

Introduction

Through the Eyes of the Seer

THE STUDY OF PROPHECY HAS PROVED to be a growth industry in the last twenty-five years. This has been fueled partly by the discoveries at Mari and elsewhere, but it has also been precipitated by the growing interest in things visionary throughout Western culture in the last several decades. In a world that has a global economy and a global communications system, it is hardly surprising that there has been some impetus to take a more global or cross-cultural approach to prophecy. Now more than ever, it is possible to compare and contrast the prophetic experience, the prophetic expression, the prophetic tradition across various cultural boundaries. Yet some cross-cultural studies, because they have been too broad, or involved comparing widely divergent cultures and their prophetic components, have shed only a little light on biblical prophecy in its various forms.¹

This book will seek to study prophecy with something of a cross-cultural approach but within limited geographical and chronological parameters. The geographical parameters are basically the eastern end of the Mediterranean crescent and the nearby Middle Eastern regions (e.g., Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt), and the chronological parameters are about 1600 BC to approximately AD 300, or a little

¹Here a study such as T. Overholt's *Channels of Prophecy: The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) comes to mind; among other things, it compares the prophecy of American Indians to that of the Hebrew prophets. This is not to say that there are not some parallels, but they are insufficient to produce any significant light on biblical prophecy.

less than two thousand years. This sort of approach produces far more useful results than studies that wander further afield for parallels, precisely because all of these Near Eastern cultures shared similar views and attitudes about a host of subjects, including prophecy and divination. This study, then, is not limited just to an examination of biblical prophecy, though that is where the major focus lies; rather, it seeks to set biblical prophecy in a somewhat wider context, attempting to see what light the larger social context may shed on the biblical phenomena.

As a prelude to the diachronic study and survey of prophecy, it will be worthwhile to take the time to interact with an important recent study that takes a cross-cultural and social approach to prophecy; through dialoguing with this study, we will be able to set out and introduce to the reader some of the problems and promise of such an approach to prophecy and, hopefully, be guided away from the pitfalls of such an approach. The study in question is L. L. Grabbe's highly regarded work, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages*.²

Grabbe begins his study by surveying the most relevant biblical texts that reveal something about the nature of prophets and diviners and their arts. One tendency of Grabbe's work throughout is his suspicion of those who would try to separate Hebrew prophets from other ancient Near East prophets as if they were somehow distinctive, and his even greater suspicion of the use of labels of "true" and "false" prophets within the biblical corpus itself. Thus, for instance, he takes the story found in 1 Kgs 22:1–28 somewhat at face value. Ahab had four hundred court prophets whom he consulted. Their leader, Zedekiah, prophesied in the name of Yahweh, and made a prophetic sign using iron horns to make clear what Yahweh was saying to Ahab—namely, that he would have a great victory. Grabbe's opinion about labels is represented in the case of Micaiah, who was brought forward and predicted defeat. To account for the former prophecies, Micaiah reveals a session of the heavenly court in which Yahweh asks how Ahab might be deceived, and in due course a lying spirit volunteers to enter the court prophets. Grabbe concludes, "All the prophets speak in the name of Yhwh; this includes the four hundred court prophets. Therefore, the conflict is between two sets of prophets of Yhwh."³ Grabbe is obviously skeptical about the use of any sort of ideological criteria to discern the difference between a true and a false prophet.

Yet, even laying ideology aside, it can not be the case that both Micaiah and the court prophets were doing equally good jobs of discerning the divine will in this matter, for clearly the court prophets proved to be wrong, and Micaiah to be right. The historical and archaeological evidence should not be ignored. It is possible to argue in the abstract that both groups of prophets could be wrong about a particular matter (e.g., if Ahab never fought an enemy at all, both these prophecies could be incorrect), but if indeed there was a battle, they could not both be right. This brings up a crucial point. However difficult it may

²L. L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity, 1995).

³*Ibid.*, 72.

prove to be to assess the matter, there must be some criteria by which one discerns the difference between true and false prophets, or real and non-prophets, or else one is failing to think either historically or critically about the prophetic material. All claims to be a true prophet are not equally valid. Charlatans were just as much a regular social type as true prophets in antiquity.

