

How Did He Get Away With It?

After hearing about the Chronicler's radical revisionism, many people wonder how his book managed to get canonized. The answer to this question has several parts.

The Chronicler was not living in a vacuum—his norms were the norms of his community, for whom he was writing. The authoritative and “standard” history of DtrH no longer spoke to that community. It did not reflect their theology, nor did it fully accord with their authoritative text, which now included P. Thus, in a sense, the Chronicler's community was “waiting” for such a history to be written, just as J.F.K. conspiracy theorists were waiting nearly thirty years for Oliver Stone's 1991 movie *JFK* to be released.

In addition, the Chronicler did a wonderful job of “footnoting” his history, giving it greater authority. Chronicles refers to fifteen books that supposedly served as sources,¹⁷ as in this example: “The other events of Manasseh's reign, and his prayer to his God, and the words of the seers who spoke to him in the name of the LORD God of Israel are found in the chronicles of the kings of Israel” (2 Chron. 33:18). Some scholars believe that these were real sources of one sort or another.¹⁸ Others suggest, more plausibly to my mind, that these sources never existed, and they are a type of fake footnote, through which the Chronicler asserts the authority and veracity of his composed traditions. In either case, these notices would have helped the alternative version of history in Chronicles gain acceptance, and ultimately, be canonized as scripture.

Is Chronicles Typical?

The picture developed throughout our discussion of biblical history writing may be disturbing to some. I have contended that authoritative writers fabricate history, making up their sources. Further, I have argued, it was more important to the biblical writers to be relevant than to be true. I do not know how typical the Chronicler was of the other biblical authors. I have highlighted Chronicles simply because its sources are extant, so that scholars could develop a good sense of how its author reworked earlier sources, and how radical he was. Even if some of the earlier historians preserved in the Bible were more conservative, we should remember that for all of them, their greatest concern was not getting the past “correct.” Rather, it was to collect, revise, and compose traditions in order to produce texts about the past that would be meaningful to their communities.

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Introduction to Prophecy

Primary Reading: 1 Kings 17 through 2 Kings 9.

Difficulties in Studying Prophecy

By “prophecy” I mean the “transmission of allegedly divine messages by a human intermediary to a third party.”¹ As a literary genre, prophecy is extremely difficult to read and to understand. Prophets are quite alien to contemporary culture. When we see someone dressed oddly in public, proclaiming that the end of the world is near, we typically keep our distance—or perhaps listen but laugh. Most people in our society no longer share the view that God communicates messages to us through certain individuals. Indeed, many of us think that anyone who believes that they have received such a divine message is delusional and requires psychiatric treatment.

Ancient Israelites had a fundamentally different view of the world and how God is manifest in it; the historical-critical method helps us to recover their worldview.

Let me highlight some of the differences between the contemporary and biblical worlds by recasting biblical passages in today's idiom. First, imagine that you are hiring someone to fill a position, and the first stage is for candidates to send in a promotional video. In scene two of one individual's video—let's call him Elisha—he is walking along when a few kids run up and to the side of the road and mock him. He curses them; they promptly drop dead. Then Elisha goes on his merry way. A simple question: would you call this person in for an interview? You might hesitate, to say the least. Yet the Bible relates a similar event about the prophet Elisha—and that passage is intended to reflect positively on him:

(2 Kings 2:23) From there he went up to Bethel. As he was going up the road, some little boys came out of the town and jeered at him, saying, "Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!" (24) He turned around and looked at them and cursed them in the name of the LORD. Thereupon, two she-bears came out of the woods and mangled forty-two of the children. (25) He went on from there to Mount Carmel, and from there he returned to Samaria.

Now, let's imagine a second scenario. One day you happen to be in New York City, in a house of worship, and the preacher gets up and says:

Thus said the LORD: / For three transgressions of the residents of Manhattan, / For four, I will not revoke it: / Because they shop in expensive shops and neglect the poor, / Eat in five-star restaurants while others starve. / I will send down fire upon Fifth Avenue, / A conflagration on 57th St. / And it shall devour the fancy penthouses, / Destroy the mansions. / And the people of "the city" shall be exiled to California—said the LORD.

