

Preface to the Fortress Press Edition

WHEN *JESUS THE SEER* first came out in 1999, it was intended as a companion volume to *Jesus the Sage*, done with Fortress Press (2000). Unfortunately, I had lost both my editors at Fortress, and both Fortress Press and I were going through transitions of various sorts. Long story short, the book was published by another publisher (Hendrickson), and when they sold numerous volumes over to Baker Books, the rights reverted to them. I am very grateful to my friends at Baker that they have given me back the rights to this volume, which has served and continues to serve as a textbook on prophecy in the Bible and on the historical Jesus and his earliest disciples in particular. I am equally grateful to my friends at Fortress, especially to Will Bergkamp and Pamela Johnson, for their eagerness to publish this volume once more, this time as the proper companion volume to *Jesus the Sage* it was originally intended to be.

While much New Testament water has certainly gone under the bridge since 1999, somewhat strangely, very little of it has to do with NT prophecy in general or the historical Jesus in particular. This may be attributed in part to the gradual fading away of the Third Quest for the historical Jesus (only a few major volumes are still being produced out of that initial surge in emphasis; notably, John Meier's series on *A Marginal Jew* is still producing fresh material), and in part from the turning of the discipline of NT studies to many other subjects.

Yes, there have been a few studies of note in the past fifteen years on the historical Jesus. Besides those of Meier, I am thinking of the volume of collected essays edited by A.-J. Levine and others, titled *The Historical Jesus in Context* (Princeton University Press, 2006), to which I contributed a discussion of Isaiah 53, as well as Bart Ehrman's

Did Jesus Exist? (HarperOne, 2012), which rebuts the arguments of those who would wish to claim there was no historical Jesus. Equally important is the new edition of *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. J. B. Green, et al.: InterVarsity Press, 2013), which gives all sorts of updated bibliography and discussion of relevant topics that overlap with this study's focus. I would be remiss if I did not mention the remarkable conference at Lateran University and the Vatican, sponsored by the Pope Benedict XVI Foundation and held in October 2013, which produced numerous good papers on the historical Jesus from a wide variety of Jesus scholars. These papers, including my paper "Jesus the Sage and his Provocative Parables," have just been published in two volumes, under the title *The Gospels: History and Christology. The Search of Joseph Ratzinger—Benedict XVI* (ed. B. Estrada et al.; Vatican Press, 2013). The conference was prompted by Pope Benedict's three remarkable books on the historical Jesus, which were written at a more popular level but which nonetheless prompted some excellent discussion about the historical Jesus.

It is interesting, however, that in terms of fresh stand-alone monographs on prophecy and Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet, basically what we find is a rehash of the older arguments by Albert Schweitzer that repeat Schweitzer's major mistake—that is, assuming that Jesus engaged in date-setting in regard to his return and/or the end of all things, based chiefly on a misreading of Mark 13 (see, for example, the studies by Bart Ehrman and by Dale Allison on Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet).¹ It seems that even with the Third Quest waning, the ghost of Schweitzer's Jesus has still not been entirely exorcised.

What has not been attempted since 1999, so far as I can tell, is what I sought to do with the volume *Jesus the Seer*: namely, study Jesus and early Christianity in the context of the long practice and history of prophecy in the Ancient Near East, in the Old Testament, in the Greco-Roman world, and in early Christianity, and see how the prophetic traditions and practice developed over time. Thus the *modus operandi* in *Jesus the Seer* is the same as what I pursued in *Jesus the Sage*, and it still provides a useful wider- and longer-angle lens from which to evaluate Jesus as a visionary prophet and his followers, such as John of Patmos, who continued to practice prophecy in that manner.

I have not sought to update the discussions of these various chapters in this volume with more recent references, since this is a reprint rather than a whole new edition, but there is still more than enough material in this volume to prompt more good discussion on the subject and to tease minds into active thought about Jesus and prophecy, which was the intent in the first place. I look forward to the response to this renewed stimulus.

Epiphany 2014

¹B. Ehrman, *Jesus. Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), and D. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

A Preview of Coming Attractions

THE STUDY OF PROPHECY, whether ancient Near Eastern, Hebrew, early Christian, or Greco-Roman, has taken many twists and turns in the twentieth century. Occasionally, scholarship on prophecy has been refreshed and refined by new, unexpected discoveries from such places as Mari, Deir Alla, where a tablet referring to Balaam of Beor was found, or Qumran, in the salt flats along the Dead Sea. Yet despite all this stimulus, no one to my knowledge has ever attempted a broad, cross-cultural and diachronic study of the bearing of the prophetic phenomenon on the biblical data. No one has looked at the whole to see what trends and developments took place over the course of time or what the whole might tell us about the parts.

