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Between Truth and Trust: The False Prophet as Self-Deceiver?



Abstract: In I Kings 22, a lying spirit deceives King Ahab's prophets into prophesying in unison success in battle. This strange and tragic story enlarges the category of false prophets to include those who are sincere yet mistaken. This biblical report of one of many clashes between true and false prophets offers a conceptually powerful tool for thinking through the human capacity and obligation to discern and convey the truth, one pursued by modern readers of the Hebrew Bible such as Kant and Hobbes as well as by rabbinic readers. In constructing a theory of culpability for the case of the deceived prophet, the rabbis reflected on the intricate relationship of truth to trust in a startlingly contemporary manner.

1. INTRODUCTION

The human capacity and obligation to discern and convey the truth is a subject of fascination within numerous disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, religion, political theory, and law. What constitutes knowledge, and how are deception and self-deception avoided? Whom should we trust to speak truthfully in public life, and how do we distinguish the authentic visionary from the misguided idealist or the dangerous zealot? What are the obligations of those who represent themselves as transmitters of knowledge or true information in society, and what virtues do we insist they possess? Each discipline offers a subtly different vision of where truth is lodged, how best to access and acquire it, and how to

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guard against the human susceptibility not only to external pressures such as popular sentiment but also to internal forces of wishful thinking and fantasy.

The goal of this essay is to show the conceptual power biblical prophecy offers for thinking through these sorts of questions. The crucial feature of biblical prophecy is the reception and disclosure of divine information. In other words, prophets are people who impart knowledge of divine truth to society. Yet, Deuteronomy 18:20 warns that a prophet may “presume to speak in God’s name a word that God did not command him to utter.”¹ The possibility of false as well as true prophecy immediately raises epistemological and evidentiary issues: How does society—or even the prophet himself—know that the prophet is transmitting divine truth? Are there reliable methods of identifying a true prophet or a true prophecy, and who should be regarded as credible in matters of speech and the reporting of private experiences? In later rabbinic readings of the Bible, these questions intersected with questions of moral and legal responsibility. Does the prophet have an obligation to avoid deception or self-deception? The problem can also be framed as one of trust and authority in public life: When, if ever, can claims of divine knowledge provide a valid basis for political authority?

While early modern thinkers mined biblical prophecy to explore such epistemological and political questions, they often missed crucial features of the biblical narratives highlighted by later readings of the Bible within the Jewish tradition. In this essay, I focus on the Babylonian Talmud’s discussion of the fascinating report in I Kings 22 that God sent a lying spirit into the mouths of King Ahab’s prophets to seduce Ahab to his death. While modern biblical scholars have focused primarily on the theological implications of the narrative—on what it says about God²—the Babylonian Talmud focuses on the uncertainty inherent in private prophetic experience and, consequently, shifts the discourse from truth to trust. A close reading of the Babylonian Talmud suggests that it is linked to a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud, which launches a legal analogy between the prophet and the judicial witness, who both claim private knowledge of the truth. At issue in both cases is the speaker’s trustworthiness. This powerful analogy is artfully reworked by Maimonides in his *Mishneh Torah*, which is concerned with the basis for prophetic authority.

¹ English translations of biblical passages are my own, based on the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) Tanach.

² See, for example, R.W.L. Moberly, “Does God Lie to His Prophets? The Story of Micaiah ben Imlah as a Test Case,” *Harvard Theological Review* 96:1 (2003), pp. 1–23; Yael Shemesh, “Lies by Prophets and Other Lies in the Hebrew Bible,” *Janes* 29 (2002), pp. 81–95.

I analyze these three texts in detail in order to show their intricate relationship to one another and, especially, to the biblical record. The debate about reading the Bible in itself versus reading it through the lens of a particular tradition is an important one. Here, I merely seek to demonstrate that the early rabbis, as careful readers, identified nuances in the biblical text that often escape the attention of modern readers. By working first through the rabbinic material and backward to the Hebrew Bible, we can capture a new angle on the Bible's approach to truth and to trustworthiness that has surprising contemporary intellectual resonance.

2. FROM THE BIBLE TO MODERN UNCERTAINTY

The biblical text already exposes the basic dilemma of prophecy. On the one hand, prophets have privileged knowledge of absolute truth, the word of God. On the other, the biblical text itself points to a variety of ways prophecy is potentially unreliable and untrustworthy. The Bible juxtaposes prophecy with sorcery:³ the nations resort to soothsayers, diviners, and augurs, whereas to Israel, God assigns the prophet. The prophet, though, does not invariably convey the words of God. A prophet may "presume" to speak in God's name a word that God "did not command him to utter" or speak "in the name of other gods."⁴ Earlier, in Deuteronomy 13:2–6, the text addresses those who incite others to idolatry, and prophets are the prime example. Deuteronomy attempts to address this issue of lack of trustworthiness and uncertainty but succeeds only in raising further difficulties. On its face, the biblical text addresses only the question of how to discern a false prophet, leaving the question of how to recognize a true prophet unanswered, except by negative implication.⁵

The biblical text stipulates two tests of false prophecy. A prophet who incites idolatry or speaks in the name of other gods is, by definition, false. As for all other prophets, Deuteronomy 18:21–22 declares:

And should you ask yourselves, "How can we know that the word was not spoken by the Lord?"—if the prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, and the word does not come true, that word was not spoken by the Lord; the prophet has uttered it presumptuously; do not stand in dread of him.

³ Deuteronomy 18:14–15.

⁴ Deuteronomy 18:20.

⁵ See Gerald Blidstein, "On the Institutionalization of Prophecy in the Halachic Writings of Maimonides," *Daat* 43 (1999), p. 31 [Hebrew].

The falsification of prophecy is thus remitted to the judgment of history. It is only in the canonical process, however, that the test of history emerges as a meaningful concept. Prophecies that were preserved in the scriptural canon, by definition, survived the test of history. The test of history is of no use, however, at the critical juncture when action by the community is required. By negative implication, the text implies that a prophet whose message survives the test of history is to be regarded as true, but it does not exclude the possibility that additional tests of true prophecy may be required. Thus, at various points, the Bible implies that the prophet will produce a sign or wonder, as did Moses, the paradigmatic prophet, as evidence that he has been sent by God. Deuteronomy warns, however, that God may test the nation by sending a prophet or a “dreamer of dreams” who incites idolatry and yet produces a sign or wonder, raising the question of whether the production of a sign is irrefutable proof of true prophecy in other cases.⁶

Cases of false prophecy are rampant in the prophetic books. The biblical books of Kings, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel initiate a psychological reflection on the problem. False prophets are not only people who speak in the name of foreign gods. They are those who offer accommodating oracles to those who solicit them and pay for their services. They are pretenders who pass off the prophecies of others as their own. They are led astray by a lying spirit sent by God to foster the divine plan of history or bearers of messages of hope and consolation, led astray by their dreams and wishful thinking. “The affabulations of their heart,” the false prophets’ dreams, are the equivalent of lies, according to Jeremiah.⁷ The description of prophets as dreamers of dreams or as those who experience a lying spirit seems to enlarge the category of false prophets to encompass not only intentional deceivers and charlatans but also those who are deluded, self-deceived, or even innocently mistaken.

The rabbinic debate about prophetic access to legal information is prefigured in Deuteronomy 18. Immediately after ordaining a court system, the text promises that prophets “like” Moses will appear. Yet the prophet’s function is not clear. The context stresses the clairvoyant function of the prophets, for the promise to raise up prophets from within Israel follows the instruction not to turn to foreign diviners. Yet, in verse 16, Scripture refers to legal matters as within the prophet’s competence: the people at Sinai feared to hear the word of God directly and requested mediation through a prophet, and verse 16 implies that God will send

⁶ See Isaiah 38:7–8: “And this is the sign for you from the Lord that the Lord will do the thing that he has promised.”