What this story does reveal, however, is that one can not divide true from false prophets purely on the basis of who claims to speak for Yahweh. Other criteria, including historical criteria, must be applied. The conclusion the author of the material in Kings would seem to urge is that even if one was disposed to see the court prophets as, in general, true prophets of Yahweh, in this particular matter they had been misled by a lying spirit. This brings up a further issue we will need to address—true prophets can, on occasion, speak beyond or against what God wishes them to say, and on the other hand, nonbiblical figures such as Balaam can offer true prophecy. It is not at all easy to distinguish between a true and a false prophet, and perhaps the distinguishing should actually be done at the level of prophecies rather than the prophets themselves.

More helpful is Grabbe's treatment of the Jonah stories. As Grabbe suggests, Jonah is too often ignored when the discussion turns to Hebrew prophecy, and certainly one of the major points this present book is seeking to make is that the prophecy a Hebrew prophet uttered could be *conditional* in nature. Furthermore, to a certain degree, a Hebrew prophet could resist God's call to make an unpopular prophecy. On the former score, if the audience repented in the face of the oracle, then God would perhaps withhold the judgment threatened.⁴ Of course, this makes it even more difficult to discern true from false prophecy, especially when we have, in most cases, a very piecemeal knowledge of what happened after a certain prophecy was uttered. Historical evidence and literary evidence must be allowed to interact before one can make pronouncements about prophecy "failing."⁵

Grabbe offers a brief definition of a prophet. A prophet is a person who speaks in the name of a god (usually Yahweh) and claims to pass on a revelation from that god. Divine revelation is a *sine qua non* of prophecy.⁶ On this showing, the literary creation of quasi-prophetic works involving *ex eventu* prophecy should probably not be seen as prophecy at all, for such efforts may well involve neither oracular prophets nor divine revelations. This point is worth pondering

⁴Ibid., 79–80.

⁵This is one of the major failings of R. P. Carroll's otherwise interesting study, *When Prophecy Failed: Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury, 1979). Carroll's particular concern is with some of the literary prophets and their predictions about the future, but he fails to deal seriously with the issue of whether some of these prophecies were intended to be conditional in nature from the outset.

⁶Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets*, 83. Compare this definition with what is said by Grabbe on p. 107: "The prophet is a mediator who claims to receive messages directly from a divinity, by various means, and communicates these messages to recipients."

further, especially when the discussion turns to apocalyptic material later in this study. On the whole, I must agree with Grabbe in his definition, and thus one must, at some point, broach the subject of non-prophetic developments based on, or prompted by, the prophetic corpus.

This leads to a brief discussion of the matter of literary prophecies, and a good point to start such a discussion is Grabbe's assessment of Akkadian literary prophecies. These prophecies generally take the form of chronicling a succession of unnamed kings and evaluating them as good or bad on the basis of what happened to the nation during their rule. There are some striking parallels with later Jewish apocalyptic, not the least in the use of *ex eventu* prophecy. There is, in addition, the description of present troubles that are said to be followed by some sort of idyllic future, often seen in terms of the coming of an ideal king (Marduk, Sulgi, Uruk). About these literary, *ex eventu* prophecies, Grabbe concludes, "There is no reason to think the literary prophecies arose from the pronouncements of a seer or ecstatic figure." Quite so, and Grabbe goes on to suggest that the distinction between literary predictive texts and real prophecy is a helpful one. I agree, and it suggests that literary predictions of the *ex eventu* sort should probably be seen as scribal rather than prophetic creations.⁷ This, of course, raises the issue of how much of OT prophecy is in fact a literary creation, rather than a transcript of oracles. This issue will have to be faced again as this study proceeds.

Grabbe weighs in against the frequently offered characterization of prophets as social reformers and critics. This view has also led to the assumption that they are the forefathers of those who preach the social gospel. In this view, the prophets were largely forthtellers rather than foretellers. Grabbe admits that figures such as Amos do indeed offer social criticism, but in fact Amos's criticisms do not always seem terribly specific.

