E. THE PROPHETIC TRADITION

CHAPTER
31

The World of the Prophets

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey! What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away? To whom will you flee for help, and where will you leave your wealth, so as not to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain? For all this his anger has not turned away; his hand is stretched out still. (Isaiah 10:1-4)

"I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD," says the LORD God, "when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God." (Ezekiel 36:23-27)

Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong. For thus says the LORD of hosts: "Just as I purposed to bring disaster upon you, when your ancestors provoked me to wrath, and I did not relent," says the LORD of hosts, "so again I have purposed in these days to do good to Jerusalem and to the house of Judah; do not be afraid. These are the things that you shall do: Speak the truth to one another, render in your gates judgments that are true and make for peace, do not devise evil in your hearts against one another, and love no false oath; for all these are things that I hate," says the LORD. (Zechariah 8:13-17)

In the last several chapters we have been exploring what the Hebrew Bible tells us about the religious practices of the followers of Yahweh in ancient Palestine. In this chapter we shift our attention to a class of religious specialists called **prophets** who played a unique role in the religious life of ancient Israel and Judah. Our information about the prophets comes from two sources: (a) collections of their sayings which were eventually compiled into books that were included in the Prophets section of the Hebrew Bible, and (b) stories about prophets that are found in some of the narrative books. Only a small fraction of the prophets who lived in ancient Israel left any trace in the written record. Others appear as members of groups, but their names are unknown. As we shall see, we should not assume that all ancient Israelite prophets were like the ones who are mentioned or quoted in the Hebrew Bible.

The next six chapters are devoted to an examination of the phenomenon of prophecy in ancient Israel and Judah. The present chapter provides an overview of the prophetic movement, including comparisons with

similar activities in other religions. Chapters 32 and 33 look more closely at the sayings of the prophets who lived before the Babylonian Exile, while chapters 34 and 35 examine the prophets who spoke to the people of Judah during and after the Exile. The study concludes in chapter 36 with an investigation of the apocalyptic movement, which arose out the prophetic movement toward the end of the biblical period.

While it might appear that we are devoting an excessive amount of attention to a single aspect of the religious life of ancient Israel and Judah, a quick review of the Table of Contents of any Bible will show why this is necessary. Nearly 30 percent of the text of the Hebrew Bible consists of sayings attributed to prophets, and stories about prophets appear at key points in the narrative books as well. Clearly the people who compiled and preserved these texts thought that prophets had played a vital role in their people's history. If we wish to understand the Hebrew Bible, we must pay attention to the role of prophets in the biblical texts.

PENETRATING THE VEIL

When people today hear the word *prophet*, they usually think of someone who claims to be able to foretell the future, like Nostradamus or the publicity-seekers whose predictions are used to sell tabloids at supermarket stands. This association has given the term *prophet* a bad name, since few people today believe that humans can accurately predict what will happen in the future.

In the ancient world, however, things were different. Virtually everyone thought that people with special gifts or training could attain insight into things to come. The world of the future, like the world of the gods, might be veiled, but it was not closed. Life was filled with signs and messages from the supernatural world. Those who knew how to interpret these messages could uncover many mysteries that escaped the awareness of ordinary people.

Various methods were used to discern what the gods were saying to humans. Some involved activities that anyone could perform, while others required specialized training. One of the most popular techniques was the casting of lots (for example, rolling dice or drawing sticks from a pouch), which worked on the assumption that the gods would influence the outcome and so make their will known. Another common practice was to look for hidden patterns within the world of nature, such as the flight of a flock of birds or the behavior of a sacred animal. Unusual natural events like eclipses, comets, and freak storms were invariably regarded as omens of the future, though the question of how they were to be interpreted was usually left to experts. Specialized training was also required to interpret dreams or to read the messages embedded in the organs of a sacrificed animal. Many of these practices can be found in various tribal cultures today.

At the pinnacle of specialization was a class of religious experts who sought to attain direct contact with the supernatural world by means of visions, dreams, spirit possession, and similar experiences. Scholars who study tribal cultures usually call these people **shamans**, but this term carries associations that can be misleading when applied to other types of cultures. A more neutral term is **intermediaries**, since the principal activity of these people is to mediate between the world of humans and the world of the divine.

Fig. 31.2. (top) The Assyrian king Shamshi-Adad V (ninth century B.C.E.) accompanied by symbols of heavenly deities, whose motions the Assyrians studied to gain insight into the will of the gods; (bottom) a Babylonian model of a sheep's liver, marked to show pupils how to discern messages from the gods in the animal's entrails.

Intermediaries employ a variety of techniques to penetrate the veil that in their view hangs lightly between the two worlds. Purification rituals are used to remove the taint of earthly associations and to prepare the person for interaction with the sacred realm. Sacred objects and sacred

places serve as channels through which the power of the supernatural enters the world of humans. Reciting sacred words and (in literate cultures) studying sacred texts help to usher the mind into the presence of the divine. Special kinds of music and ritualized dance serve to attune the senses to the presence of the supernatural and bring the person under the influence or control of a sacred power. Eating or inhaling sacred substances, including but not limited to items known today to be hallucinogenic, is yet another common means of opening one's mind and spirit to the world beyond.

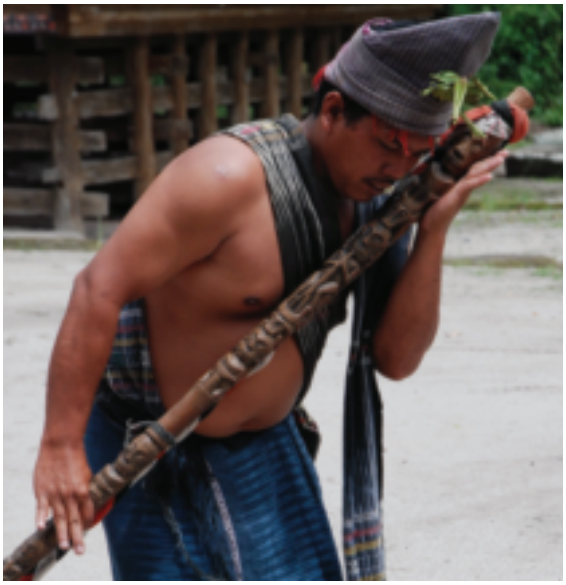

Fig. 31.3. (top) An Indonesian shaman listens for the voices of the gods speaking through his sacred staff; (bottom) a painting created by a Mexican artist based on sacred visions triggered by eating peyote cactus buttons.