⁷ Jeremiah 23.

prophets to utter, like Moses, “that which God commands.” In verse 15, the prophet is endowed with what appears to be institutional authority created by the initial revelation to Moses. “God will raise up a prophet like me [Moses]; him you shall heed.” Thus, despite the cloud of doubt surrounding prophecy, Deuteronomy 18 invests the prophet with authority, but the basis of his authority remains ambiguous, as does the question of whether the prophet is granted authority over legal matters as well as political ones, which has been a contested issue throughout the history of Jewish thought but cannot be discussed in detail here. The prophet’s authority seems to have been created and guaranteed by the initial revelation to Moses, and as such, later prophecy may be subordinated to and coordinated with all the other guarantees of the initial revelation. In verse 20, however, there is no reference to the authority of the prophet himself; rather, what is authoritative is the word of God that the prophet conveys. Israel is obliged to heed “the words the prophet speaks in my [God’s] name.” The prophet’s authority stems from the authority of divine communication itself, which is logically binding whenever God speaks. Thus, the prophet potentially has the authority to annul, alter, or supersede the initial revelation. That power is deeply problematic, however, given the possibility of false prophecy. Yet limiting the prophet’s authority because of uncertainty about the prophet’s status is equally troublesome. First, mistaking a true prophet for a false one is tantamount to rejecting God’s word. Moreover, at stake is the authority not only of later prophets but also of Moses as prophet. Thus, the concession of uncertainty about the genuineness of prophecy casts a shadow on the initial Mosaic revelation as well.

Several modern thinkers mined the biblical portrayal of true and false prophecy for its conceptual power in thinking through these issues of political and moral authority. Within modern biblical criticism, for example, the classical prophets are often analyzed with an eye toward identifying the characteristics that mark a “true” political or moral visionary.⁸ The biblical description of the uncertainty of true prophecy also played a critical role in early modern philosophical and political treatments of the validity of appeals to revelation as a ground of judgment or authority. Both Kant and Hobbes argued that prophecy can bind only the prophet who personally experiences the revelation, because prophecy lacks the requisite objectivity or certainty to bind others.

For Kant, the problem was epistemological. He claimed there to be no method of evaluating claims of truth that have their ground in the

⁸ See, for example, Simon John DeVries, *Prophet Against Prophet* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1978).

“particular character of the subject.”⁹ A judgment that is grounded in private experience, such as belief, is, for Kant, a persuasion having only private validity, because it is impossible to show “its validity for the reason of every man.”¹⁰ Hence, revelation, as a private experience that is not open to question, cannot have the status of a conviction. In his comments on the *Akeda*, the Genesis narrative of the binding and near sacrifice of Isaac, Kant pursued this point to question even prophecy’s private validity. Because prophecy is uncertain and may be true or false, the prophet has a moral duty to question his own experience. Kant framed the *Akeda* as a conflict between certain and doubtful propositions, juxtaposing the absolute certainty of the moral imperative not to slay one’s child with the uncertain appearance of God. Accordingly, Abraham should have questioned whether the command to slay Isaac was really from God.¹¹

Hobbes viewed the problem of true and false prophecy as a political one and used it to dispute the claim of all revelation to authority.¹² For Hobbes, the danger lay in mistaking a false prophet for a true one, causing men to be “lead by some strange Prince; or by some of their fellow subjects, that can bewitch them... into rebellion,” reducing order, government, and society “to the first Chaos of Violence.”¹³ Hobbes’ scrutiny of Scripture revealed two defects in prophecy that deprived it of the requisite certainty to bind anyone but the prophet himself. First, even the extraordinary prophets “took notice of the words of God no otherwise than through their Dreams or Visions, which is to say their imaginations... which imaginations in every true prophet were supernatural; but in false prophets were either natural or feigned.”¹⁴ Therefore, each individual must use his own judgment to determine whether a message originated in a true or false prophet. Second, even Moses, who in contrast to the later prophets may have received the commandments directly from God, was reporting a private experience, not witnessed by others. But Scripture cannot be made law by someone else’s claim that it is revealed by God. Because no one can be certain of the genuineness of prophecy or

⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. J.M.D. Meiklejohn (London: George Bell and Sons, 1890), ch. 2, sec. 3, p. 497.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See Immanuel Kant, *Streit der Fakultäten*, vol. 7 (Prussian Academy edition), p. 63, quoted in Jerome I. Gellman, *The Fear, the Trembling and the Fire* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1994), p. 3, n. 4.

¹² For a full discussion, see Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 137–141.

¹³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. MacPherson (Oxford: Penguin Classics, 1985), p. 469.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

the existence of revelation unless he or she experienced it directly, revelation provides too shaky a foundation for the authority of the law. Hobbes' solution was to ground the authority of Scripture in the sovereign. Moses' authority arose, for Hobbes, only after the people entered into a social contract with him and made him sovereign. Hobbes used Scripture to subordinate the Bible to the absolute sovereignty of the Leviathan, yet in pursuit of his political program, Hobbes exposed with great precision the problems the biblical text bequeathed to its rabbinic readers as well.

Both Kant and Hobbes stressed the private and uncertain nature of the claim of prophetic experience. Such admissions about the uncertainty of revelation and of private experience would seem to be possible only in modernity, once faith and an uncritical approach to authority as given waned, and a fuller image of the private human agent, whose intentions are concealed or subject to unconscious processes, emerged. As a result, the limitations of evidence became widely admitted. The turn to trust as a basis for social and political interaction, rather than faith in the divine or confidence in institutional roles, is traced to this shift. Trust appears on the heels of the turning of the problem of faith into a problem of sufficient evidence, "bringing an element of risk into Christian apologetics that brought them firmly into the modern world."¹⁵ Moreover, trust, as opposed to faith in the divine or confidence in institutions of role or professional actors, is aimed at the mundane individual whose experiences, character, and intentions are private and opaque and cannot be entirely confirmed.¹⁶ Thus, "risk, as an aspect of social relations," along with metaphysical doubt, characterizes modern society, and trust is seen as its "solution."¹⁷

Rabbinic discussions of true and false prophecy, anchored in the biblical text, offer an interesting and early recognition of uncertainty and the limitations of evidence, of the private human actor, whose experiences and intentions cannot be entirely confirmed, and of the concept of trust. These discussions, prefigured by the biblical text itself, anticipate the modern critique of prophecy while proposing quite different solutions, which draw not only on various religious assumptions and modes of thought but also on universal legal categories and concepts. For prophecy, like every other human experience, is analyzed within the framework of the halacha's legal categories and is subjected to the fine scrutiny of the rabbinic legal mind. The discussion is primarily theoretical and not

¹⁵ Adam B. Seligman, *The Problem of Trust* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 169.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

practical, for the rabbinic tradition assumes that the age of prophecy has ended. Yet the subject is not entirely moot. Prophetic claimants have appeared periodically throughout history, and the need to safeguard against false prophecy retained varying degrees of urgency.

3. PROPHECY, TRUTH, AND TRUST IN THE TALMUD

The problem posed by prophecy is well captured by the following comparison between rabbinic and prophetic authority that appears in the Jerusalem Talmud:

The prophet and the sage—whom do they resemble? A king sends supervisors to one of his territories. Of one he wrote to the subjects in that territory: if he does not show you my seal and my insignia, do not trust him. Of the other, he wrote: even if he does not show you my seal and my insignia, trust him. So with regard to prophets, he wrote: “and he give you a sign or a wonder” (Deuteronomy 13:2). But with respect to the sages, “According to the law that they shall teach you” (Deuteronomy 17:11).¹⁸

Unlike rabbinic discourse, then, which is trustworthy by virtue of its public teaching, the truth of prophecy is hidden in the prophet’s private experience and cannot be trusted, absent authentication that the prophet’s speech is from God.

Although the Jerusalem Talmud here invokes the Deuteronomic test for authenticating a prophet—the production of a sign or miracle—other tests disqualifying a prophet as false are not ruled out by the biblical text. One test, rarely discussed in post-talmudic literature, appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 89a, which sharpens the problem by focusing not only on the dilemma of society but also on the dilemma of the prophet. The Talmud notes that according to Deuteronomy 18, those who ignore the words of the prophets are subject to divine punishment, while the false prophet is put to death by the court. It elaborates that the obligation to heed a prophecy falls not only on the community but also on the prophet, who is forbidden to transgress or suppress his prophecy. If the prophet suppresses a true prophecy, he risks death at the hands of heaven. If he utters a false prophecy, however, he risks execution. But what of the prophet who may be mistaken about the nature of his prophecy? Is prophecy subject to error and, if so, how is punishment justified, given Deuteronomy’s description of the false prophet as acting with intent?

¹⁸ *Jerusalem Talmud*, Sanhedrin 11:4.

