

The New International Encyclopædia — Prophecy



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PROPHECY (OF. *prophecie*, *prophetie*, Fr. *prophétie*, from Lat. *prophetia*, from Gk. προφητεία, *prophēteia*, prediction, from προφητεύειν, *prophēteuein*, to predict, from προφήτης, *prophētēs*, prophet, from προφάναι, *prophanai*, to say before, from πρό, *pro*, before + φάναι, *phanai*, to say). According to the popular acceptance, prophecy is essentially prediction, a foretelling of events by divinely inspired personages. Inasmuch however as the general ideas on the subject are based upon religious phenomena in Hebrew history, it is but proper, in order to determine the exact force of the term and its development, to turn to Hebrew usage. Adopting this method we find the earlier terms in Hebrew for prophet (e.g. *rō'eh*, 'seer,' *khōzeh*, 'one who has a vision') associated with the prognostication of the future, and there is no reason to differentiate Hebrew prophecy in this stage from the belief common to all peoples in a low state of culture assigns to certain individuals the power of ascertaining the will of the gods in whose hands the future of an individual or of a community lies. Such beliefs were common among Semites closely affiliated with the Hebrews. In Babylonia we find soothsayers, sorcerers, witches, and magicians recognized as necessary elements of society, and various classes of omen-priests connected with the Babylonian temples: *kāhin*, the Arabic equivalent of the Hebrew word for priest (*kōhēn*), is used to designate the 'soothsayer.' The various classes of soothsayers enumerated in Deut. xviii. 9-14 show not only the prevalence of this belief among the Hebrews

up to a comparatively late period, but also the power which the soothsayers continued to exercise even after the period when the Hebrews entered upon a line of religious development destined to mark them off sharply from their fellow Semites.

The Hebrew 'prophet' accordingly traces his origin back to the 'seer,' that is, to the magician, sorcerer, and soothsayer; if he stands out in history as a personage distinct from the 'seer,' it is because there is afterwards added in his case a quality of a higher order. It is not difficult to determine what this quality is. In the proper historical sense, the term 'prophet' is applicable only to the series of teachers and exhorters who arose among the Hebrews in the eighth century B.C., and through whose influence a new conception of Deity and of the relation of the national god Yahweh to his people was evolved. While also concerned with 'prophecy' in the sense of foretelling the future, they dealt not with individuals, but with the nation as a whole or with the two sections of the people — the northern Kingdom of Israel, and the southern Kingdom of Judah. More than this, the prophetic functions which they exercised, or claimed to exercise, were incidental to their main task, which was to impress upon the people the sense of responsibility for their acts to a Deity, who governed, not by caprice, but by high standards of right, purity, and Justice, and who was therefore to be approached, not by gifts and sacrifices, but by a contrite heart and a genuine spirit of devotion. The prognostications indulged in by those prophets of whose

utterances we possess fragments in the ‘prophetical’ division of the Old Testament are largely concerned with threats of divine punishment for disobedience to Yahweh's will and decrees. They are accordingly based upon the profound conviction of the prophet that wrong-doing is certain to be punished; and in this respect their prophecies differ essentially from the attempts of soothsayers and diviners to determine by means of omens and oracular devices the course that will be taken by events and to ascertain the will of the gods.

This view of the prophetical calling among the Hebrews applies to the prophets from Amos to the anonymous Malachi, including therefore the brilliant galaxy Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. At the same time it must be acknowledged that, even in the case of these exhorters, survivals of the more primitive prophetic functions are to be discerned. While discarding the oracular methods of the soothsayers, they yet stand forth as interpreting certain signs and symbols in connection with Yahweh's purposes, and above all they claim, or are represented as claiming, to have had visions in which the future — generally of the nation — was revealed to them. No doubt it was this claim and the belief in their extraordinary powers that lent them a large measure of the influence that they exerted. And it is not necessary to assume that the prophets of the higher order no longer believed in the supernatural phases of their calling. They deeply felt that they were speaking in Yahweh's name and they were essentially the children of

their day in accepting the position that Yahweh made his will known to his people through certain individuals singled out for the purpose.