This judgment stands in spite of the fact that a considerable amount of attention has been paid to the historical relationship of apocalyptic literature to prophetic literature. Yet even this helpful body of scholarly work has not led to an adequate analysis of the broader sweep of the social and historical phenomenon of prophecy in the eastern Mediterranean. To the contrary, the study of prophecy has become an increasingly specialized and text-oriented matter. James Ward says with reason about the study of OT prophecy, “Today the emphasis is upon the [prophetic] books themselves, and the complex literary traditions that produced them”¹ rather than on the prophets, their experience, or their original oracles. This is a 180-degree

¹J. Ward, “The Eclipse of the Prophet in Contemporary Prophetic Studies,” *USQR* 42 (1988): 97–103, here 102.

reversal of the trend in the early part of this century when there was so much emphasis on prophets as unique individuals with intriguing religious experiences.² Increasing doubts about the historical substance and character of the biblical prophetic books is in part responsible for this shift. Psychological maximalism has been replaced by historical minimalism.

Yet, while attention to tradition history and to the redaction of prophetic books is an important task, it need not eclipse other lines of approach to the phenomenon of ancient prophecy—and for good reason. Consider the remarks of R. P. Gordon:

While the phenomenon of the “disappearing prophet” has become a feature (indeed function) of some modern approaches to Israelite prophecy, at the same time the profile of Syro-Mesopotamian prophecy has become increasingly clear, and there are now definite cognates for the basic Hebrew word for “prophet.” Against this background . . . though eighth century prophets like Amos and Hosea may not have been much interested in the title “prophet” (. . . not surprisingly when the title was used for non-Israelite prophets), they nevertheless saw themselves functioning as such. No single aspect of Israelite prophecy marks it out as distinct from its near eastern equivalents; its obvious distinctiveness derives from Israel’s unique perception of God.³

For some time I have been working on a broad study of the social phenomenon of prophecy in the ancient Mediterranean world, realizing full well that in some respects it is an impossible task. No one can be the master of this enormous corpus of material, and so at various points I have had to simply accept that I have to stand on the shoulders of the experts in this material and rely on their critical judgments. This means that this study must be seen for what it is—a first attempt to come to grips with this vast subject, not a definitive treatment of it.

Nevertheless, having immersed myself in the scope and breadth of this material, a great deal of light has been shed for me on issues that have vexed my particular field of expertise—NT studies. For example, I have pondered why it is that such a large proportion of the Hebrew Scriptures involves prophetic books, while the NT, unless one counts the apocalyptic revelation that concludes that corpus, contains no books which could be called prophetic as a whole or even any that in the main involve collections of oracles. I believe there are also many clues about Hebrew prophecy as part of the larger ANE phenomenon, including such sites as Mari and elsewhere, which attest to a family resemblance.

While there was a range of things that prophets might do and say in the ancient world, nonetheless their activity, the form of their discourse, and the social purposes and effects of this discourse were similar in all these Mediterranean cultures, so much so that a person traveling from, say, Rome to the extremes of the eastern end of the Empire in the first century AD could speak

² See the older classic study by J. Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion: Studies in the Life of Jeremiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922).

³ R. P. Gordon, “Where Have All the Prophets Gone?” *BBR* 5 (1995): 67–86, here 67.

about prophets and prophecy and expect most audiences essentially to understand. Similarly, during the time of Jeremiah one could travel from Babylon to Jerusalem and expect the social phenomenon of prophecy to be in many, though not all, ways the same in a variety of these ANE cultures. The story of Jonah, like the story of Balaam, encourages us to look at prophecy as a cross-cultural phenomenon, with influence moving in various directions and development happening through the course of time.

I have discovered in my odyssey through the prophetic material that a great deal of loose talk has been allowed to pass for critical thinking about the nature of prophets and their utterances. For example, in my discipline, but also in OT studies, prophecy is often regarded as synonymous with preaching or with the creative handling and interpreting of earlier sacred texts. Part of this lack of clarity may be put down to confusion on the difference between prophetic utterances and the literary residue of such utterances, namely, books of prophetic material, collected and edited by scribes over the course of time. I have found it important in this study to distinguish the prophetic experience, the prophetic expression, the prophetic tradition, and prophetic corpus, all of which are part of the social phenomenon that falls under the heading of prophecy.