The locus classicus of this problem, which becomes the focus of the talmudic discussion, is I Kings 22:2–38. Ahab, the king of Israel, invites the king of Judah, Jehoshaphat, to go into battle with him. Four hundred prophets prophesy in unison: “Go up, and God will give it into the hands of the king.”¹⁹ Jehoshaphat, however, immediately asks for another prophet, and Micaiah son of Imlah is summoned. Meanwhile, one of the prophets, Zedekiah son of Kenaanah, provides himself with iron horns and, according to verse 11, says: “With these you shall gore the Arameans, till you make an end of them.” In verse 13, Micaiah is told: “Look, the words of the prophets are with one accord [literally, one mouth] favorable to the king. Let your word be like that of the rest of them.” Micaiah initially prophesies that the king will succeed, but when pressed to speak the truth he prophesies disaster, and, in verses 19–23, he justifies his prophecy by detailing his prophetic vision. “I saw the Lord seated upon his throne.... The Lord asked: ‘Who will entice Ahab so that he will march and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ A certain spirit came forward and said: ‘I will entice him... I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’” The kings nonetheless go into battle, and Ahab is lured to his death.

Zedekiah is identified by the Talmud as an exemplar of the false prophet who prophesies “what he has not heard” from God, who merits the punishment of death for his false prophecy. But the circumstances of his prophecy make Zedekiah a tragic figure, a victim of divine ruse, far from the classic image of the false prophet as a dangerous charlatan or cunning deceiver. His punishment presents a moral dilemma for the court. “What could he have done?” the Talmud asks. “The lying spirit was misleading him.” The Talmud searches for a legal justification for punishing Zedekiah. Zedekiah’s fault, it concludes, was in failing to suspect his experience and test whether he’d received a genuine prophecy. The Talmud states:²⁰

He ought to have scrutinized the matter in light of what Rabbi Isaac said. For Rabbi Isaac said: “One communication [*signon*] may come to several prophets, yet no two prophets convey their communication in the same way [literally, in one *signon*].” For example, Obadiah (1:3) said, “Your arrogant heart has seduced you,” while Jeremiah (49:16) said, “Your horrible nature has seduced you, your arrogant heart.” In the case of these four hundred prophets, however, since they were all speaking identically, it could have been concluded that their speech was worthless. But perhaps he [Zedekiah] did not

¹⁹ I Kings 22:6.

²⁰ *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 89a.

know the teaching of Rabbi Isaac? Jehoshaphat was present and he told them.

According to R. Isaac, God may send identical messages to several prophets. A genuine prophet, nonetheless, expresses the message with stylistic variation, in language distinguishable from that of his predecessors or contemporaries. The moral implications of punishing Zedekiah impel the Talmud to reconstruct a tortuous and improbable chain of transmission of R. Isaac's halachic statement from Jehoshaphat to Zedekiah. Jehoshaphat judged the four hundred prophets in light of this criterion and concluded that, as they spoke identically, "their speech was worthless." In the case of Jehoshaphat, the Talmud is seizing on a gap in the account in Kings. For Jehoshaphat asks whether there is "no other prophet of the Lord" immediately after hearing the four hundred, when history had not falsified their oracle, implying that he could judge from their speech that their prophecy was untrue. The assumption that Jehoshaphat told Zedekiah of this test solves the local question of locating Zedekiah's guilt. Zedekiah, too, should have "scrutinized" the matter in light of R. Isaac's legal test, of which Zedekiah had knowledge. In other words, Zedekiah was obligated to engage in a rigorous examination of the prophetic message he received before uttering his prophecy in the first instance, given that it was identical with the prior prophecy uttered by the four hundred.

This talmudic passage is a hybrid of halacha and *agada*.²¹ The question of Zedekiah's guilt is a legal one. Yet its legal resolution depends on the narrative imagination. Still, both the imposition of culpability on Zedekiah and the normative implication of R. Isaac's statement beg further analysis. What picture of prophecy is presupposed here? Why does even the sincere prophet have an obligation to question his prophecy, and why is the failure to take account of external legal criteria of true and false prophecy regarded as the equivalent of an intentional act of false prophecy meriting the death penalty? Moreover, how does R. Isaac's test bear on the truthfulness or trustworthiness of the prophecy? Is the prophet's unique speech a mark of a true prophetic message or of a trustworthy prophet?

²¹ For a different interpretation of this difficult passage, see Robert Goldenberg, "The Problem of False Prophecy: Talmudic Interpretations of Jeremiah 28 and I Kings 22," in Robert M. Polzin and Eugene Rothman, eds., *The Biblical Mosaic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). Goldenberg contends that the rabbis inverted the apparent meaning of the biblical texts to avoid the theological difficulty that God himself cannot be trusted.

3.1 Prophecy and Error

In adopting R. Isaac's tradition as a normative test of true prophecy—one that is binding on the prophet himself—the Talmud launches a new model of prophecy, in which prophecy is uncertain even for the prophet.²² Standard critical biblical scholarship tends to accept the common view of the false prophets described in Jeremiah and Ezekiel as either delusional or wicked charlatans. Maimonides, who conspicuously ignored the talmudic passage under scrutiny here, also seems to have recognized only these two classes of false prophets. In his *Epistle to Yemen*, he implied that false prophets are either presumptuous charlatans who should be killed or delusional, sick people who do not merit punishment.²³ And in his comments on the *Akeda*, Maimonides emphasized that “all that is seen in a vision of prophecy” is certain; the prophet has no doubts in any way concerning anything in it.²⁴ The Babylonian Talmud, however, suggests here that the category of false prophets encompasses sincere prophets who err, who mistake a false prophecy for a true one. Thus, prophecy is no longer a spontaneous experience that can be relied on. Because prophecy may be erroneous, the prophet cannot take his sincere apprehension of prophecy as true. Rather, he must act as an objective, third-party observer of his prophecy, abandoning the positional privilege of first-person immediacy and authority. He, and not solely his audience, must check his prophecy in light of external, objective, and normative criteria of true and false prophecy.

Reconceiving prophecy in this way, we encounter a series of interesting questions about the nature of prophecy and the obligation to avoid self-deception. We may put the issue in modern terms as well: Are individuals who present themselves to society as transmitters of knowledge or true information under an obligation to avoid not only external pressures such as popular sentiment but also internal forces of self-deception, fantasy, and wishful thinking?

²² I am grateful to Professor Shalom Carmy for sharing his thoughts and sources on this topic.

²³ In his *Epistle to Yemen*, Maimonides describes a messianic pretender who is treated as a prophetic figure. He would be worthy of death, Maimonides writes, had he acted “presumptuously.” Since he is, rather, delusional, he must be treated like a sick person. Maimonides, *Epistle to Yemen*, in Maimonides, *Epistles of Maimonides: Crisis and Leadership*, trans. Abraham Halkin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 126.

²⁴ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963), 3:24, pp. 501–502.

Although the Talmud does not elaborate, logically, error may occur at two points: either the prophet may mistakenly categorize an experience as a prophecy, or he may draw the wrong conclusion from a prophecy. Prophecy in the talmudic conception is a visual, perceptive experience that must be grasped or interpreted. As such, it may be viewed as subject to the kinds of ambiguity that plague dreams and other pictorial texts. (It is the ambiguity in the visual sense data of prophecy that Maimonides, however, is at pains to deny.) In the later, neo-Aristotelian conception of prophecy, the imaginative faculty, of which prophecy is the highest perfection, becomes, for several medievalists such as Ibn Daud,²⁵ the source of prophetic error.²⁶ Imagination, Ibn Daud wrote, “sometimes creates a false form... and sometimes brings forth a true form.”²⁷ Some things that are imagined will be true, and others false. Thus, prophecy, like dreams, which may be supernatural or natural and thus deceiving, has its origin either in God or in the creative imagination of the prophet. According to Hasdai Crescas,²⁸ the false prophet Hananiah, whom Jeremiah castigated, was not guilty of lying or deceit. Crescas described Hananiah as one who “erred in the measure of the force of his imagination; he imagined that his dream about the king of Assyria was a prophetic dream.”²⁹ Here, as Alan Cooper points out, ancient biblical and medieval psychology comport with modern psychological findings.³⁰ Actual perception and mental imagination are virtually indistinguishable, and the human ability to perceive the difference between the two is fragile. Alternatively, the error may be classified, as in the standard account of knowledge, as one of unjustified true belief. The attribute of concern here is objectivity, the drawing of appropriate conclusions from the prophetic sensory experience.³¹

²⁵ The Spanish Jewish philosopher Abraham Ibn Daud (ca. 1110–1180), also known as Raavad.

²⁶ See Alan Cooper, “Imagining Prophecy,” in James L. Kugel, ed., *Poetry and Prophecy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 26, 38–41.

²⁷ Abraham Ibn Daud, *Ha'emuna Harama*, p. 73, quoted in Cooper, “Imagining Prophecy,” p. 39.

