



Prophets and Prophecy

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Published: 15th January 2021

CenSAMM. 2021. "Prophets and Prophecy." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/prophecy.

Background

In the context of religious studies and theology, 'prophecy' can be broadly understood as a cross-cultural phenomenon involving claims of supernatural or inspired knowledge transmitted or interpreted by an authoritative recipient, intermediary, or interpreter labelled a 'prophet'. The term is also used in a more general and secular way to refer to individuals who simply predict or prognosticate future events, or those leading principled causes or in pursuit of a particular social or political vision without any special association with inspired or supernatural insight. The language of 'prophet' and 'prophecy' in English derives from the Greek προφήτης (*prophētēs*) found in the Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and in the New Testament. The Greek term is also a translation of the Hebrew נביא (*navi'*) in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, though other Greek and Hebrew words are found. Both the Greek and Hebrew roots suggest ideas of 'telling forth', 'announcing,' and 'making known', but the terms were used with a range of related meanings, and an explanation of a passive meaning of the term is worth noting: 'one who has been called.'

The relationship between the written presentation of prophets and prophecy in the Bible and similar phenomena in the Ancient Near East is complex and contested in critical scholarship (for an overview, see Kelle 2014). However, while contextual differences must be noted, the various practices, types, and ideas attributed to biblical prophets are broadly paralleled in the Ancient Near East and ancient world (on which see, e.g., Nissinen 2017). Furthermore, individual or collective ownership of a supernatural message, predictions of destruction, conditional warnings, critiques of society, oracles, authoritative dreams and visions, divination, seers, spirit possession, and trance-like or ecstatic states, are recurring phenomena across cultures, continents, and time (see, e.g., Grabbe 2010).

'Prophet' and 'prophecy' in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, as well as the New Testament, cover a range of diverse practices but are generally associated with an intermediary function between the human and divine worlds, and prophets can be male or female. Biblical and other religious prophets are generally understood to have experienced some kind of divine revelation often including warnings, conditional threats, demands for repentance, and critiques of society and injustice, often accompanied by predictions of destruction and restoration.

Prophetic books form a major part of the Jewish and Christian canons. The 'Prophets' (נביאים; *n^ēvi'im*) form one of the three main sections of the Jewish Bible which is subdivided into the 'Former Prophets' and the 'Latter Prophets'. The Former Prophets comprise the narrative books Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, and tell the story of the history of Israel and Judah. The Latter Prophets are composed mainly of prophecies in poetic form and comprise three books named after the three major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) and a fourth book named after twelve minor prophets. The latter is called the Book of the Twelve in the Jewish canon, but in Christian canons is divided into twelve books named after each minor prophet: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The Latter Prophets collection corresponds with the overall classification of prophetic literature in Christian canons which also add the books of Lamentations (traditionally associated with Jeremiah) and Daniel, and (except in the Protestant canon) Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah. While the Latter Prophets are most closely focused on individual prophets, the narratives in the Former Prophets contain information about the phenomenon of prophecy and stories of some of the most famous prophets (e.g., Elijah, Elisha). There has been much academic discussion on the connection between prophetic literature (particularly as found in the Latter Prophets) and the emergence of apocalypticism and apocalyptic literature, but whatever that historic relationship may or may not have been, prophetic books like Jeremiah and Ezekiel have been the source of numerous apocalyptic speculations and predictions in their long and varied reception histories, including for the book of Revelation in the New Testament.

Prophecy and Prophets in History and Culture

Both the concepts and terms 'Prophet' and 'Prophecy' have been used in analogous ways across religious traditions and movements from ancient times to the present, especially in those tracing a lineage within or overlapping with the Abrahamic faiths and often associated with apocalyptic and [millenarian](#) ideas. The Muslim Shahada (declaration of faith), one of the five pillars of Islam, is often rendered in English as 'there is no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet'—and Muhammad is often referred to simply as 'the Prophet'. The Sibylline Oracles of the fifth century BCE to the fourth century CE performed a prophetic function (including the apocalypticism ascribed to the last, Tiburtine, Sibyl) and came to be absorbed into Christian frameworks of understanding over time. Charismatic mystics such as Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), Margery Kempe (c. 1373–after 1438) (Watt 1997), Reformers such as Martin Luther (1483–1546) (Atkinson 1984) and John Calvin (1509–1564) (Balsarak 2014), and many others, have been identified as prophets or in prophetic terms. Although prophetic elements have been found less frequently in Asian traditions, they are not completely absent. The Buddha is portrayed as a figure with knowledge of the future and predicts not only the demise of awareness of his teachings (as all things are impermanent) but also that a new figure called Metteya (Sanskrit: *Maitreya*) will eventually come to restore order. Within Japanese Buddhism, the thirteenth-century priest Nichiren (1222–1282) is the most obvious instance of a prophetic figure and movement.

More recent movements have referred to their founders and leaders as prophets; for example, the [Panacea Society](#) understood its founder, Octavia (Mabel Barltrop) (1866–1934) to be the final prophet of a line of inspired mystics originating in Jane Lead (1624–1704), the [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#) identify Joseph Smith (1805–1844) and his successor presidents as prophets—including the current incumbent Russell M. Nelson (b. 1924)—and Claude Vorilhon (b. 1946), the founder of the [Raëlian movement](#), formed his identity as a prophet through an overlap of [UFO encounter](#) and biblical learning

(Gallagher 2010). In response to colonialism, many indigenous resistance movements were founded by people claiming to be prophets. For example, several Māori prophetic movements arose in the nineteenth century in opposition to British colonialism in Aotearoa-New Zealand. Prophets such as Te Ua Haumēne (Pai Mārire) and Te Kooti (Ringatū) found inspiration especially in the Old Testament prophets and Israelites, as a way of distinguishing themselves from their Christian colonisers (Rangiwai 2017).

The diverse phenomena associated with prophets and prophecy in the Bible are not necessarily categorised in the same way by practitioners in other cultural and historical contexts or by critical interpreters of them. Nevertheless, it is possible to make comparisons on the basis of how different societies and cultures conceptualise interpreters and interpretation of inspired knowledge. In religious terms, such interpreters might be an individual or a group who claim access to and/or understanding of supernatural knowledge, which might relate to, for instance, predictions, justification of a given authority, or a critique of society. In secular terms, similar labelling (even if ironically) might be given to a group or individual predicting political events or global catastrophes on the basis of readings of sociological or scientific data. For example, Donald Trump was reported to have ‘decried climate “prophets of doom”’ at the World Economic Forum in January 2020 (BBC). Similarly, countercultural figures might be understood as prophets or ‘prophetic’ for being perceived to have spoken uncomfortable truths about society or the ruling class, as commonly found in the case of certain American comedians (e.g., Lenny Bruce, Bill Hicks, George Carlin). Overlapping with the religious and the secular are phenomena like astrology and horoscopes which may or may not invoke the supernatural but remain comparable in the sense of claiming access to or an ability to ascertain knowledge about the future and presenting an authoritative interpretation to a wider audience. (For the cross-cultural study of prophecy, religious and secular, see e.g., Harvey and Newcombe 2013).

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Article information

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Downloaded: 2021-10-01

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