

Remembering and Forgetting: “True” and “False” Prophecy

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At first glance, the subject of “true” and “false” prophecy seems to be a pre-exilic problem. In pre-exilic times, of course, prophets often were of different opinions: Would God bring judgment over his people, or would he prevent his people from suffering disaster? After the destruction of Jerusalem this quarrel seems to have been solved; “true” prophets were remembered, while “false” prophets were forgotten for future times.

A. The Book of Amos as a Model for “True” Prophecy in Exilic Times

Though the previous statement undoubtedly oversimplifies our problem, there is much truth in it. The best example of remembering a “true” prophet is the book of Amos, which more than any other prophetic book essentially is an exilic book (though there is quite a number of postexilic utterances in it). Two layers of typically exilic (and early postexilic) words in Amos determine the mood of the reader from the beginning to the former end of the book (in 9:6 or 9:10). One of these layers consists of the so-called doxologies praising Yahweh’s judgment over Jerusalem and Judah as a sign of his sovereignty over creation and history and of his power to rule the world. These hymnic pieces once introduced the book of Amos (1:2, the “motto” of the book) and marked its end (9:5–6, the last doxology).¹ Thus, the book of Amos was framed by hymnic texts in exilic times.

¹ The reasons for this assumption are presented by Klaus Koch, “Die Rolle der hymnischen Abschnitte in der Komposition des Amosbuches,” *ZAW* 86 (1974): 504–537 (528–537), and Jörg Jeremias, *The Book of Amos* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 76–79 (Excursus: The Doxologies of Amos).

The other layer of exilic interpretations consists of the deuteronomistic (dtr) words of Amos²; the most relevant utterance introduces the collection of words of Amos (3–6) by stating that there is no future event of importance that Yahweh would not reveal in advance to “his servants” the prophets (3:7). Listening to the words of the prophets is the only way to come to know God’s will in history, and listening to the prophets according to Amos 3:7 means reading the book of Amos. This is shown by the last dtr utterance in the book of Amos – probably again a former ending of the book – saying that all those who survived the catastrophe of the destruction of Jerusalem and still do not listen to the words of Amos will die (9:10). In other words, reading the book of Amos and following its instructions is the only means of survival.

The book of Amos is an ideal case of remembering a “true” prophet in exilic times, because the few words of strong hope in the book come as a kind of appendix (9:11–15) to a former book whose perpetuation is proof in itself of the truth of the words of the prophet. These words, having come true, could therefore serve as an orientation for the generations living after the catastrophe despite the main orientation having been directed to the past, not to the future (comparable to the dtr history).

B. Zechariah 13:2–6 as a (Late) Example for the Remaining Problem of “False” Prophecy

There is, of course, no remembrance of this kind in the case of those prophets who were proven “false” by the destruction of Jerusalem. It is improbable that any of them were transmitted in written form anyway. But be that as it may, the problem of “false” prophecy by no means ended with the exile; on the contrary, experiencing God’s judgment on Israel made it more difficult for future prophets to characterize “true” prophecy. The question for “true” prophecy became urgent again and the quarrel among different kinds of prophets became a matter of life and death as never before. In Zech 13:2–6, the latest text pertaining to our subject in the Old Testament, the writing prophet calls for an end of the current kind of prophecy and warns the prophets of violent deaths if they continue to prophesy:³

² The first author who treated these dtr words of the book of Amos systematically was Werner H. Schmidt, “Die deuteronomistische Redaktion des Amosbuches,” *ZAW* 77 (1965): 168–193 (168–193). Nearly all modern commentaries took up his observations.

³ Translation taken from David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 106–7.

"On that day," saying of Yahweh of Hosts,
"I will cut off the names of the idols from the land.
They shall be remembered no more.
Also, I will remove the prophets
and the unclean spirit from the land.
If anyone again attempts to prophesy,
his father and his mother who bore him will say to him:
'You shall not live,
because you have spoken falsely in Yahweh's name.'
His father and his mother who bore him
will stab him when he prophesies. (Zech 13:2–3.)

For Zech 13:2 false prophecy is as devastating as venerating idols (an allusion to Hos 2:18–19). Idols and prophecy are the main obstacles to a peaceful relationship between God and his people. Prophecy is worse than idols, because it is identified with "the unclean spirit." This phrase appears only here, but "uncleanness" is never caused by contact with foreign gods.