I have been struck repeatedly by how across a variety of cultural lines and over the course of an enormous amount of time Jews, pagans, and Christians in the eastern end of the Mediterranean crescent all seem to have had reasonably clear and similar ideas about what constituted a prophet and prophecy. To share a few of the conclusions of this study in advance, a prophet was an oracle, a mouthpiece for some divine being, and as such he or she did not speak for him or herself but for another. A prophet might also be many other things (teacher, priest, sage), but the role of prophet could be distinguished from these other roles and functions. Prophecy, whether from Mari or Jerusalem or Delphi or Rome, was spoken in known languages, usually in poetic form, and so it was an intelligible, even if often puzzling, kind of discourse. It might involve spontaneous utterances or a reading of various omens or signs, but in either case it was not a matter of deciphering ancient texts, which was the task of scribes, sages, and exegetes. Furthermore, people consulted a prophet to obtain a late word from a deity about pressing or impending matters. In sociological terms the prophet must be seen as a mediatorial figure; this, therefore, makes the prophet significant but also subject to being pushed to the margins of society if the divine words involve curse rather than blessing, judgment rather than redemption. At least in the setting of Israel and early Christianity, the prophet also deliberately stands at the boundary of the community—the boundary between God and the community as well as the boundary between the community and those outside it. It is the task of the prophet to call God's people to account and to reinforce the prescribed boundaries of the community while reestablishing or reinforcing the divine-human relationship.

This takes us to another factor which has too often been underplayed in the scholarly discourse (perhaps in order to avoid the embarrassment of having to

say that a particular favorite prophet was wrong). I am referring to the fact that prophecy was more often than not predictive in character, though most often its subject matter dealt with something thought to be on the near horizon, not something decades much less centuries in the future. And even when the more remote future was the subject of prophecy, the subject was raised because it was thought to have a rather direct bearing on the present. In short, ancient prophets were not armchair speculators about remote subjects. (Nostradamus, if even he were such a speculator, would not have felt comfortable in this company.)

Let me be clear from the outset that I am not just saying that a broad crosscultural study of the social phenomenon of prophecy is illuminating. This is true and is part of the focus of this study, but one could certainly do a broad study that was simply synchronic in nature (e.g., prophecy in the eighth century BC in the ANE including Israel). I intend in this study to also pursue particular prophetic trajectories through time, which also affords a tremendously illuminating way of examining the material. The basic arrangement of this book is diachronic.

Perhaps a small sample of the value of a diachronic study of prophecy is in order at this juncture, as a partial justification for that dimension of this work. Our earliest relevant text, Isa 24:21–22, reads: “On that day the Lord will punish the host of heaven and on earth the kings of earth. They will be gathered together like prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.” Although the identity of the host of heaven is not explicit, the contrast between them and the kings of the earth makes it likely that rebellious powers in heaven are in view (cf. Deut 32:8; Dan 10:13). There may also be something to the suggestion that these powers in heaven are seen as the ones controlling the rebellious kings and their nations.⁴ What is crucial to note about this passage is the stress that these powers are put in something like an extraterrestrial prison or holding cell until the time comes for them to be punished.

The second passage from closer to the time of, if not during, the early stages of the NT era is *1 En.* 10:4–6. Here the picture of the two-stage defeat of these powers (or at least one of them) is clarified and particularized: “the Lord said to Raphael, ‘Bind Azazel⁵ hand and foot, throw him into the darkness!’ And he made a hole in the desert which was in Dudaël and cast him there; he threw on top of him rugged sharp rocks. And he covered his face in order that he might not see the light; and in order that he might be sent into the great fire on the day of judgment.”⁶

Our next port of call is several NT texts, the earliest being Jude. For convenience we will present these three texts in parallel columns to facilitate the comparison.

⁴See now the discussion of R. Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 49–80.

⁵Clearly a demonic figure; see, e.g., D. P. Wright, “Azazel,” in *ABD* I, 536–37.

⁶One should compare this text to *1 En.* 10:12; 18:14–19; 21:6–10; 90:23–27; *Jub.* 5:6–10; 10:5–9.

JUDE (v. 6)	2 PETER (2:4)	1 PETER (3:19–20)
“And the angels who did not keep their own position, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept in eternal chains in deepest darkness for the judgment of the great Day.”	“For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell [Tartaros] and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment.”	“he [Christ] went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah.”

