

## Article

# The Prophet Problem

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**Abstract:** Because scripture represents the direct word of God, it is the most sacred source for authority in the scriptural monotheisms. Scripture is conveyed to humanity through extraordinary individuals known as prophets. But if the purported prophet is a false prophet, then the conveyed message is false, resulting in the collapse of the structure upon which religious authority rests. This problem was recognized in the Hebrew Bible, and accusations of flawed prophecy and deceitful prophets figure prominently in relations between the scriptural monotheisms. Jews do not accept the authenticity of Jesus' role as messiah (and prophet) in the NT, and Jews and Christians do not accept the authenticity of Muhammad's role as prophet in the Qur'an. But the rejection is unidirectional. As a rule, established religions cannot accept new prophets, while new religions accept the prophets that lived before, though with certain qualifications. Each of the three classic scriptural monotheisms also declares an "end" to prophecy after the canonization of its scripture. Yet despite these deadlines, each acknowledges that God could nevertheless send another prophet, leaving open the wild card for new prophecy, new revelation, and even new religion; within each of the classic scriptural monotheisms, individuals arose after the canonization of scripture who were deemed by many to be prophets or something "like" prophets. This essay presents a preliminary phenomenology of prophethood, around which much of the religious polemics between the scriptural monotheisms are constructed.

**Keywords:** prophet; scripture; new religious movements (NRMs); monotheism; polemics; attestation; saint; messiah; Judaism; Christianity; Islam



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## 1. Introduction

Polemics between the scriptural monotheisms derive in part from a set of assumptions typically associated with monotheism. If there is one God and God is all-good, all-knowing and all-powerful, then it might be impossible to imagine that God could reveal different and seemingly contradictory messages to different communities. Assuming God's communication represents absolute truth, it would follow that God's truth is unitary. It cannot be two different things simultaneously. Therefore, only one representation of God's truth can be correct, all others false.

The core repository of God's truth in the scriptural monotheisms is scripture because it represents the unmitigated word of God. And scripture is presumed to have been conveyed to humanity through extraordinary individuals called prophets. The authenticity of prophethood, therefore, lies at the very core of religious authority. If the conveyer of the message is not a true prophet, then the scripture in which the message occurs cannot be trusted, resulting in the collapse of the entire structure upon which religious authority rests. Accordingly, one of the core polemical accusations leveled between the scriptural monotheisms is that religious founders acclaimed as having faithfully conveyed God's word in scripture are not actually authentic, meaning they do not truly speak in the name of God. Therefore, the message they bring has no value and the religion they represent is false. This charge is found in scripture itself (Matthew 15:1–2; Mark 2:23–24, 7:1–5; Q.6:37; 8:31; 11:13, etc.).

Three aspects of prophethood would become key to its central role in the interreligious polemics that flowered after the emergence of Islam. These are the power and success of prediction, the direct association between prophet and written text, and the absolute and overwhelming authority of God to override or abrogate prior revelation and its record in scripture. A fourth aspect, particularly for Christian thinkers (especially in polemics against Islam) was the motive for prophetic leadership and for those who join a religion. If the motives are unworthy (such as lust for power, sex, etc.), then they invalidate the religion (further, see Griffith 1979, pp. 70–74). The issue was important also for some Jewish thinkers such as Judah Halevi and Maimonides (Friedländer 1904, p. 226; Kasher 2008). All these aspects would have a profound impact on the nature and substance of argument between competing expressions of monotheism.

Significant research has been conducted on the phenomenon of prophecy within the scriptural monotheisms (Abd al-Razek 2020; Alexander 1995; Cook 2011; Feldman 1990; Friedmann 1986; Jassen 2007; Kasher 2008; Nissinen et al. 2003; Nissinen 2017; Rabe 1976; Schmidt 2014; Stökl 2002), but the role of prophethood in the conflict and polemics between these religions has only begun to be examined (Adang 1996, 2010; Ahroni 1998; Alexander 1995; Bobzin 2011; Pregill 2011; Samir 2001). The following study treats the evolution of prophethood and some of the controversies surrounding it within and between religious traditions from the ancient Near East through the early Middle Ages. Because of the broad array of production on prophecy and prophethood among the three classic scriptural monotheisms, what follows presents only a preliminary phenomenology of prophethood around which much of the religious polemics between the scriptural monotheisms is constructed. Much more can and hopefully will be studied on this subject.

## 2. Prophetic Evolution

In addition to the well-known and beloved biblical prophets, prophetic types appear in the Hebrew Bible who conveyed messages on the authority of what those sources regard as *false* gods (1 Kings 18, in this example, Ba'al and Asherah), and others who conveyed *false* messages on the authority of the *real* God, the God of Israel (Jer.23:25–26; Jer. 23:9–40 serves as a long discourse on problems associated with prophecy). Prophets on the payroll of kings could give bad advice with prophetic authority, and competing prophets could give contradictory messages, all on the authority of the same God of Israel (1 Kings 22:1–25). Prophecy and prophethood in ancient Israel were powerful but dangerous—even destabilizing—forces. The prophet Ezekiel himself rails against errant prophets speaking in God's name:

Hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God: Alas for the senseless prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! Your prophets have been like jackals among ruins, O Israel. You have not gone up into the breaches, or repaired a wall for the house of Israel, so that it might stand in battle on the day of the Lord. They have envisioned falsehood and lying divination; they say, "Says the Lord", when the Lord has not sent them, and yet they wait for the fulfillment of their word! Have you not seen a false vision or uttered a lying divination, when you have said, "Says the Lord", even though I did not speak? (Ezek.13:2–7, See also Zechariah 13:2–6)

Prophecy did not begin with ancient Israel. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible reflect a well-known function in the ancient Near East. As early as 1800 BCE, the *muhhum*, *assinnu*, *qammatum* or *nabū* filled a similar role to the biblical prophets in their association with various Mesopotamian gods and royal courts, giving advice by conveying divine messages (Rabe 1976, pp. 125–28; Nissinen 2017; Stökl 2002). Because of the long historical period represented by the Hebrew Bible, readers can observe dramatic changes in the development of the notion and function of prophecy and prophethood in the history of ancient Israel. The role and status of prophethood developed along with other forms of authority in the community, such as kingship, and probably in relation to them; additional and some-

times competing forms included the priest (*kohēn*), tribal elder (*zaqēn*), tribal chief (*shofēṭ*) and, later, the king (*melekh*) and the scribe (*sofēr*).