Prophets do, from time to time, speak in a generic way about the evils of societies—crime, immorality, idolatry, the problem of evil neighboring kingdoms or nations, and the like. But as Grabbe points out, social criticism is a staple item in Wisdom literature as well. There is nothing distinctively prophetic about such remarks, and one might also add that there is, to some degree, this kind of social criticism in non-Israelite prophecy as well. It does not set Hebrew prophecy apart from its ancient Near East prophetic surroundings, unless in the degree that self-criticism comes to the fore in Israelite prophecy.⁸ Grabbe is also correct that both biblical and nonbiblical prophecies are filled with predictions about the future. One can not dismiss this as uncharacteristic of Hebrew prophets. "The designation 'social critics' applies only to some of the prophets and then only in a general way to a few of their prophecies, while 'social reformer' seems hardly appropriate to any of them"⁹ unless one widens the discussion to

⁷Ibid., 94.

⁸Ibid., 103.

⁹Ibid., 104.

figures such as Elijah and Elisha—which will be done in this study. It will be seen that the more social-reforming sort of prophet tended to be those remembered as men of deeds, including the performance of miracles, rather than men who offered many oracles.

Although Grabbe is clearly a critical scholar, he is very leery of those who confidently think they can distinguish original oracular material from later literary expansion in the prophetic corpus. For example, he notes that the oracles against foreign nations have often been taken as secondary because it was cult prophets who offered such oracles and the Hebrew prophets we are dealing with are thought not to have been cult prophets. As Grabbe points out, this begs a whole host of questions, for clearly there were figures, such as Samuel or Jeremiah or Ezekiel, who have cultic associations or roots. When one deconstructs such criteria as are often used (e.g., certain major themes characterize a genuine oracle—woe rather than salvation oracles, for example), one is left with the rather remarkable conclusion that

if, on the other hand, most of a book is now credited to the prophet in question—Amos, for example—such passages as messages of salvation, oracles against foreign nations, detailed forecasts about the future, predictions of a new age with millennial conditions all become part of the message of the classical prophet. The differences between the pre-classical seer, the classical prophet, the post-exilic prophet, and the apocalyptic visionary dwindle at most to matters of degree rather than kind.¹⁰

This is a startling conclusion, and this author is inclined to think Grabbe is right. The distinctions between the classical prophets and the later prophets, including the seers, appears to have been overdrawn, based on formal and content criteria that are dubious at best. A more holistic approach is in order when dealing with the prophetic corpus, and this study will try the experiment of being more inclusive in the analysis of the prophetic material of the various prophets and seeing what follows from such an approach.

Another subject on which Grabbe defies some common wisdom is the issue of ecstasy or trance and Israelite prophecy. Grabbe is right that, on a purely historical basis, one can not say it was only the prophets of Baal or non-Israelites prophets who experienced ecstasy or a trance state. Yet it is also true that only a distinct minority of texts in the Hebrew Scriptures suggest that biblical prophets experienced such a condition (cf. 1 Sam 10:10–11; 19:20–24; 1 Kgs 18:26–29; Ezek 1).

Much of the time, we have no idea how the prophet received the divine message. . . . The message could have come through a trance state or it could have been a conscious composition. It could have come spontaneously or it could be the result of specific inquiry. In many cases, a variety of modes is possible, and we can only speculate on how it was received. Thus, it would be wrong to ascribe all prophetic oracles to ecstatic experiences; equally, we have no right to deny such experiences categorically to Israelite prophets.¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 106–7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

The attempt, on the one hand, to make the classical prophets fit the mold of modern rationalistic preachers will not do, but on the other hand, it is also true that the phenomenological study of trance states and ecstasy makes it evident that they can vary from heavy to light, involving more or less loss of contact with the outer world. It would appear that Israelite prophets experienced the same range of experiences found in prophets in other, nearby cultures; more important, ecstasy certainly cannot by itself help to distinguish true from false prophecy.