Such close encounters with the supernatural world must be handled with great care, since the forces with which the intermediaries are interacting can turn against those who approach them without proper respect. But the benefits to society clearly outweigh the risks. In addition to learning about and possibly influencing the future, intermediaries often bring back messages from the gods concerning the kinds of moral or ritual conduct that their people should perform in order to avoid future hardship and enjoy prosperity. Intermediaries also channel supernatural power to help individuals who are sick or otherwise troubled within the society.

The fact that intermediaries are able to interact safely with the supernatural realm evokes both respect and fear from their fellow citizens. It is not uncommon to observe a level of tension between these charismatic individuals and other societal leaders. As a rule, intermediaries use their influence to support the social and political status quo, serving as personal counselors to those in power and lending legitimacy to their undertakings. Some, however, become critics of the established order, whether due to personal conviction, disputes with other leaders, or membership in a marginal social group. Often their criticism is framed as a message from the gods to return to social or religious practices that prevailed during some golden age of the past, even when what they are proposing is in fact a new practice.

Whether the proposed changes are accepted depends as much on the social status of the speaker as on the content of the message. This is especially true when intermediaries are lined up on both sides of a proposal. An intermediary who has earned the respect of societal leaders might find them willing to embrace the desired change, whereas one who is viewed as an outsider or whose message threatens the interests of important leaders might be ignored, abused, exiled, or even killed. The mere assertion that one is speaking on behalf of the gods does not guarantee that the message will be accepted, especially when other intermediaries can be found to speak on the opposite side of the recommendation.

PROPHETS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The narrative books and the books of the prophets contain a veritable treasure trove of material pertaining to the

words and actions of men and women who were viewed as prophets by the people who compiled the Hebrew Bible. Virtually all of the stories about the prophets are associated with the era of the monarchy, though we do find a few references to prophets in earlier and later periods. By contrast, the prophets whose sayings are recorded in the books of the prophets extend from the monarchy through the Babylonian Exile and beyond.

Like other elements of the Hebrew Bible, the stories and sayings of the prophets have been subjected to critical scrutiny by scholars. Before we can look at what scholars have said about the prophets, however, we must understand how prophets are depicted in the Hebrew Bible. Following the chronological framework provided by the biblical editors, the prophets can be divided into three periods: preexilic prophets (those who lived and spoke prior to the Babylonian Exile), exilic prophets (those who pronounced their messages during the period of the Exile), and postexilic prophets (those who arose after the return from Babylonia).

Preexilic Prophets

The first person to be designated a prophet in the biblical story line is Abraham, though the term appears only once, in the mouth of a non-Israelite (Genesis 20:7). The title is used more often in the Exodus story, where it is applied to Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15; 34:10), his brother Aaron (Exodus 7:1), his sister Miriam (Exodus 15:20), and two men named Eldad and Medad (Numbers 11:25-29). The only other person prior to the monarchy to be labeled a prophet is an unnamed man from the period of the judges (Judges 6:7-10).

With the rise of the monarchy, prophets become almost commonplace in the narrative books. The transition occurs with Samuel, who functions simultaneously as prophet (also called a seer; see 1 Samuel 9:9), priest, and judge. According to the Hebrew Bible, Samuel, following the leading of Yahweh, chose and anointed Saul to be the first king of Israel (1 Samuel 9:1—10:27). This meant laying aside his own political power as a judge in favor of a more limited role as religious leader of the nation and prophet to the king. When Saul repeatedly fails to obey Samuel's instructions, Samuel is told by Yahweh to anoint David to replace him (1 Samuel 16:1-13). During David's reign, prophets serve as advisors to the king, informing him what Yahweh wants him to do and challenging him when he fails to obey the will of the deity (2 Samuel 7:1-17; 12:1-15; 24:10-19; 1 Kings 1:22-40; 1 Chronicles 25:5; 2 Chronicles 29:25; 35:15). Scholars commonly call such people *court prophets*, since they served in the court of the king.

Beginning with David's son Solomon, the relationship between the kings and the prophets changes. Solomon receives a number of messages directly from Yahweh, but no prophets are named among his officials. Toward the end of his reign, a prophet named Ahijah arises from outside his court, pronouncing words of judgment against the king and predicting the division of the kingdom after his death (1 Kings 11:26-40). From this time forward, prophets are depicted primarily as adversaries of the kings. They appear at key points in the narrative to announce Yahweh's displeasure with the kings' conduct and to declare his intention to execute judgment against them, their families, and their people for failing to abide by his covenant, primarily by worshipping other gods (1 Kings 14:1-16; 16:1-4; 21:17-26; 2 Kings 9:1-10; 17:13-14; 21:10-15; 2 Chronicles 25:14-16; 28:8-11). The verdict is usually presented as final, with no possibility of repentance or change. In a few cases, however, the kings repent after hearing the words of the prophet and Yahweh reduces their punishment as a result (1 Kings 21:27-29; 2 Chronicles 12:5-8; 33:10-13). This description of the words and activities of the prophets coheres fairly well with the messages that are attributed to the preexilic prophets in the biblical books of the prophets (see chapters 32 and 33). As might be expected, the message of these prophets was not well-received—most were ignored, mocked, or otherwise abused.

Yet this is not the whole story. The narrative books acknowledge that at least some of the kings whom they condemn had prophets among their advisors, both prophets of Yahweh and prophets of other gods (1 Kings 18:18-19; 22:1-12; see also Jeremiah 37:17-19). The prophetic books likewise include several passages in which the biblical prophet criticizes other prophets who have more influence with the rulers and people than the person making the pronouncement (Isaiah 28:9-12;

Jeremiah 5:30-31; 23:9-40; 28:1-17; 37:17-19; Ezekiel 22:27-28; Micah 3:5-8). By contrast, none of the "good kings" is credited. On the other hand, the Hebrew Bible also contains several stories in which "bad kings" follow the advice of the prophets of Yahweh and win victories or otherwise succeed in their endeavors (1 Kings 20:13-30; 2 Kings 3:11-27; 6:8-7:20). In this they resemble the "good kings" who consistently take the prophets seriously and seek their advice in times of need (1 Kings 22:5-9; 2 Kings 3:11-20; 19:1-37; 22:11-20; 2 Chronicles 20:20; 29:25). These conflicting images suggest that the relationship between the prophets of Yahweh and the kings of Israel and Judah in the preexilic period was not as simple as some biblical texts might lead us to believe.