You might wonder how it is that this preacher presumes to speak for God. You might also be puzzled about why the preacher suddenly decided to speak in poetry rather than prose. Yet this imagined sermon is a paraphrase of one of the prophet Amos' oracles against the nations—oracles that grabbed his audience's attention—such as:

(1:3) Thus said the LORD: For three transgressions of Damascus, / For four, I will not revoke it: / Because they threshed Gilead / With threshing boards of iron. (4) I will send down fire upon the palace of Hazael, / And it shall devour the fortresses of Ben-hadad. (5) I will break the gate bars of Damascus, / And wipe out the inhabitants from the Vale of Aven / And the sceptered ruler of Beth-eden; And the people of Aram shall be exiled to Kir—said the LORD.

Finally, imagine that you are traveling on a public bus. In the seat right behind you, two people are conversing. You overhear one of them telling the other about a recent incident:

(Zech. 5:9) I looked up again and saw two women come soaring with the wind in their wings—they had wings like those of a stork—and carry off the tub between earth and sky. (10) "Where are they taking the tub?" I asked the angel who talked with me. (11) And he answered, "To build a shrine for it in the land of Shinar; a stand shall be erected for it, and it shall be set down there upon the stand."

Would you change your seat?

These three examples give us an idea of how different biblical prophecy is from our everyday experiences. We cannot read the prophetic texts as moderns—they would come across as too weird. Before we look at such texts again, we need more background, so that we can understand them more sympathetically, within their original context.

Prophecy and Omens in the Ancient Near East

The biggest challenge in our understanding biblical prophecy is to appreciate a widespread belief in the ancient Near East: the divine will can be apparent to people—if we know where and how to perceive it. Prophecy, where the divine communicates directly with a human, is just one manifestation of this belief. In Israel, prophecy served as the predominant way in which people discerned the divine will. Meanwhile, that and other forms of "tuning in" to divine messages existed in many areas throughout the ancient Near East.²

The Shape of Things to Come

Our most extensive knowledge about divine communication comes from ancient Mesopotamia.³ Archaeologists have excavated many kinds of omen texts from various periods, showing that the Mesopotamians valued this genre. Those omen texts study a wide variety of phenomena for signs as to what the gods are intending to do. Many omens are based on sacrifices, typically focusing on the hidden meaning of the shape of a given sacrificial animal's liver, which varies greatly from one specimen to the next. Trained specialists even interpreted these shapes by comparing them to clay models of liver forms.

The omen texts are formulated in two parts: a particular observable condition, and the implication of that condition for the future. (Scholars call these parts "protasis" and "apodosis," respectively.) The following four examples give some sense of their variety:⁴

If a man's chest hair curls upwards: he will become a slave.

If a man has a flushed face and his right eye sticks out: he will be devoured by dogs far from his house.

If the gallbladder (of the sacrificial sheep) is stripped of the hepatic duct: the army of the king will suffer a thirst during a military campaign.

If the north wind sweeps the face of heavens until the appearance of the new moon: the harvest will be abundant.

The texts interpret some conditions on the basis of word association; others, on the basis of whether certain signs seemed ominous or propitious. Still others use criteria that we have not been able to decipher.

In any event, both the people and their leaders invested time and effort into interpreting omens. They gleaned those omens from a huge range of phenomena, both celestial and terrestrial, both normal and unusual. The omen texts show that the populace believed that they could discern the divine will—although it might take an expert to do so reliably.

Prophecy, Mesopotamian Style

Archaeologists have excavated more than 130 Mesopotamian texts that bear on prophecy. Strangely, all of them come from just two sites out of the dozens in the region:⁵ Mari on the Tigris River (circa the eighteenth century B.C.E.), and in Assyria during the reigns of Esarhaddon (680–669) and Ashurbanipal (668–627). This concentration of evidence for a social institution is unusual. It raises an obvious question: did prophecy exist in Mesopotamia throughout its history (and the relevant texts simply have been lost)? Or was prophecy important only in these two distinct periods and locales? If the latter is the case, then Mesopotamian prophecy probably could not have influenced the development of Israelite prophecy.