Since prophecy prevents Judah from contact with God, prophets have to be eliminated. Verse 3 alludes to Deut 21:18–21, where the stubborn and rebellious son is judged. But the parents of Zech 13:3 need not go to the elders, as the parents of Deut 21 do for the condemnation of their son. The guilt of prophesying is so obvious – prophesying is identical with deceit – that they will stab their son themselves.

On that day every prophet will be ashamed of his visions
when he prophesies.
He will not wear a hairy cloak,
A cloak made of skins in order to deceive.
He will say: "I was no prophet,
I was a tiller of the ground,
but a man seduced me⁴ from my youth." (vv. 4–5)

Zech 13:4–6 presents three cases in which prophets condemn themselves and stop prophesying while denying their former profession (I cite only two). Verse 4 alludes to Jer 23:16 and Micah 3:6–7, two important passages on our subject which we will look at later on. The "cloak" mentioned in v. 4b, still a topic of debate, is either an allusion to Elijah's mantle (2 Kgs 2) or to the "cloak" worn by Jacob in order to trick his father Isaac Gen 27). Verse 5 is a combination of Amos 7:14 and Jer 20:7. Jeremiah felt seduced by God and the prophet of v. 5 was influenced (lit. "bought") by men.

Zech 13:2–6 is the most negative text on "false" prophecy in the whole Old Testament. To act as a prophet is identical with lying (to speak שקר, v.

⁴ Lit. "bought me." The text is uncertain here, because קנה "to buy" is used in the Hif. only here. But the versions do not give reasons to alter the text, as many commentators propose.

3); its only aim is “to deceive” (שׁוֹרֵר pi.). Both terms belong to the traditional characterizations of “false” prophecy from older texts, but they are now valid for prophecy as a whole; all prophecy is “false” prophecy.

There has been extensive research on what special kind of prophecy is condemned here so enthusiastically.⁵ The answer is rather simple: the danger threatening God’s people when listening to prophets is related to all speaking prophets because all “true” prophecy is already sealed in the developing canon.⁶ Whoever now rises to speak as a prophet claims to know more and better than the prophets in the book. More important than this difference between written and oral prophecy for our subject, however, is that Zech 13:4–6 is full of allusions to former quarrels between “true” and “false” prophecy. Apparently the readers are expected to be informed of these quarrels and their outcomes.

Zech 13 shows that “false” prophets should *not* simply be forgotten – then “true” and “false” prophecy could no longer be differentiated. Before Zech 13 could state that all “true” prophecy is sealed in a book, a prophet had to demonstrate his/her “truth” by referring to criteria which could serve to differentiate between “true” and “false” prophets. This differentiation belongs to the very essence of prophecy, especially biblical prophecy. Prophecy always was in danger of being “false.” Yet, step by step biblical prophecy detected essential criteria which guided listeners of prophecy – and even more so, readers of prophecy – to judge “true” prophecy – criteria which had to be remembered under all circumstances. Let me lead you on a short detour to demonstrate this.

C. In Search for Criteria of “True” Prophecy: The Difference between the Era of Isaiah and the Era of Jeremiah

Priests or wise men in a quarrel would refer to the tradition in which they were trained: liturgy and Torah on the one side, experience and its mastering on the other. But we never meet prophets referring to their education, though some of them will have received an education, such as the pupils

⁵ See, for example, Bernard Otzen, *Studien über Deuteriosacharja* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1964), 194–198.

⁶ This is the interpretation of many commentaries, among them Karl Elliger, *Das Buch der zwölf kleinen Propheten II* (ATD 25/2; 7th ed; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 172–174; Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14*, 128; Ina Willi-Plein, *Haggai, Sacharja, Maleachi* (ZBK 24/4; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2007), 204–210; and especially the exegesis of Nicholas Ho Fai Tai, *Prophetie als Schriftauslegung in Sacharja 9–14* (CThM 17; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1996), 192–220.

of Elisha. Prophets usually claim immediate contact with God, which nobody other than themselves was able to judge.

Therefore, the problem of "true" and "false" prophecy is as old as prophecy itself. In the *Letters of Mari* we can watch how the problem was handled during time of the great Hammurabi. There were three means by which the king of Mari was assured that the prophetic message which reached him in written form was reliable⁷:

1. The king of Mari used to send officials for a tour of inspection of his property throughout the land. The officials wrote down the results of their excursion and sometimes also made notes of prophetic messages if a prophet on their tour asked them for this favor. These officials usually recorded not only the prophetic message but also their impression of the reliability of the prophet in order to either warn or assure the king.