Exilic Prophets

With the coming of the Exile, the biblical depiction of the prophets undergoes a striking change. The narrative books say nothing about prophets during the Exile, but the prophetic books include sayings from several prophets who lived during this period (chapter 34). With no more kings to serve as their foils, the exilic prophets addressed their message to the elders of the exiled community and the people as a whole. Some of their statements recall the judgmental language used by the preexilic prophets against the leaders of the community and other prophets whose message differed from their own (Isaiah 44:24-26; Jeremiah 29: 8-9; 29:20-32; Ezekiel 13:1-23; 14:1-11; 34:1-31). More often, however, their words of judgment are directed against the foreign nations who are oppressing the people of Yahweh.

The message that they bring to their own people is primarily one of hope and encouragement. The exilic prophets assure their people that Yahweh has not forgotten them. Though he was angry with them for a time, he plans to return them to their land and bless them with peace and prosperity. Some of the prophets seem to envision a renewed Israel that has no need for kings, while others speak of Yahweh sending a new Davidic king who will rule with justice and equity (see Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:15-28). In both cases the historical tension between prophets and kings has been replaced by the hope of a return to an idealized earlier period when the people lived under divine rule without a king (the time of the Exodus or the judges) or when the king did what was right and did not need to be corrected by the prophets (the time of David).

Postexilic Prophets

When the story resumes in the postexilic period, the narrative books paint a picture of cooperation and respect between the prophets and the community's leaders. When the prophets Haggai and Zechariah call on the people to resume their rebuilding of the temple, the governor and the high priest act on their words, despite the fact that their Persian overlords had previously ordered them to stop (Ezra 5:1-2; 6:13-15; compare Haggai 1:1-15). This obedient response to the words of Yahweh causes the prophets to speak in glowing terms about the community's leaders and to promise Yahweh's blessings upon their actions (Haggai 2:1-5; 2:20-23; Zechariah 3:6-10; 4:1-14; 6:9-15; compare Nehemiah 6:6-7).

Yet there are still hints of trouble. Nehemiah prays for divine judgment against "the prophetess Noadiah and the rest of the prophets who wanted to make me afraid" (Nehemiah 6:14), and Zechariah mentions prophets who speak for other gods besides Yahweh (Zechariah 13:2-6). The book of Malachi and the collection that scholars call "Third Isaiah" (Isaiah 56–66; see chapter 35) criticize community leaders in language that recalls the words of the preexilic prophets (Isaiah 56:9-12; 66:6; Malachi 1:6—2:3; 2:8-9), and several passages accuse the populace of ignoring the words of the prophets as their ancestors had done in earlier times (Isaiah 57:4; 65:11-12; 66:4-5; Zechariah 1:1-6; 7:8-14). Clearly not everyone respected and followed the prophets of Yahweh in the postexilic period.

In summary, the biblical narratives and the prophetic books present a picture of the prophets that is more complex than it first appears. The people who compiled the Hebrew Bible clearly favored certain prophets over others, but they included enough references to the prophets whom they rejected to give us at least a modest sense of the diversity of the prophetic movement in ancient Palestine.

ASSESSING THE SOURCES

Despite the abundance of material in the Hebrew Bible concerning the prophets, scholars have questioned the reliability of certain aspects of the biblical depiction of the prophets. Several problems have given rise to these scholarly concerns.

1. *The questionable historicity of the narrative books.* Most of the stories involving prophets appear in the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. Discussions of the historicity of these stories cannot be separated from the ongoing debates over the historical reliability of the narrative books of the Hebrew Bible. Scholars who believe that the narratives are based on reliable materials tend to accept their depiction of the prophetic movement in ancient Palestine, even if they question some of the individual stories. Scholars who are more skeptical of the narratives regard much of the material about the prophets as the fictional creation of a later editor. Further problems arise from the manner in which the prophets are portrayed in the narrative books. Many of the stories show prophets predicting specific events in the future and even performing miracles. These features are largely absent from the books of the prophets. This gap has fueled doubts about the reliability of the stories, leading many scholars to view them as more legendary than historical.

Fig. 31.4. This parchment fragment from the Dead Sea Scrolls contains several verses from an ancient copy of the book of Jeremiah.

2. *The editorial history of the prophetic books.* As we saw in chapter 4, the books of the prophets were compiled and edited into their present form long after the prophets are thought to have lived. Scholars have different ideas about how well the words and deeds of the prophets were preserved in the intervening years and how much freedom the editors used in preparing their books. Conservatives believe that everything in the books reflects the words and experiences of the prophets to whom they are attributed. Maximalists find evidence that some of the sayings of the prophets were updated for later audiences and materials from later periods were included in the collections, but they accept the bulk of the material as reliable. Minimalists insist that the sayings in the prophetic books have been heavily reworked or even created by later editors to reflect their own beliefs and circumstances. Some question whether the books tell us much at all about the prophets whose names are associated with the books. How one answers these questions will have a profound impact on the way one views the history of the prophetic movement as well as the lives and messages of individual prophets.

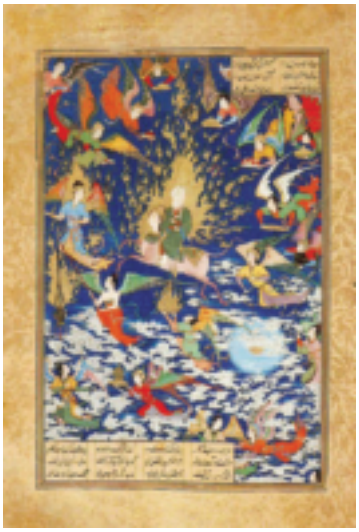

Fig. 31.5. (top) An artist's rendition of the famous "night journey" in which the Muslim prophet Muhammad is said to have been escorted to heaven by angels to meet with Allah; (bottom) Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, began his ministry as a prophet after receiving a vision in which he talked with God the Father and his son Jesus Christ.