Here are two examples of a Mesopotamian prophecy. The first, from Assyria, is an oracle from the woman Ishtar-la-tashiat of Arbela. The second one comes from Mari:

Esarhaddon, king of lands, fear not! That wind which blows against you—I need only say a word and I can bring it to an end. Your enemies, like a [young] boar in the month of Simanu, will flee even at your approach. I am the great Belet—I am the goddess Ishtar of Arbela, she who has destroyed your enemies at your mere approach. What order have I given you which you did not rely upon? I am Ishtar of Arbela! I lie in wait for your enemies, I shall give them to you. I, Ishtar of Arbela, will go before and behind you fear not! You who are paralyzed [saying], “Only in crying Woe can I either go up or sit down.”⁶

Moreover, the day I sent this tablet of mine to my lord, [an ec]static of Dagan came and addressed me as follows: “The god sent [me]. Hurry,

write to the ki[ng] that they are to offer the mortuary-sacrifices to the sha[de] of Yahdun-Li[m].” This is what this ecstatic said to me, and I have therefore written to my lord. Let my lord do what pleases him.⁷

The content and phraseology of some of these prophetic texts is mirrored in the Bible. However, it is important to remember that ancient Israel believed in prophecy more than any other type of divination, seeing it as the best way to comprehend the divine will. We are not sure why. As discussed above, we do not know whether Mesopotamian prophecy influenced Israel at an early stage.

Closer to home, we have some evidence that the Phoenicians also believed in prophets. Meanwhile, across the Jordan River, an eighth-century-B.C.E. inscription found in the city of Deir ‘Alla even talks about “Balaam the seer,” the same prophet mentioned in Numbers 22–24.⁸ However, we have so few texts from Israel’s immediate neighbors that we cannot accurately evaluate the potential evidence. Was Israel unique in its heavy reliance on the medium of prophecy? It is hard to say.

The Nature of Prophecy in Israel

The main biblical term for a prophet is *navi* (נָבִיא), used 325 times in the Hebrew Bible. It appears even in the Book of Genesis. In the middle wife-sister story (see “The Ancestors as Symbols” in chapter 7), God refers to Abraham as a *navi*, explaining to the king that Abraham “will intercede for you—to save your life” (20:7). This first use is telling: the common view today of a biblical prophet as “someone who tells the future” was not the only—or even the main—function from the Bible’s standpoint. Rather, the *navi* was an intercessor,⁹ a go-between the people and God.

The biblical prophet may intercede for others, as Abraham does for Abimelech, or as many later prophets do for the people Israel. However, the texts more commonly recount the prophet’s function as a messenger from God to the people; in this sense, the prophet functions as a divine messenger. Thus prophets may be explicitly labeled “the LORD’s messenger” (e.g., Hag. 1:13), and one prophet is called Malachi, which means “my messenger.” The prophets employ the formula *ko amar* (כֹּה אָמַר, “thus says”), called the “messenger formula”¹⁰ because secular messengers also used it. Thus, as a divine messenger, the prophet should be understood as standing somewhere on a direct line between God and the people: On this line, some prophets stand closer to God, while some stand closer to the people. To see how the prophet functions in both directions on this line, consider this example from Amos:

(7:1) This is what my Lord GOD showed me: He was creating a plague of locusts at the time when the late-sown crops were beginning to sprout—the late-sown crops after the king's reaping. (2) When it had finished devouring the herbage in the land, I said, "O Lord GOD, pray forgive. How will Jacob survive? He is so small." (3) The LORD relented concerning this. "It shall not come to pass," said the LORD.

This passage begins with the prophet's vision from God (vv. 1–2a), followed by the prophet's plea to God in response (v. 2b). It concludes with God's statement to the prophet (v. 3). Hence Amos not only delivers messages from God but also delivers requests on behalf of the people to God. The content of the concluding statement is especially important, since it suggests that God had a change of heart. This teaches us that according to the biblical authors, prophets had great power to transform the divine decree. In short, the Bible does not view prophets primarily as predictors of the future.¹¹

The etymology of the term *navi* is uncertain.¹² Most scholars relate it to an Akkadian (Mesopotamian) root *nabû*, "to name, call," either in the sense of "one who calls out," i.e., a speaker, or "one who has been called." Some terms for prophet are much less frequent, yet their origins are clearer: *chozeh* (חֹזֶה) and *ro'eh* (רֹאֶה) both mean "a seer." Likewise, *ish Elohim* (אִישׁ אֱלֹהִים) or *ish ha-elohim* (אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים) means "(the) man of God." The biblical text treats these various terms as somewhat distinct—for example, it employs *ish Elohim* to describe Elijah and Elisha, but not other prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah.

Two Main Types of Israelite Prophecy

Why did the Bible use more than one term for a prophet? In part, because there were different types of prophets. Biblical scholars typically distinguish between those who talked at length to the general population, and those who talked primarily to the king and whose messages are brief. Usually we refer to the former group—including the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Amos, and Micah, all of whom have their own books—as "classical" prophets. Their writings date from the eighth century B.C.E.