2. Every prophet delivering his message to the king was asked by the official for a curl of his hair and a hem of his gown. Though we do not know which kind of practices were used at the court to handle these instruments, we can say for sure that they enabled the king to use power over the prophet; curl and hem were thought to be part of their personality. Thus each prophet was liable for his message.⁸

3. In the case of important messages from a god the word of the prophet was tested by technical means, usually by the inspection of the entrails of a sacrificial animal. A technical oracle was judged more reliable than a prophetic word.⁹ The problem of "true" prophecy could hardly be stated more evidently.

If we turn to Israel I would like to stress the difference between the era of Isaiah and the era of Jeremiah, between the late eighth and the early sixth century. In the era of the so-called classical prophets the phenomenon of "false" prophecy still remains a kind of riddle, hardly to be handled by the texts. The texts show a definite skeptical attitude to any kind of multitude of prophets, in the case of Micah ben Imlah (1 Kgs 22) as well as in Elijah's fight with the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18). The single prophet who is not present with the king of Israel but has to be fetched from afar, is much more trustworthy than the prophets at the king's court (1 Kgs 22).

⁷ For the Mari letters containing prophetic messages see, among others: Friedrich Ellermeier, *Prophezie in Mari und Israel* (Herzberg: Erwin Jungfer, 1968), 24–75; William Lambert Moran, "New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy," *Bib* 50 (1969): 15–56; Moran, *ANET*³, 623–632; Manfred Dietrich, "Prophetenbriefe aus Mari," in *Religiöse Texte: Deutungen der Zukunft in Briefen* (vol. 2 of *TUAT*; ed. Otto Kaiser et al.; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag, 1986), 83–93.

⁸ See Abraham Malamat, *Mari and the Early Israelite Experience* (The Schweich Lectures 1984; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 94–96 ("prophetic credibility").

⁹ Moran, "New Evidence from Mari," 22–23; Malamat, *Mari and the Early Israelite Experience*, 95–96.

But when the text (in its later layer) tries to explain what makes “false” prophecy “false,” it just declares it is God’s will; God sends “the spirit” (הַרוּחַ) to beguile prophets (vv. 19–22), which means that these prophets are subjectively “true” but objectively “false”; Ordinary people are unable to judge.¹⁰

The difference between the eighth and the seventh/sixth century becomes evident when we compare the other Micah, Micah of Moreshet, with Jeremiah. Micah of Moreshet accuses his opponents among the prophets of abusing their authority:

When they have something to chew on, they proclaim peace.
But if somebody fails to put something in their mouth, they sanctify war against him. (Micah 3:9)

For Micah, prophets are no tape-recorders of God’s words, they are involved in the formulation of his word. There is no divine word which is not mediated by humans. His opponents modify the message they received to suit their own welfare and their own advantage.¹¹ As punishment for this misuse of the divine word, God robs the prophets of future revelation. They will stand ashamed, without further profession. Micah does not doubt his opponents have indeed received God’s message, but they have perverted it.

One and a half centuries later the situation has changed dramatically. For the first time in the history of prophecy we are informed that two opposing parties – Jeremiah and his adversaries among the prophets – not only condemn each other, but contest each other mutually (!) that Yahweh has spoken to them (Jer 23:16–18, 21–22, 26–27; 43:2–3). In an extremely critical situation the problem of “true” and “false” prophecy was brought to such a point that new answers had to be found. How could a contemporary hearer of the words of a prophet or a later reader of the words of Jeremiah know it was a “true” word, i.e., a word of Yahweh. The longing for criteria to differentiate between “true” and “false” prophecy grew as it never did before. Some evidence of this is the reworking of the answers of the historical Jeremiah – gathered in 23:9–32 – by later hands of exilic and

¹⁰ See recently Ehud Ben Zvi, “A Contribution to the Intellectual History of Yehud: The Story of Micaiah and its Function within the Discourse of Persian-Period Literati,” in *The Historian and the Bible* (ed. P. R. Davies and D. V. Edelman; New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 89–102 (95–102).

¹¹ The text alludes to the gifts which the people who wanted to use the special power of a prophet as a mediator between God and man would bring to the prophet; see the commentaries of, for instance, James Luther Mays, Hans Walter Wolff, or Jörg Jeremias, ad loc.

postexilic times to a great extent.¹² Apparently, the problem of how to define "true" prophecy for them was no question of the past.

The scope of this essay does not include a detailed analysis of the criteria of "true" prophecy given by the book of Jeremiah, but I will state here those two which seem to me the most important.