3. *The selectivity of the biblical materials.* The people who compiled the prophetic books into their present form were not simply historians seeking to preserve material from the past. They were people of faith who believed that these particular prophets had spoken a message that was relevant to their own generation. The decision about which sayings and stories would be compiled into a written collection and how those materials would be organized was made by these later editors, not by the prophets or their immediate followers. Prophets whose message was deemed irrelevant or incorrect were omitted from the collection, as were those who honored Yahweh as one among many gods and those who spoke for other deities. The editors were also limited to the materials that had survived until their day. Little is known about how the words of the prophets were preserved, but most were probably passed on by word of mouth for an extended period of time (see chapter 4). Along the way, some of the prophets' sayings could have been revised and others lost. Finally, careful study of the prophetic books has convinced most scholars that the editors felt free to change or even create materials to make the words of the prophets speak more immediately to their own day. Together these factors suggest that we should be careful about generalizing from the books of the prophets to the broader social and religious movement of which they were a part.

Despite these problems, most scholars believe that a judicious and critical reading of the biblical text can give us a fairly good idea of the nature and activities of prophets in ancient Palestine, including those aspects of the tradition that the editors rejected. Debates continue over how to counterbalance the editors' obvious preference for certain types of prophets over others and how to fill in those parts of the story that they neglected. Comparisons with similar figures from elsewhere in the ancient Near East are helpful for filling in the gaps, as are studies of prophets and shamans from other cultures. In the end, however, many questions remain unanswered.

EXERCISE 83

Read the following passages from the Hebrew Bible and make a list of the thoughts, feelings, and sensory experiences that the narrator associates with a direct encounter with Yahweh. Do you see any common features among the passages?

- Isaiah 6:1-13
- Jeremiah 1:1-19
- Ezekiel 1:1-14; 1:22—3:11
- Amos 7:1-9
- Isaiah 49:1-13
- Zechariah 4:1-14

THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE OF THE PROPHETS

The people known as prophets in the Hebrew Bible are both similar to and different from the intermediaries that have been observed in other cultures. The most obvious similarity is that they, like other intermediaries, claim to have direct personal experiences with the supernatural world in which they receive messages that they feel compelled to deliver to their people. The Hebrew Bible says little about the nature or content of these experiences. Several of the prophetic books describe or refer to an initial "calling" experience in which the prophet encounters the awesome presence of Yahweh and is commissioned to deliver messages to his people. Some of the books also include brief descriptions of subsequent experiences of the divine presence. Most of the time, however, the prophet's interaction with the deity is hidden behind the recurring phrase, "Thus says Yahweh." With these words the prophet asserts a divine origin for the message while giving few clues about how it might have originated.

Whether we should envision the prophets arriving at their messages through a rational process of observation and reflection or an ecstatic experience is impossible to say. Both the narrative books and the prophetic books speak of visions as a means of divine communication, though it is unclear what these visions entailed or whether they were common or extraordinary experiences. Many scholars have suggested that the texts are in fact describing dreams, since dreams were regarded as channels of divine communication throughout the ancient Near East and elsewhere around the world. Several passages state explicitly that Yahweh spoke to prophets at night or in dreams (Numbers 12:6-8; 1 Samuel 3:2-18; 2 Samuel 7:4-17; 1 Kings 19:9-18; Jeremiah 24:25-32; Zechariah 1:7-8; compare Isaiah 29:7: "like a dream, a vision of the night"), though there are also verses in which the prophet is depicted as awake and alert during the visionary experience (Numbers 22:22-35; 24:1-9; 2 Kings 6:15-17; Ezekiel 8:1-4).

More common than visions are auditory images. The frequency of expressions like "thus says Yahweh" and "the word of Yahweh came to [prophet's name]" suggests that audition (that is, the hearing of voices) was the most common mode of revelation among the prophets whose sayings are preserved in the Hebrew Bible. Whether this should be taken as implying that the prophets experienced audible sounds from outside their own consciousness is unclear. Similar language is used in prescientific cultures to describe what psychologists would regard as the reflective faculties of the human mind. The commonness of both visionary and auditory experiences among intermediaries in different cultures suggests that both types of experiences have psychological roots.

For the most part the Hebrew Bible suggests that the word of Yahweh came to the prophets without any effort on their part. A few passages even speak of the prophet being forced by the deity to proclaim a message against his will (Jeremiah 20:7-9; Amos 3:7-8; 7:14-15). Little is said about the Yahwistic prophets engaging in ritualized

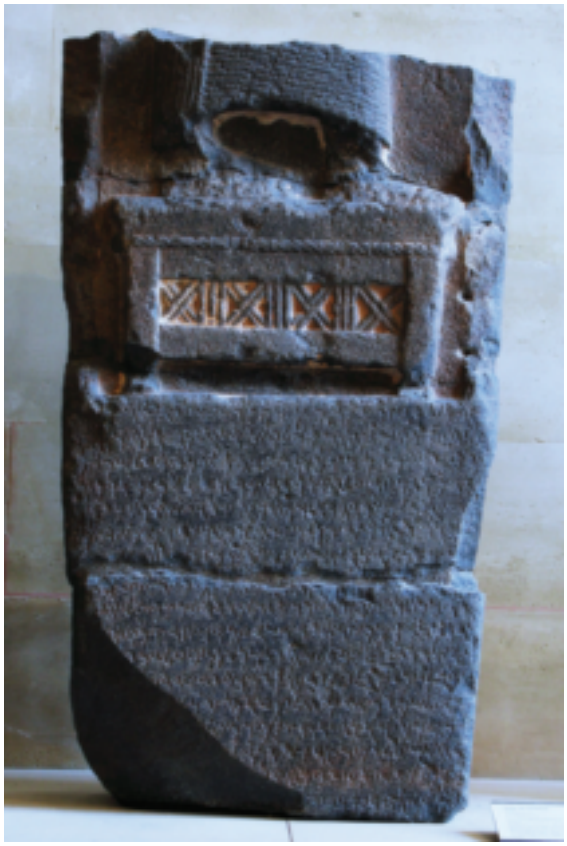

Fig. 31.6. This eighth-century B.C.E. column from Syria tells how king Zakkur of Hamath received a message from his seers confirming that Baal would protect him from invading armies.

actions to generate encounters with the divine, as we see with intermediaries in other cultures. Here and there a prophet will deliver a message from Yahweh in response to a person's prayers, but there is no sign that the prophet did anything to elicit the message (2 Kings 20:1-7; 22:11-20; 2 Chronicles 20:5-17; Isaiah 37:14-35; 38:1-6; Jeremiah 21:1-7; 32:16-35; 37:3-10), apart from a single passage that mentions the use of music (2 Kings 3:13-19; compare 1 Samuel 10:5-6). Overall, the Hebrew Bible gives the impression that the prophets had a hotline to Yahweh that allowed them to speak for the deity whenever guidance was needed. By contrast, those whom the editors regarded as false prophets are shown using a variety of techniques to evoke the presence of the deity, including sacrifices (Numbers 24:1-10; 24:14-25), cutting themselves (1 Kings 18:28-29), and divination (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; Jeremiah 14:14; Ezekiel 12:24; 13:6-9; 13:23).