Obviously, the first two of these texts are more similar to one another than the third is to either one. R. Bauckham has demonstrated a likely literary link between Jude and 2 Peter, as the passages above show.⁷ The first two of these texts are not obviously of christological import, though if the reference to Christ as Lord in Jude 4 prepares for v. 5, where the Lord is the one who saved the people from Egypt and then kept the angels in chains, then we have a comment on Christ’s preexistence and his roles in Israel’s history, drawing on Wisdom ideas not unlike what we find in 1 Cor 10:4 (cf. Wis. of Sol. 11:4). The author of 2 Peter, however, sees God and not Christ as the one who chained the disobedient angels; this comports with the font of this tradition in Isaiah.

All these NT texts refer to Gen 6:1–4, where God was so outraged by what the angels (sons of God) did with the daughters of humanity that God brought a flood upon the earth. This Genesis context is more obvious in the 1 Pet 3 use of this material, and it is in 1 Pet 3 that we find something with christological importance. Here Christ (v. 18 makes clear this is who it is) goes and preaches to these angels in prison. Though the 1 Pet 3 text has been the basis of the creedal statement “he descended into hell” and various “second chance” theologies, it is doubtful this text has anything at all to do with such notions. Nothing is said about Christ’s “descent” anywhere. We are simply told that after Christ died and was “made alive in the Spirit” he went and preached or made a proclamation to these spirits or angels. There may be a trace of this whole theological development in the hymn fragment in 1 Tim 3:16, where we hear that Christ was “vindicated in spirit.” This remark is immediately followed by “seen by angels.” Commentators have always thought this remark was out of place. If it referred to Christ’s entry into heaven it would be better placed just before or after the last line of the hymn, which reads “taken up in glory.” This reference to being seen by angels, however, may not be out of place at all if it is about Christ’s visit to Tartaros. It is also not impossible that Eph 4:8 is of relevance here as well, for there it is said of Christ, quoting Ps 68:18 with alterations, “When he ascended on high, he led (or made) captivity itself captive.”

To understand this material some knowledge of Jewish angelology and demonology is necessary. For our purposes it is necessary only to say that the powers and principalities and indeed Satan himself were believed to inhabit the realm between heaven and earth. This is one reason why the planets were sometimes assumed to be heavenly beings or angels (“the heavenly host”), and it is also why Satan is called in the NT “the ruler of the power of the air” (Eph 2:2).

⁷See R. J. Bauckham, *Jude and 2 Peter* (Waco: Word, 1983).

It would appear then that 1 Pet 3, far from being about a descent to humans, is about Christ's ascent to the angels on his way to heaven, at which point he proclaimed his victory over such powers and thereby made their captivity all the more permanent and their doom sure. This material then would provide us with another strand of evidence of the development of cosmic Christology or *Christus Victor* (over the powers), and it would show this is not simply a Pauline development. It would also provide another piece of evidence for the phenomenon whereby actions predicated of God in earlier Jewish traditions are now predicated of Christ in the NT.⁸

There is actually a remarkable coherence between these five texts with signs of development in *Enoch* in the naming of the demon in view, and in the NT in naming of the prison itself, and finally in the focus in 1 Pet 3 on the role of Christ in relationship to these beings. Yet without hearing the echoes of or allusions to the earlier prophetic texts, it is understandable how especially the text in 1 Pet 3 has been so often misread. Longitudinal studies in the trajectory of the prophetic tradition offers many such revelations.⁹ What we intend to do in the main in the following study, however, is to examine larger issues concerning the nature of prophecy and the development of prophetic traditions, especially paying attention to the cross-cultural nature of the prophetic phenomenon. As we shall see, this sheds much light on the latest canonical stages of the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions and leads to some surprising conclusions.

The turn of our own era is, in various regards, an obvious time to turn once again and examine the ancient prophetic phenomenon. As I write, we have seen for several years running a wide and wild variety of end-of-the-world religious cults from North America to Switzerland and beyond, often unfortunately ending in tragedy. The fascination with prophecy, or what passes for it, remains strong even two thousand years after the time of Jesus. It is my hope that the following study may not merely further the study of ancient prophecy, but also further the discussion of whether prophecy is still a viable form of human discourse. If it accomplishes these aims I will be content.

EASTER 1999

⁸For a compelling study of the material in the Petrine texts which leaves little doubt that the subject is angelic beings, not human beings, who are in this dark prison and that the land of the dead or hell is not meant, see W. J. Dalton, *Christ's Proclamation to the Spirits: A Study of 1 Peter 3:18-4:6* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965).

⁹Another example of this sort of approach on a larger scale but dealing with one particular tradition is found in J. T. Greene, *Balaam and His Interpreters: A Hermeneutical History of the Balaam Traditions* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).