Early prophets were charismatic types who prophesied in trance, sometimes with music and dance (1 Sam.10:5) and not necessarily in direct communication with God. They might travel in bands sometimes referred to in secondary literature as prophetic “guilds” (Paul and Sperling 2007, pp. 567–72; Kratz et al. 2015, p. 20). These prophets were not associated with written discourse and not even necessarily associated directly with God. They were often known as “seers” (*ro’īm*, *hozīm*) who functioned something like the classical Greek oracles who gave messages from beyond human consciousness and understanding (Schniedewind 2018). This role of seer declined and evolved into the more familiar role associated with the term, *navī*, the word that became the classic name for prophet in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition. 1 Sam.9:9 comments on this development: “Formerly in Israel, anyone who went to inquire of God would say, ‘Come, let us go to the seer’; for the one who is now called a prophet was formerly called a seer” (1 Sam.9:9). In ancient Mesopotamia, prophetic figures had various names or designations, such as *mahhū*, *āpil(t)um*, and *raggimu*, with meanings ranging from acting bizarrely to shouting and proclaiming. In the Mesopotamian setting are also found cognates to words found in the Hebrew Bible such as *nabū* (Heb. *navi*) and *hzh* (Heb. *hōzēh*) (Nissinen et al. 2003, pp. 6–8).

The prophetic role in the Hebrew Bible thus transformed and developed through the centuries, probably in relation to the phenomenon in neighboring cultures, and various views of the prophetic role can be found there. In only one of many examples, this from Numbers 11:25, God reduces Moses’ prophetic capacity by removing some of the spirit that was upon him and distributes it to seventy elders whom Moses had appointed to assist him: “(Then the Lord) took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders”. At the same moment, two men who were not among the elders somehow also received the spirit of prophecy and began prophesying in the camp, which was reported to Moses with great alarm. Moses responds to them by saying “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” This would appear to reflect a generous position regarding prophetic accessibility, yet only a half dozen verses later Moses’ brother and sister challenge what appeared to them to have been Moses’ unfair prophetic monopoly by saying, “Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?” (Num.12:2). God immediately rebukes them for challenging Moses’ unique status and then punishes them, reflecting what would appear to be a quite different view of prophetic accessibility (Num.12:4–15).

Some early prophets were associated with sacred places, such as Samuel at Shiloh (1 Sam 3) or Nathan at the court of King David (2 Sam 7:4–17, 12:1–14; 1 Kings 1–45), and like the seers of the prophetic guilds traveling in bands before them (*hevel nevi’im*), they were paid for their services. Those that have come to be known as the “classical (or “major”) prophets” of the Hebrew Bible, however, received no remuneration for their prophecies. These are the prophets associated with the biblical books beginning with Isaiah and ending with Malakhi (Blenkinsopp 1996, pp. 53–55; Haran 1977, pp. 385–97; Kratz et al. 2015, pp. 27–64). In fact, many of them suffered dearly for their proclamations and critiques. They treated the religious, moral, social, and political problems that faced ancient Israel when it failed to conform to God’s will and message, and they were not averse to confronting political authority, to “speaking truth to power” as might be said today. The classical prophets were thus likely to suffer, and prophets were threatened, beaten, imprisoned, and killed (1 Kings 19, 22:13–28; Isaiah 53; Jer. 11:18–21, 26:20–23; 2 Chron. 24:20–21). And at least in one case, a false prophet was killed by God (Jeremiah 28:15–17).

During the period of the classical prophets, which has been considered by scholars to be the last stage of biblical prophecy, prophetic messages were written down in highly sophisticated and often poetic literary forms that became immortalized as a core part of scripture. These prophets are also known in modern scholarship as the “later prophets” or “literary prophets”, and a record of their message is found in the fifteen whole or composite writings associated with the great prophets of Israel (Paul and Sperling 2007). Their

writings were, in effect, later proof of their inspired authenticity and became a legacy as their written word. In this last biblical stage of prophetic evolution, authentic prophethood became deeply associated with divinely authoritative text: the written record of the divine disclosure. It is with these literary prophets of the Hebrew Bible that the general and widespread notions of prophethood and prophecy became associated in the monotheist traditions. What had been a broad range of characteristics was narrowed to a relatively single type that we now call “prophet”, though that would change as prophethood continued to evolve.

### 3. Prophetic Liminality and Danger

The classical prophets occupied a liminal role in ancient Israel. They were powerful because their authority derived from God, but their actual power and impact was limited to the power of persuasion. They were potentially destabilizing because they represented the will of God, a power that not even kings and armies could counter. But there always lingered the possibility that a prophet was a false prophet. As noted above, the Hebrew Bible records occasions in which prophets uttered contradictory messages or false prophecies (1 Kings 22:10–28; Jeremiah 28), and out of Jeremiah’s discourse on the subject (see especially Jer.23:26) evolved the notion in Judaism of the “false prophet” (*nēvī sheker*), a rabbinic expression derived from Jer.23:26: “those who prophesy lies and prophesy the deceit of their own heart”. In a remarkable paradox, the prophet was unavoidably vulnerable, yet the prophecy that a prophet might bring was nevertheless extremely powerful. And lurking behind the role was the uncertainty surrounding whether the prophet was articulating the true word of God or rather falsities in the divine name.

The destabilizing nature of prophecy and prophethood was recognized in the Hebrew Bible, and passages in Deuteronomy attempt to regulate or restrict the office by defining the criteria by which a true prophet could be distinguished from a false prophet. Deuteronomy 13:2–7 defines a false prophet as one who calls Israel to worship a god other than the God of Israel. Even if the prophet gives a true sign or marvelous portent, if the message includes worship of a foreign god, that prophet is, by definition, insincere. Deuteronomy 18:15–22 adds that new prophets will certainly arise in the future among the people of Israel. Because they will speak in God’s name, they must be followed (a similar sentiment to the last point is found in Q3:81–82 and 4:64.). Yet some prophetic claimants may speak in the name of other gods or give messages in God’s name that God in fact did not authorize. A simple test is then provided to determine prophetic authenticity: if the prophetic utterance does not come true as prophesied, the prophet is a false prophet. According to both Deut. 13 and 18, if the prophetic pretender is determined to be false, he is to be killed.