²⁸ Born in Barcelona, Crescas (ca. 1340–1410) is known in the history of modern thought for his influence on Spinoza.

²⁹ Hasdai Crescas, *Or Adonai* (Vienna: Druck und Verlag von Adalbert della Torre, 1859), 2.4.3, p. 44b, discussed in Cooper, “Imagining Prophecy,” p. 40.

³⁰ See Cooper, “Imagining Prophecy,” p. 37.

³¹ On objectivity as a credibility attribute in personal observation testimony, see David A. Schum, “Hearsay from a Layperson,” *Cardozo Law Review* 14:1 (1992), p. 1; Schum, *The Evidential Foundations of Probabilistic Reasoning* (London: Wiley, John & Sons, 1994), pp. 109–112.

That prophecy may be subject to error, however, does not resolve the question of whether the sincere but mistaken prophet is legally culpable. To bridge the gap between innocent error and culpability, the prophet must have both the capacity and duty to avoid a mistake. With respect to Zedekiah, the Talmud posits both the capacity to avoid a mistake, by stipulating that Zedekiah was made aware of R. Isaac's test of true and false prophecy, and a duty to do so. Yet Zedekiah sincerely believed that his prophecy was true. Given his sincere belief, why is the failure to avoid mistake, even granted the capacity to do so, viewed as an intentional act of false prophecy, which merits the death penalty, rather than merely a case of "professional negligence"?

The sincere but mistaken prophet may be analogized to one who is self-deceived. The question of whether self-deception is a voluntary and culpable act is at the crux of philosophical studies of the coherence of applying the concept of intentional deception to the self. The "epistemological paradox" of self-deception, namely, that "the self-deceiver 'in his heart' knows what he sincerely denies... generates moral paradox since ignorance and blindness exculpate, whereas knowledge, insight and foresight inculpate."³² A critical moral attitude toward the self-deceiver, one who acts in bad faith, as Sartre put it, is possible if self-deception is viewed as an intentional resistance to taking account of relevant evidence or aspects of the real world that would alter one's beliefs.³³ Crescas insisted that a true prophet can identify an experience of divine origin "by the force of its impression on his imagination," and may rely on it.³⁴ Although Crescas described Hananiah as one who erred, he did not dispute Hananiah's guilt. For Crescas, erroneous prophecy, although not consciously deceitful, seems to involve an intentional failure to know what can be known. Thus, Crescas seems to have gone even farther than the Talmud in imposing culpability on the sincere but erroneous prophet. Even absent external evidence or interpretive norms against which the prophecy can be assessed, the prophet is capable of identifying a false prophecy. In the Talmud, by contrast, self-deception arises out of the prophet's failure to reassess his sincere belief in light of relevant, external evidence. Thus, the failure to take account of R. Isaac's tradition is an act of deliberate self-deception.

³² Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 135.

³³ See L. Jonathan Cohen, *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 133–150.

³⁴ Crescas, *Or Adonai*, 2.4.3, p. 44b, quoted in Cooper, "Imagining Prophecy," p. 39.

The view of self-deception as an intentional act places emphasis on how coming to know the truth is possible. It is best explained by contrasting two different ways of describing the acquisition of knowledge and beliefs: passive accounts expressed in spontaneous visual metaphors such as seeing, and active volitional accounts expressed in metaphors such as saying or doing.³⁵ In placing emphasis on the process of self-scrutiny that the prophet could have engaged in before uttering his prophecy, the Talmud implicitly portrays prophecy as a twofold process corresponding to these two accounts. Prophecy consists of a spontaneous, subjective experience followed by an intentional act of suppressing or uttering a prophecy, analogous to the distinction Bernard Williams drew between having a belief, a private experience, and avowing or disavowing a belief, an intentional act directed at others.

It is precisely this distinction that allowed Williams to argue that accuracy and not only sincerity is implicated in the transmission of beliefs, knowledge, or truthful information in society.³⁶ Sincerity involves spontaneity, “to come out with what one believes, which may be encouraged or discouraged but is not itself expressed in deliberation and choice.” Accuracy, in contrast, “involves the will,” implying intention and choice.³⁷ Accuracy is a dimension of truthfulness because the “[s]elf-conscious pursuit of the truth requires resistance” not only to external pressures such as popular sentiment but also to self-deception, wishful thinking, and fantasy. When it is a question of conscientiously acting “in circumstances of trust” to give others who rely on him true information, an agent has a duty to engage in effective investigation of his own sincerely held beliefs by using methods of inquiry that are “truth-acquiring.”³⁸ The Talmud’s position seems to anticipate this argument. Error may occur, despite the sincerity of the prophet, because the apprehension of prophecy is subject to deception from both external and internal forces. External forces of deception are represented here by the lying spirit. There also may be inner obstacles that promote self-deception. Wishful thinking, the need to express the agreeable, and “resistance to the world as is” also account for false prophecy that has its origin in the imagination or dreams of the prophet. Because the prophet holds himself out to society as the conveyor of God’s words, the Talmud imposes a duty on him to question his

³⁵ Fingarette, *Self-Deception*, p. 34.

³⁶ See Bernard Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 123–148.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

prophetic experience for error before uttering his prophecy, in light of objective norms that the law deems truth-acquiring.

Prophecy thus becomes a site of doubt, questioning, and struggle rather than an uncritical submission to the experience of perceiving God's words. This theme was brought out in later rabbinic reflection on the *Akeda*. Both Saadia Gaon and Gersonides alluded to the possibility that God's command to Abraham was ambiguous.³⁹ The Talmud's imposition of a duty on the prophet to investigate his truth claim for error, in light of R. Isaac's normative test of true and false prophecy, had opened the possibility that prophecy also must be measured against additional standards of truth acquisition known to the prophet, such as legal or ethical norms. This is the gist of modern debates about the inherent contradiction and paradox of the *Akeda*, and of its seeming exclusion of autonomous ethics from religious consciousness. How does one reconcile the Abraham who questions God's justice in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah with the Abraham who submits unquestioningly to divine authority? And how can Abraham commit murder, and of his son, the very son through whom God promised the establishment of a nation?⁴⁰ The talmudic emphasis on testing prophecy in light of normative standards of truth acquisition supports the idea that a prophet who is commanded to violate halachic or ethical norms also must engage in self-scrutiny and examine his own prophetic experience. Whether it is possible, however, to relate to one's inner experience in this manner—to be objective toward oneself and one's experiences—without risking disassociation or alienation, raises further interesting issues regarding self-knowledge.⁴¹ Hasidic masters, Jerome Gellman points out, touch on just such existentialist themes in describing the process of self-scrutiny, doubt, and alienation that Abraham experienced at the *Akeda*. In the Hasidic tradition, however, Abraham's greatness is located precisely in his overcoming the temptation to use external standards of rationality as a self-deceptive strategy to avoid the command.⁴²

In retrospect, we can see that, in treating prophecy as subject to error, the Babylonian Talmud merely intensified the presentation of proph-

³⁹ For a fuller discussion, see Gellman, *Fear*, pp. 28–31.

⁴⁰ See David Hartman, *A Living Covenant* (New York: Free Press, 1985), p. 44; Shalom Carmy, "Paradox, Paradigm, and the Birth of Inwardness: On R. Kook and the *Akeda*," in Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock, eds., *Hazon Nahum* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1997), pp. 459–478.

⁴¹ See Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁴² Gellman, *Fear*, pp. 23–44.

ecy in the Hebrew Bible itself as an uncertain phenomenon susceptible to ambiguity and self-deception, which not only demands but actually involves active critical reflection by the prophet himself. Recently, biblical scholars have called attention to the interpretive role of the prophet in the biblical texts, and the narrative in I Kings 22 is a prime example.⁴³ The oracle reported by the king's four hundred prophets is ambiguous. The message in verse 6—"Go up, and God will give it into the hands of the king"—does not specify which king would prevail. The band of prophets and Zedekiah interpret the oracle as referring to the delivery of the Arameans into the hands of the Israelite king. Indeed, Micaiah may have received the exact same message as the four hundred prophets but understood it differently, in light of Ahab's evil deeds' making him unworthy of victory. In the denouement of the narrative, in verse 24, Zedekiah confronts Micaiah and says: "In what manner did Yahweh's spirit pass from me to speak with thee?" Since Zedekiah sincerely believes that he has been in possession of God's spirit, he is essentially asking "whether the same spirit may speak at the same time in two different prophets to absolutely opposite effects."⁴⁴ R. Isaac's tradition, then, is a comment on this very biblical narrative: God sends the same message to two prophets even though two prophets do not report the same message.