1. Jeremiah seems to have started by contesting his opponents who proclaimed Yahweh's everlasting patience with his people. Their proclamation in a situation of utmost guilt of Israel meant that they were unable to differentiate God's word and "the vision of their heart" (חזון לבם). Their hope for their people becomes their source of revelation. Their word actually is שקר (self-deceit and deceit of their listeners), because it is wishful thinking.

But how can such a שקר be avoided? In their collection of words against the prophets the traditionists of the words of Jeremiah consciously put v. 9 first:

My heart is broken within me,
all my bones shake;
I am like a drunken man,
like a man overcome by wine,
because of Yahweh, because of his holy words.

Here a prophet describes how his own will is broken and a foreign power takes its place, whether he agrees or not.¹³ Jeremiah refers to the experience of feeling compelled to speak words he did not want to speak, which he even rejected vigorously (see the so-called confessions). The לב נשבר, the "broken heart," is his counterpart to the חזון לבם of his opponents. In this he stands in a line of tradition which leads from Amos 3:8 ("the lion roars ...") to Paul (αναγκη μοι επικαιρειται, 1 Cor. 9:16). God's word is not only unpleasant to Jeremiah's listeners, but it is unpleasant foremost to the prophet himself. He is not asked by his instructor. It is this element which later authors formulate in the report of Jeremiah's call using God's instruction: "I put my words into your mouth."

2. Jeremiah for the first time dares to give a definition to this kind of compelling word of God:

Is not my word like fire, says Yahweh,
And like a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces? (23:29)

¹² See especially Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, "Kriterien 'wahr' und 'falscher' Prophetie im Alten Testament: Zur Auslegung von Jer 23,16–22 und Jer 28,8–9," *ZTK* 92 (1995): 121–139; repr. in *Studien zu Prophetie und Weisheit* (FAT 23; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 59–76 (63–71).

¹³ See recently Werner H. Schmidt, "'Über die Propheten': Streit um das rechte Wort Jer 23,9–32," in *Geschichte Israels und deuteronomistisches Geschichtsdnken*. (AOAT 380; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010), 241–258 (244).

The notion of fire possesses two main connotations in the book of Jeremiah. One is the force that does not allow the prophet to quit his proclamation, as he has tried to do (20:7–9). The other is the symbol for God's wrath. God has made his prophet an agent of wrath on those who are unwilling to listen to God's word through Jeremiah:

Behold, I am making my words in your mouth a fire
And this people wood, and it [the fire] shall devour them. (5:14)

Compare the saying of the prophet one chapter later:

Therefore, I am full of the wrath of Yahweh,
I am weary of holding in:
“Pour it out upon the children in the street, and upon the gatherings of young men...”
(6:11)

“The wrath of Yhwh” is a dimension of God that is virtually unknown to Jeremiah's opponents who know God only as helper and shelter. In the end, the different image of God separates Jeremiah from his opponents more than anything else:

Am I a God who is near, says Yahweh,
and not a God far off? (23:23)

D. “True” and “False” Prophets in Deut 18:16–19

The criteria of Jeremiah for differentiating “true” prophecy from “false” became the guideline for prophecy in exilic and early postexilic times. One could show this by the growth of the text of Jer 23:9–32, but I prefer Deut 18, because this chapter views prophecy from the outside.

Deut 18 is the final chapter of the “outline of constitution” (“Verfassungsentwurf”) in Deuteronomy, which deals with the four most influential offices: judge, king, priest, prophet. Among them the office of the prophet is by far the most important – not just because of its final position, but also because only the prophet is installed by God directly, only he is derived directly from Moses, and finally because only the passage on the prophet has received a long exilic and postexilic actualization.¹⁴

The older deuteronomistic passage (vv. 9–15) had tried to demonstrate that biblical Israel does not need to go to future specialists of any kind like soothsayers, diviners, sorcerers and the like because of Moses' promise:

¹⁴ Cf. the reasons given by Udo Rüterswörden, *Von der politischen Gemeinschaft zur Gemeinde: Studien zu Dt 16,18 – 18,22* (BBB 65; Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1987), 106–111; Schmidt, “Das Prophetengesetz Dtn 18,9–22 im Kontext erzählender Literatur,” in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic Literature* (ed. M. Vervenne and J. Lust; BETL 133; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 55–69 (56–58).

Yahweh, your God, will raise up a prophet among you like myself:
To him you shall listen! (v.15)

Israel possessing prophets in the continuation of Moses does not need other means of orientation in their request for the future.