Grabbe rightly emphasizes that prophecy in Israel, as in the other ancient Near Eastern cultures, was not a gender-specific matter. There were certainly prophetesses in Israel, although they made up a minority of the prophetic guild. Huldah is surely one of the more notable prophetesses (2 Kgs 22:14–20). Notice that Huldah is consulted by King Josiah. Huldah responds to the inquiry by delivering an oracle of disaster, telling the king that God would judge Israel's disobedience. One may also point to the prophetess Noadiah, who opposed Nehemiah, or to Miriam (Exod 15:20), or to Deborah (Judg 4:4). From "what little is known, the only difference from the male prophets seems to be their sex. The behavior and messages of the prophetesses show no significant differences from those found among male prophets. . . . No special bias against female prophets is indicated in any of the passages where they are mentioned. This suggests that the proportion of male and female prophets in the text probably represents social reality."¹² Here it is important to note that Israel was not unusual either for the presence of prophetesses or for the roles they played in society; this shall become evident in the first chapter of this study.

The next minefield in the discussion of prophecy is the matter of divination. On first blush, one might think that divination was completely condemned in Israel (Isa 8:19; 44:25; Jer 14:14; 27:9–10; 29:8–9; Ezek 12:21–24). But what, then, is one to make of the sacred dice or lots, the consultation of Urim and Thummim for either yes or no answers (1 Sam 23:8–13; cf. Exod 28; 39)? It would appear that, as with the case of prophecy, there was bad consultation or divination for answers, and good consultation or divination. Or is it that the lots were tolerated in Israel but the prophets, as part of their critique of the cultus and the priestly apparatus, anathematized this way of controlling prophecy? Should one see in Israel an evolving critique of earlier means of getting answers from God?

It is difficult to know how to evaluate the data, but this matter needs to be revisited, not least because it even crops up in the NT in Acts 1. There would seem, however, to be this difference between genuine prophecy and divination: the latter is a human attempt to obtain an answer from God, presumably at a time when there is no spontaneous revelation from the deity about the matter. In other words, in Israel at least, it seems to serve in lieu of spontaneous

¹²Ibid., 115.

prophecy. It also potentially involves an element of human manipulation.¹³ As such, it would seem to be subject to more human abuse and charlatanism.

It is time now to turn briefly to the issue of dreams and the receiving of revelations in dreams. On the one hand, dreams seem to be treated rather negatively in Jer 23:27–32 and 29:8; on the other hand, Daniel and Zechariah treat the matter rather differently, as does the book of Acts in the NT. It is perhaps possible to make a distinction between message dreams and symbolic dreams, the latter of which require more interpretation.¹⁴ The evidence is such that one must say that this was a widely known means of receiving revelation throughout the entire period this book will be discussing.¹⁵ We have clear evidence from as early as the Mari materials of revelations received in dreams (*ANET* 623). It is perhaps possible to group visions together with dreams—the former being a sort of day dream, the latter received in the night.

There is also the issue of whether a vision or dream will be made public or whether it is intended as a private revelation to the recipient. Oracles, by nature, are public in character, even if there is only an audience of one. In any event, one finds as early as 1 Sam 28:6 the suggestion that dreams and prophecy are equally means of discovering God's will, a phenomenon one also finds as late as the book of Acts, where both dreams and oracles regularly are portrayed as means of divine communication. There is clearly no blanket condemnation of dreams in the biblical or extrabiblical material relevant to this study, nor is there always a clear distinction between dreams and visions, any more than there is a clear distinction between seers and prophets in this material.

In many, if not most, respects, from a sociological point of view, it would appear that prophecy in Israel or in the Christian communities of the first century and later bore many similarities to the phenomenon found in the larger environment. One does see in the biblical tradition the shunning of certain practices, such as necromancy or witchcraft, but on the other hand, not all forms of divination would seem to have been ruled out. The question then becomes whether one places the emphasis on the similarities with the extrabiblical prophetic material or on the differences. Grabbe clearly does the former. Perhaps the current study will be able to assess the continuities and discontinuities without minimizing either. Prophecy is far too important a clue to the nature, especially the religious nature, of these ancient societies to be handled in overly simplified fashion. The reader, then, must be patient as this study allows the material to have its own say, without trying to impose a schema on the varied materials. If the reader has been exposed to new and fresh lines of thought about this venerable and variegated material, this author will be content. Clearly, this material holds an important key to understanding the biblical world. It will, then, be worth a detailed examination, to which this study now turns.

¹³ See *ibid.*, 136–38.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, 146.

¹⁵ On the NT period, see pp. 340–43 below.