3.2 *Individual Speech, Truth, and Trustworthiness*

The Babylonian Talmud's focus on linguistic formulation as a normative test of true and false prophecy invites us to reflect on the relationship of truth and trust to individual expression. Is individual expression a mark of true prophecy or of a true prophet? Is it the divine insignia of a genuine message from God or a measure of the qualities of mind or character that those who are trusted to convey God's words must possess?

Critical biblical scholarship often draws on modern aesthetic and political criteria of truth and authenticity, which emphasize individuality and self-expression,⁴⁵ to explain why the classical prophets whose speech is preserved in the canon were regarded as "true." Originality of

⁴³ See generally Benjamin D. Sommer, "Prophecy as Translation: Ancient Israelite Conceptions of the Human Factor in Prophecy," in Kathryn F. Kravitz and Diane M. Sharon, eds., *Bringing the Hidden to Light: The Process of Interpretation* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2007), pp. 271–290; Yair Zakovith, "God Said One Word, I Heard Two': Ambiguous Expressions in Biblical Literature," in Zakovith, *Riddles and Dream-Riddles in Biblical Narrative* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2005), pp. 98–110 [Hebrew].

⁴⁴ DeVries, *Prophet Against Prophet*, p. 46.

⁴⁵ See generally Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

thought and expression, a critical moral voice, and iconoclasm become the outstanding features of the true classical prophets, a conception of prophecy familiar in Western political thought. R. Isaac's stress on the prophet's individual speech comports well, at first glance, with the modern conception of prophecy. The individual prophet who speaks in his own voice, formulating the message he receives in language compelling to his audience and the needs of the times, has the capacity to inspire ethical and political action and can be trusted to stand up to the reigning powers or the masses. Like the nonconforming Micaiah, who calls the king to account before the kingdom of God, the prophet who speaks in his own voice announces that his words are impelled by God alone and so can be trusted to represent God's will. The "smooth words in unison" of the four hundred are, by contrast, "worthless," in that each is the product of a conformist, group mentality, motivated by the desire to please the king.⁴⁶

These strong aesthetic and political criteria of truth, developed in a different time and culture, must be sharply modified, however, given the talmudic portrayal of prophecy. For, in the Talmud, an original work is the essence of false prophecy. The Talmud proposes two legal categories of false prophecy: an invention, on the one hand, and a copy, on the other. Even minor variations in the language of one prophecy from another suffice to assure that the prophecy is neither an invention nor a copy and, thus, authentic. To understand why this is so, one must reconstruct the larger legal debate. The talmudic discussion refers to the Mishna in Sanhedrin 11:5. According to the Mishna, the false prophet "prophesies what he has not heard or what was not told to him," implying two different types of false prophecy. The sages link the Mishna's ruling to an anonymous *beraita*, found in *Tosefta* Sanhedrin 14:14, which opens the talmudic discussion. The *beraita* identifies three categories of false prophets: one who delivers a message not heard from God (the Mishna's first case), one who delivers a message sent by God but to another prophet (the Mishna's second case), and one who speaks in the name of idols. The rabbis offer examples of each, culled from the literary record of true and false prophecy. In this context, R. Isaac's tradition—that prophets may receive the same message yet express it differently—is cited by the sages not only to justify Zedekiah's punishment but also to clarify how the literary record of true and false prophecy comports with the *beraita*'s categories of false prophecy, now understood as invention and copy.

The second category, a message sent by God to another prophet, is represented by Hananiah, who plagiarized Jeremiah's prophecy word for

⁴⁶ Michael Walzer, "Introduction," in Walzer, Lorberbaum, and Zohar, *Jewish Political Tradition*, p. 203.

word. Why, then, is a prophecy that appears to cite a prior prophecy but with minor variations in wording—as in the case of Obadiah and Jeremiah, both true prophets, according to the literary record—not a case of plagiarism? The two prophecies refer to the same subject matter, the kingdom of Edom, and are framed in nearly identical language, with minor stylistic discrepancies. R. Isaac's tradition answers this question. Several prophets may receive the same message from God, and so their utterances will be similar yet stylistically diverse. Obadiah and Jeremiah received the same message, yet each expressed it differently. If R. Isaac's tradition holds true (as it now must to explain Obadiah and Jeremiah), the case of the four hundred—a single message expressed identically by prophets speaking in unison—must fall within the first category.

Yet what precisely is the relationship between the verbal formulation of the prophecy and its truth, if even minor stylistic variation suffices to guarantee that the prophecy is not a copy or an invention? This question is all the more difficult to answer because the talmudic discussion does not clarify whether the verbal formulation of the message is the work of the prophet or of God. Is unique expression a mark of true divine communication, of a true prophet, or a necessary feature of credibility?

The careful phrasing of R. Isaac's statement suggests that it is a comment on the nature of true divine revelation, which inevitably results in varied formulations of even a single divine message. Divine communication produces multiple formulations of a single divine message, because divine revelation is multifaceted and not capable of being fully captured or replicated in human speech. The individual speech of the prophet is thus a mark of true divine communication.

This interpretation comports well with other comments about the nature of divine speech and divine creativity that pervade talmudic and midrashic materials. R. Isaac's statement recalls the numerous descriptions of the overflow of meaning in a single divine statement. Psalms 62:12, "Once God has spoken, but twice I have heard," is explained by Abbaye: "A single verse has several senses, but no two verses ever hold the same meaning."⁴⁷ Rabbinic descriptions of the initial divine revelation at Sinai emphasize this overflow of meaning in divine language as a way to explain legal and interpretive controversy. Jeremiah 23:29 describes true prophecy as a hammer that shatters a rock into pieces. In its original context, the verse may have referred to the clarity and univocal nature of true prophecy. The rabbis, however, seized upon this metaphor as a proof-text for the splitting of a single word of God into multiple languages,⁴⁸ or to

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Babylonian Talmud*, Shabbat 88b.

explain the multiple implications or interpretations of a single divine scriptural verse,⁴⁹ implying that interpretive pluralism, the hallmark of the rabbinic project, parallels God's pluralism.⁵⁰ God's pluralism is also mirrored in prophetic communication to the prophet. The unique mark of divine, as opposed to human, speech is precisely the capacity to engender multiplicity from singularity. The Mishna in Sanhedrin identifies the capacity to produce multiplicity from singularity as the mark of divine creation as well. Human and divine creativity differ radically: "Man produces many coins with a single stamp [mold], and each is a replica of the other. But God produced each human with the stamp [in the mold] of the first Adam—[in whose image humans were created]—and yet not a single person resembles his fellow."⁵¹

The notion that there are varied formulations of a single message from God further exemplifies the multiplicity engendered from singularity that is a mark of divine communication. Thus, unlike Jeremiah's description of God's words as clear, certain, and univocal, for the rabbis, all true prophecy exhibits the same multiplicity and pluralism engendered by the initial divine revelation and divine creation. Hence, identical divine messages will engender multiple and varied formulations. A true prophecy from God cannot engender replicas or copies. R. Isaac thus uses the same word to signify both the message and its verbal formulation: *signon*. In talmudic-midrashic literature, this word connotes a visual sign, banner, or identifying mark, recalling the divine insignia, the stamp of God, which the prophet must present.⁵²

Alternatively, unique expression may be a mark of a true prophet. Even talmudic-midrashic sources acknowledged the human contribution to prophecy. The true prophet does not function merely as a mechanism for transmitting God's words; rather, the prophetic relationship is dialogic. Thus, the prophet's individual expression may be viewed as a sign of a genuine divine-human encounter. In Deuteronomy 18:18, the prophet is arguably depicted as a transparent medium. God describes true prophecy as putting "my words in [the prophet's] mouth." Yet, in Kings, the placing of words in the mouth of the prophets is transformed into a sign

⁴⁹ *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 34a. See David Stern, *Midrash and Theory* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp. 15–38.

⁵⁰ This point is made by Hanina ben Menahem, "Controversy in Jewish Law: The Talmud's Attitude to Controversy," in Marcel Dascal and Han-liang Chang, eds., *Traditions of Controversy* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2007), pp. 17–62, 23–24, 31.

⁵¹ Mishna, Sanhedrin 4:5.