This liminality of prophethood in its biblical context, its instability, and the ambivalence associated with it became part of its legacy. Prophecy and prophethood are inherently destabilizing because they represent the most powerful authority conceivable, that being the authority of the creator of the universe. Yet one may not be certain that a prophetic claimant is a true prophet, and despite the authority and power associated with the prophetic utterance, prophets were not divine beings, but only human agents who could be persecuted and killed.

### 4. Prophecy, Prophethood, and the Roles of Jesus and Muhammad

Given the Deuteronomic emphasis on the importance of prophesied events expected to come to pass in the future, it is not surprising to observe the New Testament linking authentic Hebrew Bible prophets and prophecies to the accurate and divinely grounded foretelling of the arrival of Jesus (Mt.1:1, 1:23, 3:3; Luke 2:25–30; John 7:42, 20:31). The emphasis on the prophetic role of foretelling future events had a major impact on the general perception of the prophetic character, which for the New Testament was found not within *it* but rather in the Old Testament (Schmidt 2014). The purpose of prophecy in the New Testament was to affirm the truth of Jesus’ messiahship; thereafter, the prophet was of little importance. As Sara Stroumsa put it, “...from an early date in mainstream Christian theol-

ogy Jesus was not considered to be a prophet...Prophets were...usually given a secondary role; they are those who announce the coming of Jesus...the signs that mark a true prophet had become the problem of bygone generations". (Stroumsa 1985, p. 105).

While there are important distinctions between prophet and messiah, for the specific purpose of this exploration, they are not particularly significant, and the New Testament itself, while taking Jesus' messiahship as axiomatic, includes many voices that considered him a prophet (Matthew 21:10–11; 21:46; Mark 6:4, 14–15, 8:27–8; Luke 7:16; John 4:19, 6:14–15, 7:16, 40; 17:8). It is possible that Jesus' designation as messiah was appropriate or even necessary for the circumstances of Christian emergence, since the Judeans were waiting and hoping for a messianic figure to redeem them from the power of their Roman overseers.

Josephus noted how large numbers of people believed in prophets (προφήται) who failed. At least one of them, whom he calls a false prophet (ψευδοπροφήτης = *pseudo-prophétēs*) was responsible for the deaths of thousands (Feldman 1990, p. 410). The failure, instability, and threat associated with prophethood were certainly some of the reasons that Jewish thinking moved to the position that would call an end to official prophecy—but with certain exceptions that will be treated shortly. Consequently, while the role of prophet provided agency for making changes in the status quo, the messianic figure became a more culturally and historically appropriate one at the time. In any case, Jesus' role of bringing a new divine revelation and dispensation through his own personhood, as the *logos* or walking word of God in human form, would appear to be highly prophetic, and he was indeed considered by many to be a prophet in his own day. Even if Jews proclaimed that prophethood ceased with the canonization of the Hebrew Bible, something like prophethood would continue to function.

Despite Christianity's preference for the messianic role over the prophetic, prophecy and prophethood continued to develop in early Christianity even after the death of Jesus and throughout Late Antiquity, as evidenced in Acts and Corinthians and in other, non-canonical writings (Witherington III 2014). At least one major and influential community, the Montanists, held prophecy to be a central theme of Christian life (Trevelt 1996). It was an active part of other religious communities as well (Neusner et al. 1987; Pregill 2011).

Prophethood continued to evolve among the monotheistic traditions and became particularly successful with the emergence of Islam in the 7th–8th centuries. Muhammad competed with other prophetic figures during his own lifetime, the most famous of whom was a prophet named Maslama from Yamāma in the eastern central region of Arabia. Muhammad never bested Maslama (whom Islamic tradition refers to through the derisive diminutive, "Musaylima") but his counter-prophet nemesis was finally destroyed along with his community (and army) by the forces of the first caliph, Abū Bakr (Eickelman 1967; Kister 2002; on Musaylima's name, see especially, Kister 2002, pp. 2–3). Musaylima was not the only prophet to challenge Muhammad's authority during his lifetime. Others include Sajāh, al-Aswad al-'Ansī, and Ṭulayḥa b. Khuwaylid (Friedmann 1986, p. 194). They were all defeated in a series of battles called in Muslim tradition the Ridda Wars (Lecker 2004, pp. 692–95).

Despite many setbacks, Muhammad succeeded in establishing a new religious community based on his prophetic role and the scripture he conveyed, but to the dismay of Muslim rulers who followed, claims to prophethood continued even after the end of the Ridda Wars and the canonization of the Qur'an. The Shi'ī rebel al-Mukhtār b. Abī 'Ubayd (d.687) was accused of claiming prophethood, Al-Ḥārith b. Sa'īd claimed prophethood during the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik b. Marwān (d.705), an unnamed person was said to have claimed prophethood during the lifetime of Abū Ḥanīfa (d.767), one Ḥāshim b. al-Ḥakīm (better known as al-Muqanna', d.780) is said to have claimed prophethood and even divinity, and a man called Maḥmūd b. al-Faraj claimed prophethood and a divine text revealed by the angel Gabriel during the reign of caliph al-Mutawakkil (d.861) (Friedmann 1986, pp. 94–96). And several movements in the east were led by individuals with prophet- or messiah-like characteristics, such as embodying God or the divine spirit (روح)

الْقُدُّس = *rūḥ al-qudus*) within, thereby mediating between the divine and the world (Crone 2012).