Whether this difference reflects a genuine historical distinction is hard to judge. It is certainly possible that the prophets whom the biblical editors regarded as true used different techniques than those whom they derided as false. The sharpness of the contrast, however, suggests that the distinction is a literary contrast created by the editors. Perhaps they decided to suppress what they knew about the activities of the prophets whom they favored because such activities would have been unacceptable in their own day. Or perhaps they knew little about what their ancient prophetic heroes had done and simply presumed that the true prophets must have been fundamentally different from those whom they considered false. Whatever their thinking, it seems clear that the theological judgments of the biblical editors concerning which prophets were true and which were false influenced the way they portrayed the prophets' activities.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE PROPHETS

Prophets in ancient Palestine came from all walks of life. Unlike the priesthood, which was restricted to males, women could serve as prophets (Exodus 15:20-21; Judges 4:4-7; 2 Kings 22:14-20; Nehemiah 6:14; Isaiah 8:3; Ezekiel 13:17-23), though most of the prophets named in the Hebrew Bible are men. Some, like Jeremiah and Zechariah, were members of priestly families, while others, like Amos, labored at ordinary occupations and had no formal ties to the religious establishment. Some grew up in towns or cities and moved among the urban elites, while others came from rural areas and viewed the world through the eyes of farmers and peasants. Some had a good education, while others were probably illiterate. Some were married and had families, while others remained single throughout their lives.

Prophets also differed in the way they related to the religious and political systems of their day. Some spoke in the name of Yahweh alone, while others were devoted to different deities. Some served at local or regional shrines, where ordinary people would come and request a word from Yahweh. Others moved from place to place, proclaiming their message to anyone who would listen. Some spent their entire lives as prophets, while others prophesied for a time and then returned to their former occupations. Some worked in groups with other prophets, while others labored alone. Some operated at the highest levels of society, even serving as advisors to kings, while others lived far outside the corridors of power. Some spoke in favor of the status quo, while others issued words of judgment against the ruling elites.

Given all of this diversity, it should come as no surprise that the Hebrew Bible speaks repeatedly of tensions between prophets and rulers as well as conflicts among the prophets themselves. Several passages in the Hebrew Bible suggest that the kings of Israel and Judah maintained a stable of court prophets whom they consulted when they needed guidance on matters of state, particularly decisions about war and peace. In the pages of the Hebrew Bible, these prophets invariably claim to speak in the name of Yahweh. Even King Ahab, whose wife is said to have fed nine hundred prophets of Baal and Asherah at her own table (1 Kings 18:19), is shown consulting only Yahwistic prophets. Since they were supported by the king, these prophets clearly felt pressured to promise divine blessings upon whatever course of action the king wished to pursue. With few exceptions, the Hebrew Bible derides these prophets as false prophets who speak

Fig. 31.7. (top) Palma Giovane, *The Prophet Nathan Admonishes King David*; (bottom) the prophet Elijah confronts king Ahab of Israel.

what the king wants to hear rather than declaring the true word of Yahweh.

Somewhat different are the individual prophets who served as personal advisors to the kings. The few who are mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible are depicted in a positive light, though their numbers are too small to make any firm judgments about their activities. Following the reign of David, the only person who clearly fits into this category is Isaiah, who advised King Hezekiah in the eighth century B.C.E. As portrayed in the Hebrew Bible, these prophets were able to maintain a degree of independence from the kings, supporting them when they were acting properly but also challenging them when they did wrong. Their independence is attributed to their openness to the word of Yahweh, who gives them special messages for the kings as the need arises. The biblical image of these individuals is clearly idealized, but it seems likely that people like them played an important role in the royal administration of Israel and Judah, whether as prophets of Yahweh or other deities.

The Hebrew Bible also speaks of prophets who were not part of the king's court, but who were consulted by the kings in times of uncertainty or crisis. Two individuals who clearly fit this category are Elisha (ninth century B.C.E.) and Jeremiah (sixth century B.C.E.). Neither served as a close personal advisor to the king, since the kings who ruled during their days are depicted as less than faithful servants of Yahweh. Yet both seem to have been respected by their rulers as spokesmen for Yahweh, though in Jeremiah's case the content of his message (the imminent victory of the Babylonians over Judah) repeatedly aroused the king's displeasure. Several other prophets are mentioned briefly when one of the kings turns to them for guidance, including Ahijah (1 Kings 14:1-18), Micaiah (1 Kings 22:5-28), and Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20). All of the prophets in this category are depicted as faithful servants of Yahweh who bring valid messages to the kings, though their words are not always followed. Why a king should have wanted to consult one of these prophets rather than (or in addition to) his court prophets is unclear, though in a couple of stories the text implies that the king had doubts about the words of the court prophets (1 Kings 22:1-28; 2 Kings 3:1-20). How often such outside consultations might have occurred is impossible to say.

Even further removed from the corridors of power are prophets who criticized and challenged the ruling elites.

The narrative books tell several stories of prophets who approach one of the kings of Israel or Judah unbidden and pronounce a word of judgment in the name of Yahweh (1 Kings 13:1-10; 16:1-4; 18:17-18; 20:35-43; 21:17-24). The books of the prophets likewise include many sayings that condemn rulers either directly to their face (Isaiah 5:8-24; 10:1-4; 22:15-25; Jeremiah 22:1-17; 23:1-4; 34:1-7; Ezekiel 34:1-10; Amos 4:1-4; 6:1-7; Micah 3:1-12; Haggai 1:1-11) or indirectly in speeches addressed to the common people (Isaiah 1:21-24; 3:1—4:1; Micah 2:1-5; Zephaniah 3:1-6). All of the prophets who speak out against the ruling elites are cast in a positive light in the Hebrew Bible. Most likely there were other prophets who voiced similar concerns about leaders whom they viewed as too narrowly Yahwistic, but their words have not survived. The decision to collect and preserve the sayings of some prophets and not others implies that the elites who created these books shared their critical view of the behavior of the elites, whether they lived close to the prophet's lifetime or much later (during or after the Exile).