⁵² See Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Jastrow, 1967), s.v. *signon*.

of false prophecy. Thus, the lying spirit is put in the mouth of the false prophet, implying a form of possession rather than a true prophecy. In contrast to the lying spirit, which places words directly in the mouth of the prophets who do not hear or see the prophecy, God sends to Micaiah a divine vision. Thus, the text of Kings implies that God communicates not *through* a prophet but *to* a prophet. The prophet does not function as a transparent medium, as one who is possessed by a spirit. Rather, God delivers a communication to a human agent, a prophet who retains his personality and brings his individuality to bear on the content of the revelation. That the prophet maintains his personality even during the prophetic experience is critical to the fulfillment of his mission. God communicates to the prophet and, in turn, the prophet speaks to God, interceding on behalf of the people.

The human contribution to prophecy, evidenced by individual speech, may be conceived in more radical and less radical ways.⁵³ The bolder conception is that prophets freely composed the wording of their prophecies, bringing to bear their different talents, personalities, and education on the content of the divine message. This conception is found in the medieval commentaries of Abravanel, who was influenced, Moshe Greenberg notes, by the “humanism of Christian Europe, with its renewed emphasis on the individual and self-expression.”⁵⁴ According to Abravanel, R. Isaac’s dictum presupposes that the prophets “perceived the general purport of the matter communicated to them... and then related it and wrote it down in their own language.”⁵⁵ In doing so, they often couched their prophecies in the language of their prophetic predecessors. As R. Isaac observed, Jeremiah and Obadiah received the same message. Jeremiah borrowed the language of his prophecy from the verses of Obadiah with which he was familiar, adding his own interpolations.

The intermediary position conceives of prophecy as a mediated experience, in which the prophet’s personality and perceptive capacities inevitably, although passively, interact with the divine communication, producing different prophetic formulations of the same message. Central

⁵³ The topic is thoroughly explored in Moshe Greenberg, “Jewish Conceptions of the Human Factor in Biblical Prophecy,” in Greenberg, *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995), pp. 405, 419.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

⁵⁵ Don Isaac Abravanel, comment on Jeremiah 49:16. As Greenberg notes, Abravanel gives more weight to the conscious human contribution to prophecy in his commentary on the Bible than he does in his commentary on Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*. There, Abravanel follows Maimonides in viewing the prophet as a passive recipient of prophecy who does not contribute to the prophecy he apprehends. Greenberg, *Studies in Jewish Thought*, p. 418, n. 21.

to this conception is the visual nature of the mediated prophetic experience. In Maimonides' writings, a prophetic vision (like a dream) is interpreted, not repeated. Yet the prophet's choice of language and metaphor is not conscious and free. As Maimonides put it, an interpretation is "straightaway impressed" upon the prophet's mind.⁵⁶ At the same time, Maimonides stressed the individuality of each prophet, noting that the prophets varied in their prophetic capacities.⁵⁷ Just as a picture is perceived differently by each viewer, depending on her perspective and distance, the prophetic vision is perceived differently, depending on the life experiences and talents of the individual prophet.

This conception of prophecy is common in medieval writings. Albo summarized it as follows: "Different effects may arise from the same agent, depending on the nature of the recipients."⁵⁸ Because the prophetic utterance is the product of diverse personalities with varying capacities of perception interacting with the visual content of revelation, no two prophets will perceive an identical message in the same way—and so its formulation must vary. But this conception also has deep roots in the talmudic and midrashic understanding of both the visual, mediated nature of non-Mosaic prophecy and the differing perceptive capacities of the prophets. The literary record of prophetic visions already prompted the early rabbis to contrast Mosaic prophecy, which is clear, to non-Mosaic prophecy, which is "through a darkened mirror." Prophets may receive the same vision yet describe it differently given their differing perceptive capacities, as with the throne visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel.⁵⁹

A third interpretation of R. Isaac's statement is suggested by a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud, which focuses on the evidentiary signs a prophet must bring in order to be accepted as a true prophet. In this passage, the Jerusalem Talmud mentions Zedekiah as an exemplar of false prophecy without further elaboration, omitting all discussion of the four hundred prophets and the lying spirit. The Jerusalem Talmud also refrains from citing R. Isaac's test of prophetic style. Nonetheless, when viewed in light of the Jerusalem Talmud, R. Isaac's statement emerges as a simple application of the laws of testimonial witnesses to prophetic speech, rather than a comment on divine language or divine-human encounter.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, "Knowledge," Laws of the Foundations of the Torah 7:3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 7:2.

⁵⁸ Joseph Albo, *Book of Principles*, ed. and trans. I. Husik (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1946), 3:76, p. 84.

⁵⁹ *Babylonian Talmud*, Hagiga 13b.

⁶⁰ *Jerusalem Talmud*, Sanhedrin 11:6 (57b).

This passage also served, as traditional commentators already noted, as a crucial source for Maimonides' reformulation of prophecy in the *Mishneh Torah*.⁶¹

The Jerusalem Talmud draws a legal analogy between the prophet and the judicial witness. In discussing the case of the prophet who incites idolatry, the Jerusalem Talmud quotes R. Yossi ben Hanina's statement that "such a prophet is included within the legal category of one who bears false witness."⁶² The prohibition against false testimony does not carry the death penalty, however; for this reason the punishment of the false prophet is specified. The analogy of false prophecy to false testimony is suggestive and may be elaborated even further. Both the prophet and the judicial witness report private experiences they have observed, which are not subject to common knowledge or any other means of independent verification. In both cases, the credibility or trustworthiness of the reporter is at issue, and judgments must be made to accept such testimony, despite the limited capacity of humans to ascertain the truth of the matter. Thus, the issue at hand is not the truth of the prophecy itself, but, rather, the credibility of the prophet who announces that he has received a message from God.

Indeed, the Jerusalem Talmud seems to extend the analogy in precisely this direction. Immediately after quoting Yossi bar Hanina, the Jerusalem Talmud returns to the question of the signs a prophet must bring. It posits, as quoted earlier, that the prophet must produce a sign or wonder attesting to his prophetic status. In the course of discussing whether a sign or wonder is always necessary, the Talmud poses a case in which two prophets, either together, or separately yet in a single city, announce the same message (although not in identical language). R. Isaac and R. Hoshaya disagree about whether such signs are necessary when two prophets are in agreement. Commentary on this text suggests that the view dispensing with the requirement of a sign or wonder, presumably that of R. Isaac, is based on the application of the laws of witnesses to the case. According to biblical law, the testimony of two conforming witnesses is presumptively credible and must be accepted as true. Because the prophets corroborate each other, reporting the same

⁶¹ See *Pri Hadash*, *Hilchot Avoda Zara* 5:4.

⁶² It is noteworthy that the term "false prophet"—more literally, "lying prophet" (*navi sheker*)—was used for the first time in the Mishna and nowhere appears in the biblical text. Although scholars have speculated that the term was borrowed from the Greek Septuagint translation of Scripture, which uses the word *pseudoprophetes*, it is possible that the term originates in the analogy of the lying prophet to the lying witness, a term found in Scripture. The exact connotation of the word *sheker* in the Hebrew Bible is unclear. As a verb form, it often connotes disloyalty, faithlessness, or unreliability.

message, their prophecy must be accepted as true, and they need not produce any additional signs of their prophetic authenticity.

Conceiving the prophet as a judicial witness also enables a reconception of R. Isaac's test of prophetic style. Individual speech is an external sign of the prophet's credibility. In assessing the credibility of speakers, the law recognizes the evidentiary significance of individual human speech. The Jerusalem Talmud cites R. Huna's practice of strictly examining witnesses whose testimony is worded in identical language. Witnesses whose testimony is worded identically are subject to intense scrutiny by the court because of the suspicion that they colluded and invented their testimony.⁶³ The disqualification of prophecy that is worded identically, one traditional commentator notes, is a simple application of this evidentiary rule.⁶⁴ Variation in wording is legally significant, just as in the case of testimonial evidence. Identical utterances are scrutinized as collusive inventions. Only a message conveyed in distinctive language is exempt from the suspicion of plagiarism or collusive invention. Thus, R. Isaac's tradition can be understood as a normative criterion of suspect prophecy, parallel to the evidentiary rule of the laws of witnesses. Hence the legal term of art employed in the Babylonian Talmud: Zedekiah should have "scrutinized" his prophecy and disqualified himself, as does the judge who "scrutinizes" the testimony of witnesses.

Analogizing the prophet to a judicial witness seems, at first blush, both reductive and formal—a radical departure from the Hebrew Bible's poignant and poetic description of the struggle of Israel's prophets to understand God's word. Yet the analogy is faithful to the logic of Deuteronomy, which linked prophecy from the outset to problems of epistemology and evidence. Indeed, the Jerusalem Talmud's analogy of prophecy to judicial testimony receives its most striking and artful reformulation in Maimonides' treatment of prophecy in the *Mishneh Torah*, which harks back to Deuteronomy.