## 5. The Prophetic Wild Card

The anxiety found in the Hebrew Bible regarding future claims to speak in the divine name is shared by both the New Testament and the Qur'an, each of which has been understood to claim that divine disclosure ends with it. In Mt.24:3–5: “When [Jesus] was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the end of the age?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, ‘I am the messiah’ and they will lead many astray” (Cf. 1 Corinthians 9:2: “If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord”). The Qur'an affirms that Muhammad is the seal of the prophets in 33:40: “Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but he is the messenger of God and the seal of the prophets (خَاتَمُ النَّبِيِّينَ = *khātam al-nabiyyīn*); and God is cognizant of all things”. Exactly what “seal” meant at the time of qur'anic assembly and canonization is not clear; some understood it to mean “confirmation of the prophets”, meaning that Muhammad's prophetic role served to authenticate previous authoritative prophets and was in continuity with them. While such a sense would keep a window open for the possibility of future prophets, the normative position in Islam established that Muhammad sealed prophecy with his prophetic vocation. He was the “last of the prophets”. None will follow (Stroumsa 1986; Bobzin 2011; Rubin 2014; Amir-Moezzi 2014; Powers 2015; Tabarī 2001, vol. 19, pp. 122–23).

As noted above, Christianity emphasized the power of prophetic prediction to authenticate the truth of Jesus' role as Christ/messiah, but largely removed the prophetic role from its own contemporary scripture. As L. Stephen Cook put it, “Several NT texts can be understood as placing the OT prophets in a distinct (and extinct) class” (Cook 2011, p. 6). Similarly, according to the majoritarian position of the rabbis as expressed multiple times in the Talmud, prophethood was for all intents and purposes ended with the last literary prophets Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi—despite the possibility that Deuteronomy 18 allows it in its cautionary verses: משמתו נביאים האחרונים חגי זכריה ומלאכי = נסתלקה רוח הקודש מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל = “When the last prophets Haggai, Zachariah and Malachi died, the Holy Spirit left Israel...”. (Sanhedrin 11a, Yoma 9b, Sota 42b, and elsewhere) (Urbach 1946, 1979, pp. 576–79; Alexander 1995; Sommer 2014). The Book of Zechariah could be said to affirm this view in its own discourse, in which God is depicted in 13:2–6 as condemning prophets who “speak lie(s) in the name of the Lord”. The Hebrew word “prophets” (*nəvī'im*) in this passage (e.g., Zech.13:2) is translated in the Septuagint as “false prophets” (*pseudoprophētēs*). Yet this was not necessarily the position of Josephus (and perhaps Philo); Josephus allows for something that looks quite a bit like prophecy (Feldman 1990, pp. 398, 400–5). The Dead Sea writings appear to accept some kind of ongoing prophetic activity as well—though different from that depicted in the canonical prophetic books—manifested through inspired exegesis and sapiential revelation (Jassen 2007).

The end of prophecy associated with the last three biblical prophets—which correlates roughly with the destruction of the First Temple, the Babylonian exile, and the early Persian period—became the normative position in Judaism. By declaring the end of prophecy, the rabbis made possible the rise of a new authority in their status as masters of tradition. Ironically (but perhaps not so ironically), they ended up basing their authority on a related notion (Alexander 1995, pp. 414–19), articulated as follows: “When the last [biblical] prophets Haggai, Zachariah and Malachi died, the holy spirit (*ruah haqodesh*) left Israel, but there would still be use of the *bat qōl*: משמתו נביאים האחרונים חגי זכריה ומלאכי נסתלקה רוח הקודש מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל ואף על פי כן היו משתמשין בבת קול (Sanhedrin 11a). The idiom “*bat qōl*” can be translated roughly as “the divine voice”, so something akin to prophecy lingered on in Jewish tradition. While the famous Talmudic pronouncement that prophecy (*ruah haqodesh*) departed from Israel, the “divine voice” (*bat qōl*) remained available to be

used. Something akin to prophethood sanctioned the authority of the rabbis according to the Talmud.

Similar notions of the role of the “holy spirit” are found in the roughly contemporary Christian community. It occurs more than ninety times in the New Testament and is well attested in all the Gospels (Thiselton 2013). The Jewish Christian community known as the Ebionites is said to have believed that Jesus was the “True Prophet” through the divine spirit (*theion pneuma*) (Del Colle 1994, p. 158). Justin Martyr used the term “prophetic spirit” as moving the prophets to speak: “[W]hen you hear the sayings of the prophets spoke as if from a person, you should not believe they are spoke from the inspired persons themselves, but from the divine Word who moves them” (Briggman 2012, p. 19). Irenaeus (d. c.202) also associates the Holy Spirit of the Trinity with prophecy. On Matt.28:19 (“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”), Irenaeus writes “This (Spirit), indeed, he promised by the prophets to pour out in the last times on [his] servants and maid servants so that they might prophesy; and for this reason [the spirit] descended on the Son of God and the Son of Man...” (ibid., p. 72); and elsewhere, “the Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied and the patriarchs learnt the things of God and the righteous were led in the path of righteousness...” (ibid., p. 163, see also pp. 53–56). The Qur’an also uses the term (*rūḥ al-qudus*) in relation to Jesus (Q2:87; 5:110; Cf. Q19:17), and it is associated in the Muslim commentary tradition (*tafsīr*) with various means of receiving revelation. The most prolific collector of Muslim Qur’an exegesis, Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d.923), for example, cited traditions associating it in the Qur’an with the person of Gabriel (*Jibrīl*) who conveyed the qur’anic revelation from God to Muhammad (الرُّوحُ الْقُدُسُ الَّذِي أَخْبَرَ اللَّهَ تَعَالَى ذِكْرَهُ) (أنه أُنْذِرَ عِيسَى بِهِ هُوَ جِبْرِيلُ), the New Testament (*al-Injīl*), or simply as a means (*ma’tā*) of revelation (Tabari 2001, vol. 2, pp. 221–24; vol. 9, p. 114).

