dramatize his hope in God’s promise of the restoration of Israel, Jeremiah purchases a field during the siege of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 32). He is mocked for investing in a country that is about to be laid waste, but Jeremiah foresees the eventual restoration of Israel.

Prophets are a paradoxical combination of pessimists about the present and optimists about the remote future. Jeremiah forecasts the destruction of Judah but also promises that God will forge a new covenant with Israel, a covenant in which God’s law is written in the heart of every Israelite (Jeremiah 31:31–33). Ezekiel has a vision in which he prophesies to the dry bones of the former Israelites – and his prophetic words breathe new life into old bones. What a symbol of the power of prophecy: to raise the dead into newness of life. “Thus says the Lord your God, I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people” (Ezekiel 37:12). Even death cannot separate God from his people.

The prophets are the first utopians – their visions of paradise are meant to be a standing rebuke to our complacency and failure. The gap between how God intends us to live in paradise and how we live today should be a reproach and an embarrassment. The visions of the prophets are a mirror in which we see the radical evil and injustice of our own societies. Some biblical utopias are in a remote place, like the Garden of Eden; others are located in the remote future, like the messianic age of Isaiah. These biblical utopias inspired modern literary utopias, some of which are set in remote places, like Thomas More’s *Utopia*, while others are set in the future, like H. G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia*.

Utopian politics became discredited by the efforts of fascists and communists to create ideal societies, often requiring the use of violence

against recalcitrant human nature. But the Hebrew prophets condemn as prideful any human effort to create a new paradise; indeed, according to the Bible the entrance to Paradise is blocked forever (Genesis 3:24). The visions of the prophets will be realized by God alone in the fullness of time.

Our later prophets, from Socrates to Martin Luther King, Jr., were all inspired by visions of ideal societies – what King called “the promised land” of righteousness and justice. Many social reformers despise the visions of the utopians as mere daydreaming. But those reformers are wrong: Better always implies best. There is no reform without utopia. How could we measure progress without a goal? The visions of the prophets cannot be fully realized in this imperfect world; but without their visions we could not hope to become less imperfect.

False prophets have led many people away from God, which is why many Jews have claimed that the age of prophecy is over (Zechariah 13).<sup>33</sup> Prophets are at best wild cards and at worst loose cannons in religious life. Indeed, the whole purpose of organized religion is to keep God’s power operating within official ritual channels. Priests speak for God by proclaiming Scripture; priests act for God by forgiving sins. These practices are essential for any community of biblical believers. Prophets claim to speak and to act for God in creative, new, and unofficial ways. They are a standing threat to organized religion – while also breathing new life into that religion. The end of prophecy would mean the end of biblical religion.

According to the prophets, biblical religion is always dying from a hardening of the ritual arteries and is always being rejuvenated by the lifegiving breath of prophecy. God’s saving love for his world cannot be contained by ritual nor controlled by priests; God’s spirit, like the wind, blows where it wills (John 3:8). When Eldad and Medad are prophesying without permission, Joshua asks Moses to stop them. But Moses replies: “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” (Numbers 11:26–29). Joel also looks

<sup>33</sup> According to the Talmud: “since the Second Temple was destroyed [AD 70], prophecy has been taken from the prophets and given over to lunatics and babies.” Quoted in David Novak, *Athens and Jerusalem* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), 62.

forward to a time when everyone, including slaves, will prophesy with the spirit of God (Joel 2:28–29). When Jesus is informed that an unauthorized person is casting out demons in his name, Jesus says: “Do not stop him ... whoever is not against us is for us” (Mark 9:40). Prophets teach us precisely that we cannot predict how God will speak to his people or through whom – God even speaks through the donkey of Balaam (Numbers 22). Whoever is not against the Hebrew prophets is for them.

Socrates, Jesus, Joan of Arc, Thomas More, and Martin Luther King, Jr. were all martyred prophets. The Hebrew Bible frequently refers to kings killing prophets, and Jewish legends of prophets being killed by rulers, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, are found throughout the Talmudic and apocryphal literature.<sup>34</sup> Jesus sees himself as part of a tradition of martyred Hebrew prophets (Matthew 23:29–31; Luke 11:47–51; cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:15). Being persecuted and even killed is something that unites the Hebrew prophets with their successors, from Socrates to Martin Luther King, Jr.

#### GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

For an introduction to the Hebrew prophets, see *Kings, Prophets, and History*, by Josephine Kamm (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966); *The Path of the Prophets: The Ethics-Driven Life*, by Barry L. Schwartz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018); *Thinking About the Prophets*, by Kenneth Seeskin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020). For two very influential philosophical interpretations of Hebrew prophecy, see *The Prophetic Faith*, by Martin Buber, translated by Carlyle Witton-Davies (New York: Harper Brothers, 1949); *The Prophets*, by Abraham Joshua Heschel (New York: Harper and Row, 1955). For sociological studies of the role of prophets, see *Ancient Judaism*, by Max Weber, translated by Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1952); *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, by Michael Walzer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*

<sup>34</sup> On the persecution and killing of prophets in the Hebrew Bible, see 1 Kings 17:3; 18:3–4; 2 Kings 6 and 9; Nehemiah 9:26; Jeremiah 26:20–24; 2 Chronicles 24:17–22. On extra-biblical sources, see “The Killing of the Prophets: Unraveling a Midrash,” by Betsy Halpern Amaru, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 1983, Vol. 54 (1983), 153–180.

by Robert R. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). For the history of the Hebrew prophets, see *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, by Joseph Blenkinsopp (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983). For the theology of the Hebrew prophets, see *The Religion of Israel*, by Yehezkel Kaufmann, translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); *The Message of the Prophets*, by Gerhard von Rad, translated by D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, by John F. A. Sawyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For the political role of the Hebrew prophets, see *The Jewish Political Tradition, Vol 1: Authority*, edited by Michael Walzer et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015). On how the Bible distinguishes true from false prophets, see *Prophecy and Discernment*, by R. W. L. Moberly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).