The latter group is comprised of individuals like Nathan and Gad (tenth century B.C.E.), and Elijah and Elisha (ninth century B.C.E.). Some of them remain nameless, and some are female. Many scholars have referred to them as "preclassical" prophets. However, I avoid that term for two reasons. First, we do

not know when prophets of the classical type first developed. Perhaps they existed in earlier eras too—but their speeches went unrecorded or were lost. (Nor do we know what factors in the social, religious, or economic life of ancient Israel first prompted classical prophecy and its records.)¹³ Second, we do know that prophets of the type like Elijah continued to exist side by side with the classical prophets.

For both reasons, the term "preclassical" is misleading. "Nonclassical" is a better term, though it too is somewhat misleading, since the prophets within this group are so different from each other. Indeed, we can subdivide this group of prophets usefully, either by whether they perform magical acts (e.g., Elijah and Elisha), or by whether they critique the monarchy (e.g., Elisha) or support it (e.g., Nathan).¹⁴

Those who support the king are the earliest Israelite prophets that the Bible writes about. They are much like other ancient Near Eastern prophets. It is easy to locate them within this context, even if we do not know the lines of influence (see above, "Prophecy, Mesopotamian Style"). But we know precious little about how prophecy developed in Israel.

The remainder of this chapter will focus on the main characteristics of the nonclassical prophets. Often it will clarify their role by contrasting it with that of the classical prophets. Each of the next several chapters will then spotlight a leading classical prophet.

The Nonclassical Prophets

Though the nonclassical prophets were not all alike, most of them had—according to the Bible—some combination of the following traits:

- they generally knew what was happening in other places;
- they were consulted on fixed occasions and often paid for their services;
- they banded together;
- their prophecy could be induced;
- they performed miracles;
- they usually prophesied to the king, speaking in prose;
- they performed unusual actions; and
- they predicted the future.

We will now explore these qualities in turn, giving examples from various prophets.

Viewing and Sensing Remotely

The nonclassical prophets were expected to know what was happening in distant places that they could not physically see. The exception that proves this rule is 2 Kings 4:8–37. In this story, the only child of the Shunammite woman dies, and she entreats the prophet Elisha. His assistant, Gehazi, tries to shoo her away, but Elisha says: “Let her alone, for she is in bitter distress; and the LORD has hidden it from me and has not told me” (v. 27). Elisha implies that he normally knew the divine will and could perceive what had happened elsewhere. In a similar vein, in 2 Kings 6:12 a foreign officer says to the Aramean king (who had failed in several attempts to ambush Israel): “Elisha, that prophet in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom.”

Serving as Freelance Consultants

People who needed these prophets visited them at traditional times. When the son of the Shunammite woman dies and she wants to consult Elisha, her husband attempts to stop her, saying: “Why are you going to him today? It is neither new moon nor sabbath” (2 Kings 4:23). His question implies that on fixed occasions the prophets made themselves available for consultation—not unlike a college professor who posts a schedule of regular office hours.

Other texts suggest that the people paid prophets for advice given on such days. Consider the scene in 1 Samuel where Saul and his servant are searching for some stray donkeys. The dialogue begins with Saul’s unnamed servant:

(9:6) . . . “There is a man of God (*ish elohim*) in that town, and the man is highly esteemed; everything that he says comes true. Let us go there; perhaps he will tell us about the errand on which we set out.” (7) “But if we go,” Saul said to his servant, “what can we bring the man?¹⁵ For the food in our bags is all gone, and there is nothing we can bring to the man of God as a present. What have we got?” (8) The servant answered Saul again, “I happen to have a quarter-shekel of silver. I can give that to the man of God and he will tell us about our errand.”

This, then, is really a discussion about the smallest payment that they believe Samuel will accept in order to tell them where the donkeys are!

Forming Prophetic Fellowships

Many of these nonclassical prophets banded together into groups who lived and prophesied together. The stories concerning Elijah mention that he is the head of such a group. It also appears in 1 Samuel, as King Saul becomes a temporary or ad hoc prophet: “he saw a band of prophets coming toward him. Thereupon the spirit of God gripped him, and he spoke in ecstasy among them” (10:10). The term usually used for these groups is *benei ha-nevi'im* (בְּנֵי הַנְּבִיאִים), literally “sons of prophets,” better understood as “members of a prophetic group or guild.” The material in Kings about Elijah and Elisha refers to such groups more than ten times.