Thus, notions of prophecy, though perhaps not in the sense of classical biblical prophecy, continued to provide authority to extraordinary persons for whom the “holy spirit” was present (Cook 2011; Alexander 1995; Takim 2006; Amir-Moezzi 2014). It was inconceivable that God would cease all form of divine communication to those who believed in him. For the rabbis, typified by a rabbinic commentary on Lev. 27:34 (“These are the commandments”), prophets as bearers of divine revelation in the form of scripture would cease with the classical prophets of the Hebrew Bible: “No prophet is allowed to introduce anything new from now onward” (שֶׁאִין הַנְּבִיאַ רִשְׁאִי לַחֲדָשׁ דְּבַר מֵעַתָּה) (BT: *Temurah* 16a). But extraordinary individuals—that is, the rabbis, meaning “masters”—would continue to guide the people. Henceforth, innovation and change would endure, but for the established rabbinic leadership it would do so by nesting under established norms, assumptions, and texts. Yet even with this “new normal”, there were exceptions, such as the extraordinary Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus who, after being consistently overruled by all the rabbis in a legal dispute, called to heaven to prove him right—which it did (BT: *Baba Metzia* 59a-b). The rabbis nevertheless insisted in their ruling against the position of Rabbi Eliezer, which confirmed the new, jurisprudential approach to understanding the divine will while simultaneously acknowledging continuing revelation.

Muslims came to a similar conclusion with the understanding that “the scholars (or learned ones) are the heirs of the prophets” (وَإِنَّ الْعُلَمَاءَ وَرَثَةُ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ) through an authoritative tradition found in the canonical Ḥadīth tradition (Abū Dāwūd n.d.; Sunan Abī Dāwūd, K. al-ilm 1 [<https://sunnah.com/abudawud:3641>] (accessed on 14 November 2024). In the Shi’a tradition, this inheritance is directed to the imāms, who take on a prophetic role based on Q.29:49 (“Certainly, these are the clear signs in the breasts of those who are granted knowledge—[الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ]...”). The imāms, then, are integrated into the aforementioned tradition to make it: *wa’inna al-‘ulamā’ al-a’imma* (or *al-awṣiyā’*) *warathat al-anbiyā’*. Amir-Moezzi translates this as meaning “the initiated Sages are the inheritors of the prophets” (Amir-Moezzi 1994, p. 196, n. 387). Among the Shi’a *ghulāt* (“exaggerators, extremists”), the first imam, ‘Alī, was a divine manifestation and perhaps even a divine incarnation

(Crone 2012). Prophecy may have ended officially with the canonization of scripture, but something very similar continued.

Meanwhile, another “prophetic type” remained active in the minds and hearts of Jews, even with the emergence of the rabbis carrying on the prophetic tradition through the Oral Torah. This is the longed-for messianic liberator who would defeat their enemies and restore them to an imagined past of dignity, glory, and redemption. They recorded these yearning in writings ranging from the Book of Daniel, Psalms and other biblical texts to pseudepigraphic writings, targums (Aramaic interpretive translations of scripture), Talmud and Midrash and apocalyptic literature (further, see Reeves 2005; Mitchell 2016). These writings did not envision a redeemer in the form of a biblical literary prophet but as a powerful divinely enabled individual fulfilling the sentiment and prophecy of Hebrew scripture who would, with God’s sanction, slay the enemies of Israel and restore the people to its former glory. Several such apocalyptic works were circulating shortly before the rise of Islam in the seventh century (Mitchell 2016, p. 226).

## 6. A Revival of Scriptural Prophecy

With the emergence of Islam, the concern for scriptural prophethood was revived, because Muhammad’s vocation was based on the notion of the divinely inspired literary prophet. Muhammad’s role in the Qur’an lines up closely with that of Moses, the prophetic lawgiver of the Hebrew Bible. And while Moses is not counted among the so-called “literary prophets” in contemporary scholarship, he is the quintessential prophet of the written word of God through his association with the Ten Commandments inscribed by the “finger of God” (Ex. 31:18; Deut. 9:10). In what might appear to be a striking forewarning of such an occasion as Muhammad’s emergence, a third cautionary Deuteronomy text, which is found in the very last lines of the book and therefore the Torah as a whole, adds the qualifying statement that no prophet who might appear after Moses can exceed his position. By extension, then, neither can the teaching (*torah*) that a new prophetic contender might bring exceed the teaching of Moses, *torat moshe*.

“Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel”. (Dt 34:10–12)

Nevertheless, the Qur’an places itself firmly within a sacred history of continuing prophetic revelation established by the Hebrew Bible and utilized as a form of authenticating proof also in the New Testament. Twenty-five prophets are mentioned by name in the Qur’an, ranging from pre-Islamic Arabian prophets (Hūd and Šālih) to biblical prophets from Adam to Jesus. Muhammad is both messenger (or apostle = *rasūl*) and prophet (*nabī*), which establishes him within the prophetic typologies known from earlier scripture, while the Tradition literature establishes his prophetic lineage through the line of prophet Abraham (Al-Saqā n.d., 1:1–3; Guillaume 1955, p. 3; Cf. Gen.20:7). As the bearer of written revelation (*kitāb*), he parallels the role of Moses (Abd al-Razek 2020, pp. 37–41, 128–30, 355–56). The Qur’an proclaims that its message is a continuation of prior scriptures (Q3:2–4, 48–50; 5:44–48) and positions itself, in the typical prophetic fashion of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, to serve as a divine corrective to the errors, lapses and wrongdoings of those who claim—but nevertheless fail—to adhere to the message of God.

## 7. Scriptural Canonization and the End of Prophecy

A literary canon indicates a standard or measurement (inevitably not clearly defined) that determines which writings are authoritative enough to be included in a collection of revered works. Canonization serves as a means of institutionalizing religious authority. It can occur only when a religious establishment is influential and powerful enough to affirm and declare what is sacred scripture and what is not, for by definition and in every case, the act of canonization requires that certain writings be rejected from the official, hal-

lowed collection. As a result, some individuals and groups are inevitably quite displeased about the decision—yet are unable to challenge it successfully (Alexander 1995, p.429, n.22, and sources there). Scriptural canonization thus marks a level of centralization and institutionalization of power enabling the ruling authority to make the determination and make it stick.

Before canonization (which, in the case of the Hebrew Bible, was a much longer process than for either the New Testament or the Qur'an), a certain fluidity exists regarding the contents of sacred text. In the case of the canonization of the Hebrew Bible, different groups within the community of Israel held differing views about which writings were particularly sacred: Pharisees, Samaritans, perhaps the Therapeutae, Essenic or Dead Sea communities, various Christian or Jewish-Christian groups, etc., and eventually, the rabbis (Chapman 2000; Lim 2013). Similarly, there were several communities that held on to versions of the Gospel that were not accepted into the canon of Christian scripture (Ehrman and Pleše 2011; Bockmuehl 2007). There remains much uncertainty about how the writings were incorporated into what would become canonical scripture in all three of the classical scriptural monotheisms, but once the text was established and fixed, no new material could be added. After canonization, absorption of new prophecy into the corpus of sacred text is impossible; any attempt to do so challenges the legitimacy of the authority that established and is then represented by the canon of divine writ, because claims for a new prophetic revelation inherently contest established religious authority.