4. MAIMONIDES ON PROPHETIC AUTHORITY

The aim of Maimonides in the *Mishneh Torah* was not to advance the discussion of how to arbitrate between true and false prophecy. His purpose, rather, was to retain prophecy as a ground for the authority of Mosaic law while, at the same time, undermining the authority of all later

⁶³ *Jerusalem Talmud*, Sanhedrin 3:8. See also *Tur*, *Hoshen Mishpat* 24:4.

⁶⁴ Samuel Eliezer Edels (Maharsha), commentary on *Babylonian Talmud*, Sanhedrin 89a.

prophecy.⁶⁵ Maimonides' treatment of prophetic authority has far-reaching importance for the understanding of the relationship between truth and authority and what constitutes a proper basis of trust. Taken to its logical conclusion, uncertainty about the reliability of prophetic claims of divine knowledge threatens the authority of the initial revelation conveyed through Moses' prophecy.

Hobbes, as noted, used this insight to great effect. Prophecy or revelation, he argued, is too uncertain a basis on which to ground the authority of law, action, or correct beliefs altogether. Because prophecy is a private experience incapable of independent verification, the truth of any prophecy will be the subject of doubt. Moreover, revelation cannot guarantee political order or provide a stable basis for government, because revelation cannot be temporally confined. Maimonides well understood the radical implications that could be drawn from the lack of reliable criteria to distinguish between true and false prophecy, and he proceeded to undertake a comprehensive defense of Mosaic prophecy while insisting that all later prophecy was uncertain. In so doing, he transformed the usual understanding of the basis of prophetic authority and thereby succeeded in maintaining the unity of truth and order achieved in the initial revelation to Moses.

According to Maimonides, a key function of the prophet is to fulfill a political mission.⁶⁶ When charged with a mission, the prophet is given "an evidential sign so that the people know God has truly sent him."⁶⁷ (Maimonides reads the word "sign" [*ot*] as a synonym for "witness" [*ed*]. The miracle serves as a corroborating witness to the prophet's assertion that he is a prophet.) Maimonides did not claim that prophetic experience itself is uncertain or subject to error. In *The Guide of the Perplexed*, he asserted that the true prophet, such as Abraham at the *Akeda*, does not experience doubt. But a prophet may satisfy all the conditions for proving prophetic status and yet be a false prophet, a sorcerer.⁶⁸ Maimonides' emphasis on independent reason led him to conclude that none of the conventional signs of the prophet's authenticity are determinative. Miracles may be trickery, and predictions may materialize through the

⁶⁵ See also Blidstein, "Prophecy in the Halachic Writings of Maimonides," p. 42. Blidstein notes, as well, the talmudic sources for Maimonides' assertion that one prophet can vouch for another. But he connects these sources to Maimonides' depiction of the "chain of prophecy" rather than to the analogy Maimonides draws between prophets and judicial witnesses. See p. 29. On Maimonides' deployment of the legal analogy of judicial witnesses and its relationship to Islamic thought, see p. 39.

⁶⁶ Maimonides, *Foundations of the Torah* 7:7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ See Maimonides, *Epistle to Yemen*, pp. 112–113.

course of natural events. Just as one can never be certain that a judicial witness is truthful, one can never be certain that the signs and wonders performed by a prophet are not illusions. “For whoever believes on the basis of signs necessarily entertains doubts, since a sign can be produced by secret art and sorcery.”⁶⁹ We believe Mosaic prophecy not because of the signs Moses brought. The “doubt-free validation of [Moses’] prophecy” rests on public witnessing of the revelation. “We rather witnessed it with our own eyes, and heard it with our own ears, just as he did.”⁷⁰ Before this public witnessing, Israel believed in Moses “with a trust that remained susceptible to suspicion and second thoughts.” After Sinai, however, Moses is the object of a “perdurable trust.”⁷¹ Mosaic authority is validated by “the certainty of sight,” as Maimonides referred to it in *The Guide of the Perplexed*.⁷²

Establishing the certainty of Mosaic prophecy allowed Maimonides to make two more, interrelated claims. In the first claim, he argued that the certainty of Mosaic prophecy requires the community to disregard a prophecy that annuls any Mosaic law. Scripture, it will be recalled, stipulates that only a prophet who incites idolatry is, by definition, false. The talmudic rabbis debated whether prophets could annul other laws, and some granted the prophet authority to do so. Maimonides rejected this possibility because later prophecy, which is subject to doubt, must logically be subordinated to Mosaic law, which is certain.⁷³ Maimonides compared later prophecy that annuls or alters Mosaic law to the testimony of judicial witnesses. If judicial witnesses tell a person who saw something with his own eyes that it was not as he in fact saw, the person has no choice but to disregard the testimony. His own personal observation proves the witnesses false.⁷⁴

In his second claim, Maimonides reconceived the nature of Israel’s obligation to heed the words of the prophet. We believe post-Mosaic prophets not because they convey the word of God, but because Moses

⁶⁹ Maimonides, Foundations of the Torah 8:1.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 8:3.

⁷¹ Ibid. 8:1.

⁷² Maimonides thus consistently emphasizes the reliability of personal experience or “certainty of sight”—whether that of the community that witnessed Mosaic revelation, that of the judge who sees the very event about which witnesses report, or that of the true prophet who sees a divine vision. This emphasis is necessary to establish the certainty of Mosaic prophecy and also may explain why Maimonides ignores the Babylonian Talmud’s model of prophecy as subject to prophetic error.

⁷³ This is the argument Kant later employs in subordinating Abraham’s prophecy, which is uncertain, to the certain command not to kill.

⁷⁴ Maimonides, Foundations of the Torah 8:3.

commanded that we must “heed” them. After all, we cannot be certain whether the prophet is true or false, even if he brings an evidential sign. The command to heed the prophet who brings signs is comparable to the presumption of truthfulness. Mosaic law obliges the court to extend to the testimony of two competent witnesses, even though the witnesses may, in fact, be lying. Since we listen to prophets solely because Moses so commanded, “how could we possibly accept, on the basis of a sign, someone who comes to deny the Mosaic prophecy?”⁷⁵ Maimonides claimed that the obligation to listen to a true prophet arises only because Mosaic law so requires.⁷⁶ Yet the source of authority of the true prophet, God’s word, is the same and independent source of authority as that of Mosaic law itself. Why then must one refer to the original Mosaic legislation? Maimonides’ explicit response was that only the first revelation is certain in the eyes of the community and therefore validated as authentic. Implicitly, however, Maimonides offered a new conception of prophetic authority.

To understand Maimonides’ innovative approach to prophetic authority, we can distinguish initially between two conceptions of authority. In the first, authority is lodged in a factual event that is outside any system that the event generates. Revelation, for example, is a factual event that expresses the will of God. “Will is a psychological metaphor for the showing forth of the sovereign.”⁷⁷ The sovereign may be conceived of as God, a king, or the people and may show itself in different ways. God makes an appearance through revelation, while the people appear through an act of consent or of revolution, which is the closest secular analogue to revelation. The factual event of revelation is the source of authority of its content, the words of God. This factual event, however, precedes and lies outside any system generated by the content of the revelation, such as a political or legal order. Similarly, the factual event of the consent of the people or of revolution is the source of authority of government or law that the event precedes and generates. This factual event can be replicated at any time and cannot be temporally confined. Each time revelation occurs or the sovereign, whether God or the people, makes an appearance, new content, new political structures, and new law may be generated.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 7:7.

⁷⁶ See Moshe Halbertal, “Maimonides’ Book of Commandments: The Architecture of the Halacha,” *Tarbiz* 59 (1990), p. 463 [Hebrew].

⁷⁷ See Paul Kahn, *The Reign of Law* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 188.

Alternatively, authority may be conceived as constitutive, constituted by and internal to the system initially generated. The comprehensive character of the rule of law is an expression of this form of authority. In *Marbury v. Madison*, for example, the U.S. Constitution is presented as “fundamental and paramount law.” This law now becomes the authority for and source of the whole political order, and all later political action is referred to and judged by this law. The original, external act of constitution making subsumes all later external political acts under its rule, even though these later external acts may be based on the same factual activity that authorized the initial Constitution. Thus, authority no longer derives from and has its source in a factual event outside the system that can appear again at any time. Instead, authority is now lodged in the object that the initial founding event generated, the Constitution.