Finally, there were prophets who had little or no contact with the royal house. As with the other categories, there were surely more of this type than are named in the Hebrew Bible, since only prophets who attracted the attention of the literate elites had a chance of having their names or sayings enshrined in writing. Some of these prophets were associated with local shrines, where they focused on the needs of the people who came to see them and said little about the problems of the nation. Some may have been peasants who lived among the illiterate masses, where they escaped the attention of the elites. Some spoke in the name of deities other than Yahweh or offered messages that were discredited with the passing of time. In none of these cases would their words have been recorded and preserved by the people who produced the Hebrew Bible.

In short, the Hebrew Bible gives us a picture of the prophetic movement that has been filtered through the lens of a particular Yahwistic viewpoint. Whether this makes it historically or theologically inaccurate is a matter of judgment. The important point to keep in mind is that when we are reading the stories or sayings of the prophets, we are only getting one side of the story.

EXERCISE 84

Read the following passages and summarize what each one says about the social position and role of the prophet, include the prophet's relations with people who hold positions of leadership.

- 1 Kings 1:28-40
- 1 Kings 21:17-29
- 2 Kings 3:4-20
- Jeremiah 37:11-21
- Amos 7:10-17
- Micah 3:1-12
- Haggai 1:1-15
- Malachi 1:6—2:9

TRUE AND FALSE PROPHETS

In a culture that has one principal intermediary, such as a shaman or medicine man in a tribal community, people are taught to honor and trust the intermediary's words. While some individuals might have doubts about a particular pronouncement, serious questioning arises only in times of extreme crisis or when the intermediary's message threatens those who hold political power within the group.

In ancient Palestine, by contrast, there were numerous prophets who claimed to be speaking for various gods, including many who served as prophets of Yahweh. In addition to those mentioned earlier, the narrative books refer several times to bands of Yahwistic prophets who seem to have lived, traveled, and worked together, sometimes at regional shrines. Prophetic groups are associated with the towns of Gibeah (1 Samuel 10:5-13), Naioth (19:20-24), Bethel (2 Kings 2:3), Jericho (2 Kings 2:5; note that this band included more than fifty prophets, v. 7), and Gilgal (2 Kings 4:38), as well as "the hill country of Ephraim" (2 Kings 5:22) and various unidentified locations (1 Kings 20:35; 2 Kings 4:1; 9:1). The prophetic books also contain several verses that seem to refer to a similar phenomenon (Isaiah 8:16-18; Amos 2:11; 7:14; Zechariah 7:1-3).

With so many people claiming to be able to speak for the gods, including many who were devoted to Yahweh,

the question of which prophet to consult and whom to believe must have been continually at the surface. At any rate that is impression that one gets from reading the Hebrew Bible. Again and again we hear of disputes among people who were regarded as prophets, with each side disparaging the other as false prophets who were speaking lies concocted out of their own minds. Even the kings appear unsure whom to trust on occasion.

So how does one decide which of several competing intermediaries is in fact speaking for the deity? The question rarely arises today in the same form, since most people (including religious believers) tend to be skeptical of anyone who claims to be hearing messages from God. Yet contemporary believers face similar problems when they hear religious or political leaders offering different ideas about how their sacred texts and traditions should be applied to current issues like war, gay rights, or abortion. Often those who hold opposing positions cannot even agree on the criteria that should be used to settle the matter. The situation was no different in ancient Palestine.

The narrative and prophetic books offer several criteria for distinguishing a true prophet from a false one. The frequency with which these criteria are cited in the books of the preexilic prophets suggests that at least some Yahwists were grappling with this problem from an early period, though it is possible that some of these references are later additions that reflect the viewpoint of the Exile. At any rate, the people who edited the Hebrew Bible accepted these criteria as valid. We can assume that those who opposed the biblical prophets had their own criteria for accepting some prophets and rejecting others, but we hear almost nothing about their point of view.

1. *Devotion to Yahweh.* While some of the biblical prophets acknowledge the existence of other gods, they invariably insist that the people of Israel and Judah should serve Yahweh alone. Not once do we hear a positive word about any other deity; some of the later prophets even mock those who worship other gods (Isaiah 40:19-20; 41:21-24; 44:9-20; Jeremiah 2:9-13; 10:1-16; Ezekiel 16:15-22; Habakkuk 2:18-20). According to the Hebrew Bible, individuals who speak in the name of other deities are by definition false prophets whose words should be ignored (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:20; Jeremiah 2:8; 2:26-28; 23:13).

Behind this criterion lies the presumption that Yahweh should be the sole guide and authority for Israel and Judah. This does not mean that any prophet who speaks in the name of Yahweh must be heeded, but it does eliminate all non-Yahwistic prophets as possible sources of guidance. Even Yahwistic prophets are accused of spreading lies when they disagree with the prophets whose words are included in the Hebrew Bible (Isaiah 9:13-16; Jeremiah 14:13-16; 23:35-42; Ezekiel 22:28; Zechariah 13:2-3), so it is not surprising to see non-Yahwistic prophets being rejected without a hearing. Obviously this negative judgment would not have been shared by those who prophesied in the name of other gods.

2. *Accurate predictions.* Several of the later biblical prophets insist that true prophets must be able to make accurate predictions about the future, particularly the future of the nation (for example, Isaiah 44:7-8; compare Deuteronomy 18:21-22). The central question that divides the preexilic prophets is whether Yahweh means to protect his people from the looming threat of invaders from the north or whether he intends to send plagues and foreign armies to punish them (Jeremiah 5:12-15; 14:13-18; 23:16-22; Ezekiel 13:8-16). From the perspective of the people who compiled the prophets' sayings, the conquest of Israel by the Assyrians and Judah by the Babylonians stands as unequivocal proof regarding which prophets were in fact speaking for Yahweh (2 Kings 17:13-23; 2 Chronicles 36:15-21; Jeremiah 29:16-19; 44:1-6; Ezekiel 33:27-33; Zechariah 1:2-6; 7:8-14). Similar disputes arose during the Exile over when and how the people would be allowed to return to their land (Jeremiah 27:16-22; 28:1-18; 29:8-14; Isaiah 44:24-28; 46:8-11). The postexilic prophets also made predictions about the future of their nation, though the text says nothing about prophetic voices that opposed them (Haggai 2:7-9; 2:20-23; Zechariah 8:11-15; 9:9-17; 14:1-21; Malachi 4:1-6).