In light of this, it is not surprising to observe the admonition noted above and expressed through all three canonical scriptures—directly or via their interpretation (reception history)—regarding future prophetic claimants. The Hebrew Bible cautions care in the evaluation of future prophetic contenders (Deut. 13:1–6; 18:18–22; 34:10–12). The New Testament is more absolute in its condemnation of those who might claim the mantle of prophethood (Mt.24:3–5; 1Cor.9:2). At least some views of Q. 33:40 in the early period were more open to the possibility, but the doctrinal position was eventually established—perhaps in response to the immediate and continuing appearance of prophetic claimants and prophetic types in the first centuries of Islam—that the meaning of “seal” is “last”. Muhammad was God’s last prophet.

Yet despite repudiating future prophetic contenders who might deny the validity of scripture, the three scriptural traditions leave open the possibility of a figure who will come in God’s name to upend everything and set the world straight. This is perhaps the quintessential paradox of prophetic, scriptural monotheism. While it offers a solution to the tribulations of the world, they continue unrelentingly. The pain and suffering of the eternal present are then counterpoised with hopeful anticipation of a future redemption, and all three classic expressions envisage the arrival or return of someone who will reset the world as it should be. That person might be called messiah, Christ, or mahdī—sometimes prophet; in all three can be found the potential for future redemption—or revolution.

## 8. Post-Scriptural Prophets and Prophetic Movements

Once scripture had been canonized and God’s word established and disseminated, there was no need for more prophets. Indeed, continuing prophecy would challenge the establishment communities that enabled canonization. Yet prophets or something like prophets continued to appear in all three scriptural monotheistic traditions. These were often leaders of what are often called messianic movements in Judaism and millenarian or apocalyptic movements in Christianity, though all these terms can be used for both. In Islam, the prophetic impulse was no less powerful; as with Judaism and Christianity, it produced a wide variety of types, apocalypses and messianic scenarios. All were motivated by the same problem of unrealized redemption. Despite all efforts to submit to the divine will and obey the teachings, values and precepts of the prophetic word, many believers experienced the pain and disappointment of a broken world and the promise of redemption unfulfilled. Accordingly, there arose an expectation that God will send someone who will finally set things straight by punishing the oppressors, righting the wrongs, and rewarding

those who suffer innocently. Those defined here as “prophet-like individuals” represent a wide variety of types, which likely correspond to the particularities of religious and historical context. More consideration is needed before equating these necessarily with prophecy and prophethood, but it is helpful at this moment to open the discussion for future refinement and consideration.

Messianic/prophetic types have appeared among Jews for millennia, beginning long before the canonization of the Hebrew Bible (Schaper 2009), and like the category we call “prophet”, “messiah” takes on a range of meanings and expectations. The meaning of messiah (מָשִׁיחַ) is “anointed”, with the assumption that the anointing was authorized by God (1 Sam.24:6, 10, 26:16; 1 Sam.1:14, 16, 21, 19:22, etc.) and applies to a king or leader of the line of the biblical David. According to Maimonides, “the messiah is greater than all the prophets after Moses...and God even singles him out in ways that He did not single out Moses” (אלא תעלה יא אכ' אן אלמשיח אעט' מן ג'מיע אלנביין בעד משה רבינו ויכ'צה) (Sheilat 1995, p. 106). Maimonides wrote that assessment in a letter intended to reduce enthusiasm for a Jewish messianic pretender occurring in Yemen during his lifetime in the 12th century. It was therefore perhaps somewhat hyperbolic, but the comparison with prophethood is instructive. The classical messianic objective—though not held by all (Idel 2020, p. 50)—is to return Jews spread throughout the world to the Land of Israel and reestablish an independent polity there (traditionally a divinely authorized kingdom) and rectify the wrongs done to the Jewish collective while bringing justice and compassion to the entire world. But messianic movements were only one of several modes of seeking direct divine guidance. The literary and historical evidence for divine inspiration movements offers a wide range of scenarios (Idel 2008, pp. 38–57; Ben-Sasson 2007, pp. 115–22). Personal experience with the divine was a goal of Merkavah mysticism by the second century CE, and messianism was particularly strong in the mystical tradition. It received a boost with Abraham b. Shmuel Abulafia (d. after 1291), who, after delving into the mysteries of Maimonidean philosophy and Kabbalah, became “a self-proclaimed prophet and Messiah” (Idel 2020, p. 13—Idel uses both designations for him repeatedly); several students of Kabbalah (or their students) determined through their mystical studies that God continued to speak to them (Scholem 1974). Some of the most notable Jewish messianic claimants were Simon Bar Kosiba in the Land of Israel (d.135 CE), Moses of Crete (5th C), Abū 'Isa al-Isfahānī (8th C) in Persia, David Alroy (Ibn al-Rūhī, mid-12th C) in Iraq, Abraham b. Samuel Abulafia (d. after 1291) in Spain and Italy, David Reubeni and Solomon Molcho (mid-16th C) in Portugal, Spain, and Italy, Shabbtai Tzvi (d.1676) in the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Europe, Jacob Frank (d.1791) in Eastern Europe, and many others who remain less well known. The trend in Judaism remains active today, with one of the most recent messianic claimants the “Lubovitcher Rebbe”, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (d.1994) in New York, the US, and Israel. These historical figures appeared as religious leaders, warriors, mystics, and diplomats, in all cases attracting a significant following.