The importance, therefore, of the Hebrew prophets consists in their paving the way for a new and far higher conception of prophecy, which, becoming in time more and more dissociated with mere foretelling propensities, made the prophet the moral and religious teacher *par excellence*. The highest expression of prophecy in this sense is to be seen in the announcement of a glorious age when with the complete reconciliation of Yahweh with his people a new period is to be ushered in, marked by the triumph of right and justice, and when the worship of Yahweh will be freed from all impurities and unworthy features. That this new era was closely bound up with strictly national ideals represents a natural limitation, the absence of which would have placed both the prophets and prophecy entirely beyond the intellectual and religious horizon of their times. As late as the advent of Jesus, the Messianic period (as the new era was designated) was bound up in the minds of the masses with the restoration of the Jewish kingdom, and though Yahweh long ere the days of Jesus had ceased to be a merely national deity, yet even the God recognized as supreme and single in the universe was bound by special ties to a particular people; and even when the Messiah was no longer pictured as an earthly king, the limitation of Hebrew prophecy appears in the position accorded to Jerusalem, which, as the chosen seat of the universal God,

was to be the spiritual centre of mankind — the gathering place to which all nations would make pilgrimage.

The view of prophecy above unfolded makes it doubtful whether the term prophet is applicable to such personages as Elijah and Elisha, or even to Samuel and Moses. That in the Old Testament the name *nābī'* is distinctly applied to them is simply due to that projection of later conditions into the remote past which is a distinguishing feature of the theory controlling historical compilation in the Old Testament collection. According to this theory, the religious views and ideas of the later prophets are but special expressions of a faith first promulgated by Abraham and given a definite shape by Moses. As a matter of fact the historical rôle of Moses and Samuel, so far as this can be determined, was so essentially different from that of the prophets from the eighth century on, that it is only a source of confusion to apply the term *nābī'* to those who flourished before the beginning of the religious movement that takes its rise with Amos. Elijah and Elisha are in a measure forerunners of this movement, but the religious problem in their days, involving mainly the conflict between the Yahweh cult and the Canaanitish Baal cults, is so entirely different from the one encountered when we come to the prophets in the real sense that we ought likewise to avoid the extension of *nābī'* to individuals of whom Elijah and Elisha are types; or, if the term 'prophet' is to be extended to them, it should at least be recognized that they are prophets of a totally different character, standing far closer

to the old Semitic *kāhins*, who, more or less closely organized into a guild, differ from the ordinary representatives of the gods — the priests — only in not being attached to any particular sanctuary, but, passing from place to place, furnish oracles to those who seek them out, and engage in religious practices that are the outcome of primitive religious beliefs.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. Out of the large mass of literature the following works are selected: Smith, *The Prophets of Israel* (London, 1882); Kuenen, *The Prophets of Israel* (Eng. trans., London, 1877); Duhm, *Die Theologie der Propheten* (Bonn, 1875); Ewald, *The Prophets of the Old Testament* (Eng. trans., London, 1875); Kittel, *Prophetie und Weissagung* (Freiburg, 1899); Riehm, *Die Messianische Weissagung* (2d ed., Gotha, 1885; Eng. trans., Edinburgh, 1891); Cornill, *Der israelitische Prophetismus* (Strassburg, 1894; Eng. trans., Chicago, 1897); Darmesteter, “The Prophets of Israel,” in *Selected Essays* (Boston, 1895); Briggs, *Messianic Prophecy* (New York, 1886); and the Old Testament theologies of Dillmann, Smend, Oehler, and Schultz. See [ELIJAH](#); [ELISHA](#); MOSES; SAMUEL; and the articles, on the different prophets of the Old Testament and their books.

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