Preparing to Receive Their Message

For these individuals, prophecy can be induced by the right technique. For example, Elisha says, “Now then, get me a musician” (2 Kings 3:15). The result is described thus: “As the musician played, the hand of the LORD [a technical term for prophecy] came upon him.” In various places, prophets prophesy at night, sometimes in temples. This may be similar to “incubation dreams,” namely going to sleep at a special place with the hope that you will have a prophetic dream—a phenomenon well-attested in many cultures.

Doing Wonders

One striking aspect of the stories about these nonclassical prophets, especially Elijah and Elisha, is the extent to which they are miracle workers. They feed the masses with a small amount of food, revive the dead, find lost objects, make poisoned food safe, heal lepers, etc. The Bible recounts many types of “miracle worker” stories about these figures. The tales are of varied literary types, and they emphasize different aspects of the prophetic experience. Thus they likely originated in various circles for different purposes.¹⁶ Note that, as a kind of literary fulfillment of Elisha’s request of Elijah that “a double portion of your spirit pass on to me” (2 Kings 2:9), miracle accounts are transferred between these two prophets, with the number of miracles performed by Elisha equal to approximately double those of Elijah.

Restricting Their Audience

The Bible suggests that a primary role of nonclassical prophets was to prophesy to the king. Thus, the Elijah unit opens with “Elijah the Tishbite, an inhabitant of Gilead” speaking to Ahab, king of the Northern Kingdom (1 Kings 17:1). Even the famous confrontation between Elijah and the priests of Baal opens: “Much later, in the third year, the word of the LORD came to Elijah: ‘Go, appear before Ahab; then I will send rain upon the earth’” (chap. 18). The focus on speaking to the king contrasts sharply with classical prophecy, which typically addresses itself to a broad group of people, even though sometimes classical prophets inveigh against the king; they do so as part of their mission to the people.

Both kinds of prophets engage in rebuking the powerful, but the nonclassical prophets typically rebuke the king only using short, prosaic condemnations. For example, Elijah’s famous rebuke of Ahab by Elijah, after Ahab has Naboth killed in order to appropriate Naboth’s vineyard, reads: “Thus said the LORD: Would you murder and take possession? Thus said the LORD: In the very place where the dogs lapped up Naboth’s blood, the dogs will lap up your blood too” (1 Kings 21:19). Classical prophets, on the other hand, speak to all classes, often in long poetic speeches.

Doing Strange Deeds

Nonclassical prophets perform unusual actions. Recall Elisha’s deadly response—mentioned at the start of this chapter—to the children who mock him. Elsewhere, in a single passage of forty-four verses, Elisha produces excessive amounts of oil for a needy widow, promises a woman that she will conceive, revives a dead child, provides the antidote to a poisonous stew, and multiplies a limited amount of food to feed the masses (2 Kings 4). The purpose of such acts is to glorify prophetic prestige. In contrast, when classical prophets do strange things, such acts turn out to have their own meaning; they are teaching tools.

Making Predictions

Nonclassical prophets do predict the future. However, they do not dwell on it. Rather, they offer short, final pronouncements, such as Elijah’s word to King Ahab: “As the LORD lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding” (1 Kings 17:1). According to Kings, that one-

sentence message turned out to be the start of a three-year drought and famine. In contrast, when the classical prophet predicts doom, most often it is conditional, functioning as a call to repent.

Summary of Prophetic Types in the Bible

According to the Bible, the populace believes that both nonclassical and classical prophets can convey the divine will. Both types serve as intermediaries between the people and their God. Yet the differences between the types are enormous—in terms of their audience and communication style, the reason for their odd actions, and their use of predictions. Given such differences, one may reasonably wonder whether the same title of “prophet” should apply to both groups!

The following table compares and contrasts the classical and nonclassical prophets.

Characteristics of Nonclassical Versus Classical Prophets

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Nonclassical</i>	<i>Classical</i>
Knew secret and hidden information	Yes	No
Typically consulted on fixed occasions	Yes	No
Were paid to disclose or intercede	Yes	No
Banded together	Yes	No
Induced prophecy	Yes	No
Worked miracles	Yes	No
Main audience	King	People
Main genre of speech	Prose	Poetry
Reason for strange deeds	Build prestige	Convey a message
Type of predictions	Short verdicts	Long warnings