After the Exile this criterion became problematic, since many of the predictions that had been made by the preexilic and exilic prophets about the glorious conditions that would prevail when Yahweh restored his people to their land did not come to pass. Chief among these failures were the absence of a Davidic king and the continuation of foreign rule under the Persians. Rather

than admitting that the earlier prophets might have been wrong—a decision that would have compromised one of their chief criteria for identifying true prophets—the postexilic prophets and religious leaders preferred to postpone the fulfillment of their words into the future and to make them contingent on Israel's faithful conduct (see chapter 35).

3. *Moral critique.* Here and there in the books of the prophets we find verses that insist that true prophets will always challenge the moral and religious failings of their people (for example, Ezekiel 2:3-5; Micah 5:8). According to this criterion, prophets who promise only divine blessings and comfort are not speaking for Yahweh. The standard by which the people's behavior is judged to be right or wrong is never clearly identified, but the problems mentioned by the prophets are consistent with what we find in many of the laws of Torah. Scholars disagree about whether the prophets might have been familiar with an early version of the Torah, since the Hebrew word *torah*, which appears fairly often in the books of the prophets, can also mean "instruction" in a more general sense. Nonetheless, it is difficult to avoid the impression that the editors of the Hebrew Bible meant to depict the prophets as defenders of Israel's covenant with Yahweh, including the laws of Torah.

This criterion is closely related to the previous one, since the biblical prophets consistently point to their people's failure to obey Yahweh as the chief reason for their predictions of impending doom. Again and again they criticize the people of Israel and Judah for their refusal to listen to the prophets whom Yahweh has sent to correct them and warn them of coming judgment (Jeremiah 7:22-26; 29:17-19; 35:15-17). Instead, they follow false prophets who overlook their faults while promising peace and prosperity (Jeremiah 23:16-17; Ezekiel 22:23-28; Micah 3:9-12; compare Lamentations 2:14). This criterion of judgment relates primarily to the preexilic prophets, since the message of the exilic and postexilic prophets in the Hebrew Bible is predominately positive and comforting rather than challenging (see chapters 34–35). Yet their message is not devoid of moral criticism, a fact that presumably set them apart from those labeled *false prophets*.

4. *Righteous conduct.* Several times the biblical prophets criticize the personal behavior of those whom they see as false spokesmen for Yahweh. The presumption seems to be that a person who does not live according to Yahweh's standards cannot possibly be speaking for Yahweh. Prophets are criticized for drunkenness (Isaiah 28:7-8), adultery (Jeremiah 23:14; 29:21-23), greed (Jeremiah 6:13; 8:10), favoring the wicked over the righteous (Jeremiah 23:14; Ezekiel 13:22), and generally living sinful and evil lives (Jeremiah 23:11; Zephaniah 3:4; compare Lamentations 4:13). One passage even accuses them of predicting good outcomes when they are paid well and bad results when they are not (Micah 3:5-8).

Since we see these people only through the jaundiced eyes of their opponents, it is hard to know how seriously to take these statements. The accusations imply that the false prophets have deviated from a widely accepted code of conduct, but this claim is undermined by the fact that there was no universally acknowledged law code in the preexilic period. Many of the criticisms are so broad as to be useless, though some are concrete enough to suggest a factual basis. In the end, the criticisms are significant only if one accepts the assertion that there is a relation between a prophet's behavior and the validity of the message that is pronounced. The opposing side could just as easily argue that what matters is not the prophet's conduct but the ability to access the supernatural realm. In short, this criterion would be useful only to people who shared the particular set of Yahwistic moral values that it presumes to be true. Others would simply reject it as inappropriate or irrelevant.

5. *Influence with the deity.* Less obvious but equally important is the belief that a true prophet should be able to influence the gods to act on behalf of those who request their help. Several passages in the narrative books show "good" prophets praying to Yahweh and achieving immediate results, as when Elijah calls on Yahweh to send fire from heaven to burn up the sacrifices that he has laid out on an altar (1 Kings 18:36-39) or when Isaiah asks Yahweh to reverse the movement of a shadow in order to prove to King Hezekiah that his word can be trusted (2 Kings 20:8-11). Similar ideas are found in the prophetic books, as when Jeremiah challenges a group of false prophets to prove their worth by convincing Yahweh to turn aside the coming exile (Jeremiah 27:16-18) or when King Zedekiah asks Jeremiah to pray for a similar outcome

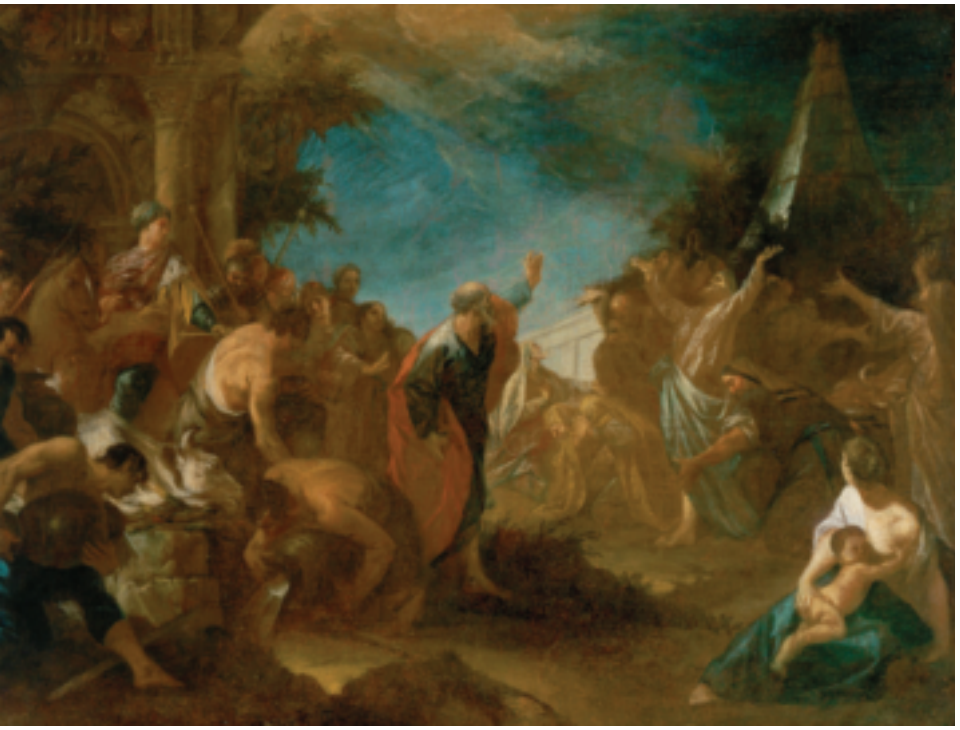

Fig. 31.8. Johann Heinrich Schoenfeld, *The Prophet Elijah Confounds the Priests of Baal*