These competing conceptions of authority are already hinted at in the Deuteronomic text. As noted, two readings of Deuteronomy 18 are possible. In one reading, the authority of the prophet derives from and has its source in revelation; the divine words the prophet conveys. Thus, as formulated in verse 20, there is no obligation to heed the prophet, but, rather, to heed “the words the prophet speaks in my [God’s] name.” What is authoritative is not the prophet but, rather, the appearance of the will and word of God through the medium of the prophet. Revelation is a factual event that is authoritative whenever it appears, and it remains outside the system of law or political institutions that revelation may generate. Each appearance of revelation through the medium of a prophet has, therefore, the capacity to alter or annul the prior law, generate new authoritative systems of law, or generate new political institutions. Divine truth prevails over order. But in verse 15, the prophet is endowed with what appears to be institutional authority created by the initial revelation to Moses. “God will raise up a prophet like me [Moses]; to him you shall heed.” In this conception, the authority of the prophet is derived from and constituted by Mosaic prophecy in which authority is now lodged. This conception of authority subordinates prophecy to law, and truth to order. All later prophecy must come under the rule of law created by the initial authorizing revelation and will have to be coordinated with and subject to the authority of the system of law or governance generated by the initial revelation to Moses.

Maimonides adopts the second conception of authority; that implied by verse 15. Thus, he cites verse 15 (“to him [the prophet] you shall heed”) and never mentions verse 20. Prophetic authority is now constituted by or internal to the system generated by the initial revelation, and all later appearances of the divine will through revelation are subject to the authority of the system that the initial revelation generated. Maimonides’

early elaboration of a constitutive theory of authority enables him to accomplish what Hobbes also intended—the creation of a permanent law and a stable basis for government—without, however, sacrificing the truth revelation promises. Moreover, Maimonides remains more faithful to the text of Scripture, which portrays the Sinai theophany as a public, exoteric event and not, as Hobbes claimed, a wholly private experience.

Although Maimonides resolves the issue of guaranteeing Mosaic revelation despite the cloud of doubt that envelops prophecy, one gap remains in his reworking of prophecy. He leaves open the possibility that a prophet will come forward who produces a sign. Such a prophet must be obeyed, provided he does not seek to annul Mosaic law, even though that prophet may, in fact, be false. Maimonides proceeds to close this gap, again by analogy to the laws of evidence. By placing prophecy within the paradigm of judicial testimony, Maimonides is able to assert that, as in the case of judicial witnesses, the presumption of trustworthiness extends only to those who are first judged competent. Witnesses are deemed incompetent to testify if they are sinners, disreputable, or lack personal rectitude. Such individuals cannot be trusted to be truthful in matters of speech. Prophets also must pass a standard of competence entitling them to the presumption of trustworthiness. They must be within the class of possible prophets. For Maimonides, these are the wise and righteous who are “worthy of the prophetic gift.”⁷⁸ The focus on the prophet’s moral character emerges naturally from Deuteronomy 13 and Jeremiah 23 and is pursued as well in the Talmud.⁷⁹ But it is particularly emphasized by Maimonides. In doing so, Maimonides virtually collapses the once-distinct categories of prophet and sage.⁸⁰

Maimonides is forthrightly responding to the critical question: Who deserves our trust when the truth is unverifiable? In the final analysis, after offering two bases for trust—trust based on communal participation in the revelation, in other words, plain truth; and trust as a function of formal criteria, the legislative command to heed the prophet—Maimonides links trust and authority to the character of the one who is trusted.

⁷⁸ Maimonides, *Foundations of the Torah* 7:7.

⁷⁹ See, e.g., *Babylonian Talmud*, Shabbat 92a.

⁸⁰ On the parallels between prophets and sages in Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, see Blidstein, “Prophecy in the Halachic Writings of Maimonides,” pp. 25–36. On the parallels between false prophets and rebellious elders in the Talmud and Qumran literature, see Aaron Shemesh, “Halacha and Prophecy: The False Prophet and the Rebellious Elder,” in Avi Sagi and Tzvi Zohar, eds., *Renewing Jewish Commitment: The Work and Thought of David Hartman*, vol. II (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2001), p. 923 [Hebrew].

5. CONCLUSION

One may argue that the inevitability of false prophecy, coupled with the absence of clear criteria for authenticating prophecy with absolute certainty, caused the failure and demise of prophecy altogether. The talmudic rabbis gave voice to this perception when they declared that the age of prophecy had come to an end, inaugurating the process of canonizing Scripture. Scholars debate whether the perception that the age of prophecy had passed, that somehow the gates of heaven had closed, was in fact responsible for the canonization of Scripture, or whether the process of interpreting a canonical Scripture led to the abandonment of prophecy as a means of gaining knowledge. Canonization, it is argued, forced the sages to rely on interpretive methods and intellectual endeavor to ascertain the law. Moreover, prophecy itself had gradually undergone transformation, increasingly resembling inspired interpretation rather than direct communication of the words of God.⁸¹

But the unreliability of prophecy as a means of gaining access to the truth, given the lack of criteria to authenticate true prophecy, no doubt contributed to, if not caused, the growing sense that human intellection was no more certain or reliable a means of gaining knowledge of the truth, at least in the legal context, than resort to prophecy. Uncertainty about the law became the condition of man, and the sages struggled to articulate why legal rulings that may not necessarily reflect the true will and intent of the sovereign were nonetheless binding. In so doing, the sages self-consciously chose to forgo possible access to truth for the sake of order and stability. These elements conjoin in the famous talmudic narrative of the Oven of Achnai, which tells of the banishing of prophecy in legal decision making.⁸²

Nevertheless, debates about the merits and defects of prophecy in contradistinction to rabbinic legal reasoning continued into the medieval period. Two contrasting models of prophecy emerged. According to the first model, prophecy provides certain and monolithic access to God's will. The Meiri emphasized this prophetic advantage in tracing the

⁸¹ On the "end of prophecy" and prophecy's transformation, see Suzanne Last Stone, "The Transformation of Prophecy," *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 4 (1992), pp. 167, 169, 172–175.

⁸² See Suzanne Last Stone, "In Pursuit of the Countertext: The Turn to the Jewish Legal Model in Contemporary American Legal Theory," *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993), pp. 813–894, esp. pp. 841, 855–865.

emergence of legal controversy to the cessation of prophecy,⁸³ and it also formed the cornerstone of R. Zadok Hakohen's fascinating reconstruction of the history of prophecy. "For Rabbi Zadok, certain, clear, reliable knowledge comes not from the intellect but from divine, prophetic or mystical, illumination... reason unaided is untrustworthy."⁸⁴ In contrast, talmudic and midrashic texts exalting controversy and pluralism as both desirable and a truer reflection of the pluralism inherent in revelation can be seen as attempts to establish the sage's superiority to the prophet, given this model of prophecy.⁸⁵

According to the second model, however, on which I have focused here, prophecy provides uncertain and unreliable access to God's words. Prophets are human actors subject to the human propensity for deceit and self-deception. They may distort the truth intentionally, as a result of wishful thinking and illusion, or even innocently, by making a mistake. Halachic discourse, in this view, offers more certainty and reliability than prophecy, given the hidden nature of truth and of people.

This latter model of prophecy offers a powerful conceptual model for thinking through a variety of contemporary legal, political, and philosophical questions. Among the most challenging is the question: What makes legal, political, or religious actors worthy of trust and, hence, authority? Is trust a function of truth, of the substantive truth of a message conveyed? Is it a function of the use of modes of reasoning that are truth-acquiring, such as those that can be held up to scrutiny, questioning, and debate? Or is trust a function of the actor's character? In our modern culture, with its deep skepticism with regard to whether objective truth exists at all, the value these readings of the Hebrew Bible assign to character and to modes of reasoning that are truth-acquiring deserves renewed attention.

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⁸³ Menahem Hameiri, *Beit Habehira on Mishna Avot* (Jerusalem: Mechon Hatalmud Hayisraeli Hashalem, 1964), introduction, p. 20 [Hebrew].

⁸⁴ Yaakov Elman, "Reb Zadok HaKohen of Lublin on Prophecy in the Halakhic Process," in *Jewish Law Association Studies Touro Conference*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1985), pp. 1, 6.

⁸⁵ See *Babylonian Talmud*, Baba Batra 12a ("A sage is superior to a prophet"). See also Nissim of Gerondi (also known as Ran), *Drashot Haran* (Jerusalem: Mechon Shalem Yerushalayim, 1977), *drasha* 12, pp. 213–215 [Hebrew].