The exilic or early post-exilic actualization moves this Mosaic promise into a new horizon by two citations: 1) The report of the revelation at Sinai/Horeb as a proof of scripture; 2) The report of the call of Jeremiah:

¹⁶ All this follows from your request to Yahweh, your God, on Horeb on the day of the assembly. There you said: 'Let us not hear again the voice of Yahweh, our God, nor see this great fire again, or we shall die.' ¹⁷ Then Yahweh said to me: 'What they have said is right. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you, one of their brothers, and I will put my words into his mouth. ¹⁹ He shall convey all my commands to them, and if anyone does not listen to the words which he will speak in my name I will require satisfaction from him.

Deuteronomy 5, cited in the beginning of the passage, differentiates between the Decalogue as the basic revelation spoken by God to the whole people and the other prescriptions of God mediated by Moses. Of course, these prescriptions are the word of God from Horeb as well, but the word of God which comes through the mouth of Moses.

Exactly this function of Moses is continued by the prophets according to Deut 18:16–19. These prophets by no means are exegetes of the words of Moses (as they were thought to be in the whole early Jewish and early Christian tradition), but they continue the function of Moses because later Israel needed as much orientation as early Israel. The prophets belong to the same hour of revelation as Moses does. As there is no revelation of God without Moses, there is no revelation of God without the prophets after Moses. Moses comes first; this is his only prerogative.

But the word of God by means of his prophets is a different kind of word compared to the word of God through Moses. Our text demonstrates this difference by citing two verses from the report of the call of Jeremiah.¹⁵ Jeremiah finally has become the model of a "true" prophet, especially

¹⁵ Fomer scholars often thought Jer 1 was citing Deut 18; see for instance William L. Holladay, "The Background of Jeremiah's Self-Understanding: Moses, Samuel, and Psalm 22," *JBL* 83 (1964): 153–164; Winfried Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 1–25* (WMANT 41; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 66–72; Christopher R Seitz, "The Prophet Moses and the Canonical Shape of Jeremiah," *ZAW* 101 (1989): 3–27; but recent scholarship has shown convincingly that the dependence is on the site of Deut 18; see Christoph Levin, *Die Verheißung des neuen Bundes in ihrem theologischeschichtlichen Zusammenhang ausgelegt* (FRLANT 137; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985), 149–152; Georg Braulik, *Deuteronomium II: 16,18–34,12* (NEchtB; Würzburg: Echter, 1992), 136–7; Schmidt, "Das Prophetengesetz Dtn 18,9–22", 61–63. The most complete reasoning is presented by Matthias Köckert, "Zum literargeschichtlichen Ort des Prophetengesetzes Dtn 18 zwischen dem Jeremiabuch und

in the respect that he will speak Yahweh's word independent of his own appraisal of its content. In other words, Jeremiah's most important criterion for a "true" prophet has become the prerequisite for the prophets' promotion to the realm of the basic revelation of God at Sinai/Horeb.

God ensures the continuity of his divine truth by positioning the timeless words of Moses beside the words of his current prophets. I know of no other text in the Old Testament putting Moses and the prophets on an equal level, without any prerogative of Moses, as Deut 18:16–18 does.

But this apparent harmony is disturbed suddenly:

But the prophet who presumes to utter in my name what I have not commanded him or who speaks in the name of other gods – that prophet shall die. (v. 20)

In the preceding verses, prophecy had been given the dignity of belonging to God's basic revelation. For the first time it had been raised to the level of revelation, when the phenomenon of "false" prophecy again raises its head. "False" prophecy, also for the first time, is threatened by death penalty (though the reader is not informed as to how he is to conclude upon such a penalty, since the "false" nature of prophecy is detected only in retrospect). Evidently the danger of "false" prophecy remains – even after Jeremiah, the new model of "true" prophecy.

E. Conclusion

What I wanted to show is that "remembering" and "forgetting" take on two different aspects when related to "true" and "false" prophecy. On the one hand, "false" prophecy of pre-exilic times was indeed forgotten; only "true" prophecy was remembered in the way the message of Amos was remembered by praising God for his righteousness in bringing judgment upon his people. But on the other hand, structurally "false" prophecy should by no means be forgotten, because it was a danger inherent in all kinds of prophecy. It was the merit of the prophet Jeremiah and of his traditionists to define clear criteria of "true" prophecy, by which prophecy could even enter the realm of revelation in Deut 18. But the danger of "false" prophecy did not end by that, until all "true" prophecy was gathered in the canon around the time of Zech 13.

Dtn 13," in *Liebe und Gebot: Studien zum Deuteronomium* (ed. R. G. Kratz and H. Spieckermann; FRLANT 190; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 80–100 (85–93).