Millenarianism (or “millennialism” or “chiliasm”) refers to a broad range of scenarios in Christian thinking in which a golden age of peace precedes a final cataclysm and judgment. The term is derived from Rev.20:4–6, in which a period of a thousand years is associated with the revival of the dead. Millenarian ideas have spawned innumerable activist social-religious movements ranging from “catastrophic millennialism” to “progressive millennialism” and engaging in behaviors ranging from extreme violence and revolution to quietist activism (Hall 2013; Crossley and Lockhart 2021). Leaders of these movements are often prophetic types, but Christianity has also produced thinkers and individual activists who functioned without a movement following. Thomas Aquinas remarked that “at all times there have not been lacking persons having the spirit of prophecy, not indeed for the declaration of any new doctrine of faith but for the direction of human acts” (Hvidt 2007, p. 4). The prophetic impulse was recognized by institutional authorities, which attempted to control it, but many prophetic types remained independent and often threatening to the Catholic Church. Perhaps the consummate example of the prophetic type in

opposition to the Church is Martin Luther, but many others were also claimed—or claimed themselves—as such, including Montanus and other Montanist prophets and prophetesses (2nd C), Merlin (mythic or composite) in Wales, Giacomo Salomoni (d.1314) in Italy, Nostradamus (d.1566) in France, Justus Velsius (d.1581) in the Netherlands, John Bull (d.1642) in England, Joseph Smith (d.1844) in the US; Mary Baker Eddy (d.1910) in the US; and many others.

Islam also produced a large number of prophetic types. The common term for prophetic revelation in the Qur'an is *wahy*—meaning “inspire”, “reveal”. A second term, *ilhām*, has been understood to denote inspiration revealing hidden things to certain people who are not prophets, through premonition or other means. Several terms are used to identify the broad range of prophetic types in the post-qur'anic literature, including *rasūl* (“apostle” or “messenger”), *imām* (“leader”), *mahdī* (“guide”), *mujaddid* (“renewer”), *qā'im* (“standing one” or “riser”, “resurrector”), *walī* (or *walī Allah*, “friend of God”), *ulū al-'azm* (“resolute”) and *waṣī* (inheritor) (Geddes 1967; Amir-Moezzi 1994; Cook 2021; De Smet 2009). Some of these words occur in the Qur'an, and their sense is complicated by the notion that Muhammad was the last prophet and the prophet extraordinaire, so a distinction is usually made between what exactly is the nature of the other ranks of divinely inspired wisdom identified by these terms and how they relate to the prophethood of Muhammad. There were exceptions to this rule, such as the claim that Muhammad foretold the coming of a Mahdī “coined in his own image: ‘His name will be my name, and his father’s name my father’s name’”, or that the mark of prophecy would be on his shoulder as it was on that of Muhammad (Arjomand 2007). The terms listed here are used differently between Sunni and Shi'a expressions, and also within them, because of the complex and competing relationships between the factions. Both exoteric and mystical trends produced spiritual leaders with prophetic characteristics, especially among the Shi'a and Sufi communities, and as with Jewish and Christian scenarios, these have ranged in their activity from militant to quietist. The designation, “Mahdī”, in particular came to be used for an expected redeemer who would restore Islam to its original perfection and became associated with a militant type of messianism (Madelung 1986, p. 1231; Cook 2021, pp. 128–29). There are innumerable scenarios describing the purported arrival or return of the redemptive Mahdī (Cook 2021; Arjomand 2007). Some notable leaders who claimed or were claimed to fit the prophetic role include `Alī and the line of the imāms according to various Shi'ite groups, Abdullah b. Al-Ḥusayn (al-Mahdī billāh) (d.934) in N. Africa and founder of the Fātimid caliphate, Ibn Tumart (d. c 1130) in Morocco who founded the Almohad movement (*al-muwahhīdūn*); Ḥassan-i-Sabbah (d.1164) in Iran who abrogated the exoteric practice of Islamic law; Nur-bakhsh (d. after 1425) who was proclaimed messiah in today's Tajikistan; Muhammad al-Mahdi Jaunpuri (d.1505) in Uttar Pradesh who established a community that exists to this day; Ismail I (d.1524), the founder of the Iranian Safavi dynasty who proclaimed himself the reincarnation of `Alī and the Mahdī; Ali Muhammad Shirāzī (d.1859) in Iran who claimed to be the Mahdī and Bab (gateway) and founded Babism, which would be a precursor to the Bahá'ī faith; Ḥusayn-`Alī Bahá'u'lláh (d. 1892) in Iran who claimed to be the expected one promised in all the major religions; Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d.1908) in India who claimed both the title of mahdī and the second coming of Jesus; Wallace D. Fard Muhammad (d. c1934) in the USA who was declared both mahdī and messiah and founder of the Nation of Islam; and Muhammad b. Abdullah al-Qahtāni (d.1979) who was proclaimed mahdi by his brother-in-law Juhayman al-Otaybī in Saudi Arabia in a military revolt against the Saudi authorities in the attempt to seize the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Many more examples could be cited.

Finally, the three classic scriptural monotheisms produce a parallel phenomenon in sainthood, in which God's presence on earth becomes manifested through the exemplary life of certain pious individuals (Coello de la Rosa and Jones 2020, p. 4). The phenomenon is well known in Christianity and is traditionally controlled, to a certain degree, by the institution of the Church, whereas in Islam and Judaism, which are less centrally organized, the position is more informal, popular and local (Hatt 1980, pp. 64–65). The Christian term

“saint” is well known; in Judaism, the saintly or righteous person is known as a *ṣaddiq*, a description that has been taken as a title like *rabbi* among some Hassidic communities. In Islam, the common Arabic term is *walī*, which conveys a sense of intimate proximity, especially in *walī Allāh* = “intimate friend of God”. Designations for saintly persons in Islam can vary between *walī*, *sayyid*, *ṣāliḥ*, *pīr*, *baba*, *marabūṭ*, etc. Comparative studies of sainthood in the three scriptural monotheisms have been treated elsewhere (Coello de la Rosa and Jones 2020 and sources). It is sufficient here to note that this role also denotes a post-canonical designation of divine communication through the personhood of extraordinary pious and virtuous individuals.