(Jeremiah 37:3; compare 7:16-20; 11:14). The narrative books also contain numerous stories of the prophets Elijah and Elisha performing miracles that demonstrate their close ties to Yahweh (1 Kings 17—2 Kings 6), though such powers are rarely attributed to other prophets. For the most part, the biblical prophets do nothing more unusual than predict events that will happen in the future (for example, Isaiah 38:14-35; Jeremiah 28:12-17; Amos 7:14-17).

Behind these passages lies the assumption that Yahweh is committed to answer prayers and work miracles on behalf of his true prophets, while false prophets can perform no such works of power, whether they claim to be speaking for Yahweh or some other god. Not surprisingly, no one identified as a false prophet is ever shown performing a miracle or motivating a god to act in the Hebrew Bible, unless we count the Pharaoh's magicians in the Exodus story (Exodus 7:8-13; 7:20-22; 8:5-7). While it is possible that this reflects a genuine difference in the abilities of the prophets, the clear theological agenda of the stories raises serious doubts about their historical value, as does the presence of the supernatural in the accounts. The fact that intermediaries in many cultures are credited with similar mysterious powers should caution us against dismissing these stories out of hand, but most contemporary scholars would regard such accounts as legendary.

In the final analysis, all such efforts to distinguish between true and false prophets are entirely subjective, reflecting the personal opinions of the people who are making the judgment. People who followed other gods or who adhered to a different version of Yahwism would have used other criteria and come to different conclusions. There is simply no way to determine with certainty the truth or falsehood of a person's claim to be speaking for God. So why does the Hebrew Bible use these criteria and not others? Because they agree with the beliefs, values, and experiences of the people who collected and edited the stories and sayings of the prophets. In the eyes of these people, Yahweh is the supreme god who established a covenant with Israel that requires loyalty and obedience on the part of his people. Those who are devoted to this covenant, as reflected above all in the laws of Torah, will enjoy the blessings of the deity, while those who disregard or ignore the covenant will be punished. Prophets who adhere to this message are speaking for Yahweh, while those who do not are proclaiming lies.

In the end, it was the experience of the Exile that demonstrated to many people which prophets were speaking for Yahweh. Prior to the Exile, according to the Hebrew Bible, the prophets were deeply divided over which course the nation should pursue in relation to the surrounding nations. Some lobbied for an alliance with Egypt to resist the Babylonian threat, others called for submission to the Babylonians, and still others insisted

on resistance to both powers. The crushing defeat of Judah by the Babylonians, following the earlier conquest of Israel by the Assyrians, was seen by many people as a vindication of those prophets who had predicted exactly this outcome. As they saw it, this was not an ordinary military defeat; it was Yahweh's way of punishing his people for violating his covenant and refusing to listen to the prophets whom he had sent to warn them of his displeasure.

How then were they to regain the blessing of Yahweh? An obvious answer was to renew their commitment to his covenant and to follow the words and examples of the prophets whom he had sent—and would continue to send—to guide them in the right path. To do this, they had to determine which prophets had in fact been speaking for Yahweh and then collect their sayings into a format that could be preserved, taught, and studied in the future. Out of this process came the earliest books of the prophets. Other books were added to the collection as new prophets arrived bringing messages that were consistent with the central themes of the earlier prophets. The collection was revised and edited from time to time to keep the prophets' messages current.

By the third or second century B.C.E., the religious leadership had concluded that the books of the prophets were too sacred for further revision; in modern terms, the canon of the prophets was closed. Implicit in this decision was the judgment that the era of the prophets was over; Yahweh now spoke primarily through a book. Not all shared this opinion, however, and many people continued to regard popular Jewish preachers like John the Baptizer and Jesus of Nazareth as prophets. Here again we see that the decision concerning who is and is not a true prophet of Yahweh is in the eye of the beholder.

CONCLUSION

The prophets of ancient Palestine often appear strange to modern readers, but they are far from unique. Similar intermediary figures can be seen in many cultures both past and present. What distinguishes intermediaries from other people is their ability to interact safely with the awesome powers of the supernatural realm and to channel the benefits of that realm to others. Sometimes this includes bringing messages to humans about how they should live in order to avoid hardship and enjoy prosperity. Whether these messages are taken seriously depends on the status of the speaker and the content of the message.

The prophets whose stories and sayings appear in the Hebrew Bible were part of a broader movement that included many people who were labeled false prophets by the people who compiled the collection. Some of those who were rejected spoke in the name of deities other than Yahweh, while others prophesied on behalf of Yahweh but gave messages that conflicted with the words of the prophets whom the editors saw as true prophets of Yahweh. The Hebrew Bible tells us very little about the actions or messages of these other prophets.

Prophets came from a variety of social backgrounds and worked at all levels of society, from the smaller towns and villages to the regional shrines to the courts of the kings. Some carried out their missions alone, while others worked in groups or had followers who traveled with them. Many scholars believe that it was these groups of followers who preserved the sayings and stories of the prophets, though others doubt this explanation. No one, however, doubts the importance of prophets to the religious life of the people of ancient Palestine, nor their central role in the Hebrew Bible.

EXERCISE 85

Read the following passages, then choose one of them and summarize (a) the message of those labeled false prophets, and (b) the message of the true prophet of Yahweh. What does the passage say about how one can tell when a prophet is or is not speaking for Yahweh?

- 1 Kings 22:1-40
- Jeremiah 28:1-17
- Ezekiel 13:1-23