## 9. Prophecy in the Emergence of New Religions

We have noted how the three classic scriptural monotheisms share certain behaviors in relation to the challenge of new prophets and how new prophecy and newly inspired writings cannot be accepted into canonized scripture but can (but not necessarily will) be accepted into collections that are assembled into new canons of scripture. Whatever is rejected from the evolving canon might survive as non-canonical writings but is more likely to be lost to history or discovered fortuitously by archeologists or paleographers centuries or millennia later (Ehrman and Pleše 2011; Kalmi et al. 2013; Nicklas and Schröter 2020). As many as forty non-canonical Gospels have been discovered up to now (most from archeological digs) that were rejected from the canon of the New Testament (Bockmuehl 2007, pp. 31–33). In some cases, however, writings rejected by religious authorities in power may serve to energize a movement that challenges the status quo and eventually becomes an independent religion. Most new religious movements, whether they are based on new or alternative sacred writings, die out and are known only from the serendipity of discovery or from references (usually polemical) from contemporary observers. While not common, some eventually form new religions.

Much scholarly study has been devoted over the past 50 years to the phenomenon of new religious movements (NRMs). The sudden interest in these movements came in response to what was perceived to be the sudden growth of “cults” in the West during the latter half of the twentieth century (Melton 2004; Bromley 2012; Stark 1996). Scholars of religion were commissioned by concerned parents and clergy to study them in order to discredit the leaders and thwart them from influencing their children. Those scholars soon recognized that what were termed “cults” led by “charlatans” were actually new religions in the making that were disparaged by parties feeling threatened by them, a phenomenon that has been a part of human civilization for as long as we have a record (Saliba 2003, pp. 46–47; Barker 1989, pp. 148–49). The appearance of new spiritual communities and movements represents a threat to the authority and power of established religions because they represent alternatives, particularly in the monotheist traditions (Assmann 2018). Most new religious movements fail for a variety of reasons and represent little danger, but if they succeed in gaining enough adherents to become perceived as threatening, they are condemned, proclaimed heresies or diabolical enemies and suppressed or even physically destroyed (Costen 1997). Jews, Christians and Muslims all produced heresiographies, usually polemical works that catalog and critique what they deem to be heretical communities with explanations as to why and how they strayed from the Truth (Royalty 2013).

New religions are not created “ex nihilo”. They emerge in historical-cultural contexts that reflect contemporary religious and spiritual notions and practices. Whether they emerge from within or outside of an established religion, they exist from their inception in relation to religious communities already present, and they bear some resemblance to them. Their ideas and practices are familiar to members of established religion(s), and their leadership will often resemble traditional leadership models, including the role of seer or prophet (Derricourt 2021, pp. 223–34).

Prophethood, therefore, remains controversial and seems always to have been so. Prophecy is an indispensable vehicle for conveying the divine will and is therefore a crucial component of the scriptural religions, but prophets are destabilizing and threatening

to religious establishments. After scriptural canonization, new prophets become *personae non gratae*. Yet, some form of prophethood, or its equivalent, must always remain a theoretical possibility, for it is always assumed that God has not abandoned those who love him. Until divine deliverance occurs, there must always be the possibility for a redemptive figure to arrive and make radical changes in the name of God. This causes a level of anxiety for religious leadership, because, while its authority rests in part on its role of proclaiming an impending final redemption, it must abdicate that very authority when redemption arrives. When new religious claimants appear, therefore, the response among established religions is predictable. They begin by ignoring them, and the new religious movements usually fail for a wide variety of reasons. Some, however, become successful enough that they cannot be ignored.

When this occurs, established religions (or more accurately, their leadership) send experts to interrogate the new prophetic contenders. Moses is tested by Pharaoh and his magicians (Ex. 8:14). Pharisees and Sadducees test Jesus (Matthew 16:1, 19:3, 22:23–46; Mark 10:2–12), and rabbis examine Muhammad (*Al-Saqā* n.d., 1:543; [Guillaume 1955](#), p. 255; [Ibn Sa'd \[1418\] 1997](#), 1: 138 [Arabic]; n.d., 1:200–201 [English]). In the literature produced by the new religious movements, their founders always pass the tests.

Attestation stories can be found in the sacred literature of all three of the scriptural monotheisms considered here, and they serve to demonstrate that their prophetic leader is authentic. These narratives are first produced by religious communities during the period of their emergence when they are forced to make the case for their authenticity in the face of criticism by established religion. New religious movements need to argue their case because established religions not only test them but actively oppose them. Established religions, in the meantime, produce counter-attestation narratives to refute the claims of new religions, but of course not in their scriptures, which have been canonized before the appearance of the new threat (though scriptures do include condemnations of enemies and sectarian trends within the community of believers before canonization). In the record of established religions, the opposite conclusion is necessarily drawn from their attestation stories associated with new prophets. They are proven false and the new religions inauthentic. Jewish counter-narratives to the New Testament attestation of Jesus' status can be found in the Jewish *Toledoth Yeshu* stories ([Meerson and Schäfer 2014](#)), and counter-narratives to the *Sīra* attestation stories and the Qur'an's claim to authenticity can be found in a variety of both Jewish and Christian literatures ([Daniel \[1960\] 2000](#); [Roggema 2008](#); [Firestone 2014](#); [Tolan 2000, 2019](#)).

## 10. Conclusions

Prophecy and prophethood have always been at the center of scriptural monotheism. They are the conduit to the divine as conveyers of the heavenly message. They also serve to authenticate the divine message—that is, if they are considered authentic themselves. Prophets and prophethood represent a key nexus of contact and controversy between the scriptural monotheisms. They serve not only as the fulcrum between the mundane and supernal worlds, but also as a focus for rivalry and contention between religious communities arguing over the exclusivity of religious truth.

The relationships that religions have with their prophets and the prophets of others fall into certain patterns. Christians accept the prophets and prophetic utterances of the Hebrew Bible, though they understand them differently than Jews. And Muslims accept the prophets of Jewish and Christian scriptures while interpreting their messages in the context of their own scripture and sacred extra-canonical literature. But Jews cannot accept even one more prophetic figure outside the canon of their own sacred writings. Neither can Christians or Muslims. The phenomenon continues into the modern period with the appearance of new scriptural monotheisms such as the LDS (Mormon) Church and the Baha'i faith, along with their prophetic founders. The negative and often violent historical reaction of established religious communities to the emergence of new prophetic figures shows how the prophetic dilemma persists and will likely continue to do so.

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