

THREE RATIONALIST EXPLANATIONS OF PROPHECY

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Prophecy is ubiquitous but undefined in the Hebrew Bible. A prophet is referred to as *navi*, *roeh* or *hozeh*, but the derivation of these terms only highlights the uncertain meaning of prophecy. The translations "messenger," "seer" and "visionary" are ambiguous even in English.

In the Northern Kingdom of Israel, at least, there existed a guild called the *b'nei neviim* [sons of the prophets] whose function was prophecy on a professional basis. Its services were provided to the king or ruling elite, but may also have been available to the populace at large. It is not clear whether the craft was oracular, intellectual, spiritual or political. The Bible expresses a difference between levels of prophecy – the highest being a clear prophet of the Lord, in between coming the ranks of the *b'nei neviim*, and the lowest being a false prophet. For instance, the Judean prophet Amos, who prophesied in and against Israel, states bluntly: *'I am not a prophet nor a member of the prophetic guild'* (Amos 7:14).

In I Kings.13:9-17, a Judean prophet refuses to eat with Israel's King Jeroboam I and then with an elderly Northern prophet, on the grounds that a Divine message had instructed him to return home without accepting a meal. The elderly prophet (possibly one of the *b'nei neviim*) falsely states that an angel of the Lord advised him that the Judean prophet should eat with him. The Judean prophet then dines (13:18-19). The elderly prophet now actually receives a Divine message that the Judean prophet would be punished with death on the road because he disobeyed God's command (13:21-22). The Judean prophet, on the road home, is killed by a lion (but, oddly, is not eaten). The elderly prophet eulogizes him and asks to be buried next to his "brother" prophet (13: 24-31).

The "Lying Prophet" story raises questions about prophecy. What is revelation? How does the prophet know it was received? Why is the prophet chosen? How does the audience ascertain the veracity of the prophecy? When does obedience to God, or law, limit prophecy? What is the relation between

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reason and prophecy? Deuteronomy, the most intellectual book of the Pentateuch,¹ and arguably composed later than the numerous prophetic stories in the Book of Kings, addresses inauthentic prophecy but provides no clear answers to these questions. According to Verses 13:2-6, accurate prediction is no guide (and, indeed, predictions of the biblical prophets often did not come to pass). The Deuteronomic rule is that loyalty to God and obedience to law are ultimately the tests (13:5, but cf. 18:15-22).

We will compare the answers to these questions given by three rationalist interpreters: the 12th-Century scholar Moses Maimonides, the 17th-Century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, and the 20th-Century spiritual teacher Aryeh Kaplan.

MOSES MAIMONIDES (THE RAMBAM) (1135-1204)

In his *Guide for the Perplexed*,² the Rambam interprets prophecy as a mental process, rather than as a supernatural occurrence. A prophet is physically and intellectually advanced and prepared.³ He thereby posits that prophecy is not an arbitrary gift but the potential (if not certain) outcome of high intellectual and spiritual development. Prophecy is "an overflowing from God, through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty."⁴ (The Active Intellect is one of the Rambam's phrases for God.) Intellect is a higher trait shared by God and human beings, while imagination is a lower human feature.

The imagination alone is reached externally in magicians or politicians, while the Active Intellect reaches the intellect of philosophers or wise people.⁵ The prophet is reached in both ways – the Active Intellect stimulates the intellect, which then excites the imagination. The prophetic vision is a spasm in which the senses cease to function while the Active Intellect stirs the faculty of reason and, through it, spurs the imagination to perfection and activity.⁶ Actually, the description appears almost anatomical, as if the Rambam (who was a physician) were describing different parts of the nervous system (e.g., brain lobes, spinal chord).

The key to the Rambam's explanation is a gradation of about eight to twelve ascending ranges of prophecy,⁷ which we can fairly group into four levels. The first is Divine inspiration or motivation for writing or activity, which he

ascribes to philosophers, scientists, the acts of the Judges, and the entire *Ketuvim* [Writings] section of the Hebrew Bible. This first level is really not prophecy as the word is commonly used; and the Rambam's inclusion of this level emphasizes his naturalist understanding of prophecy. The second level is the receipt of a Divine message in a dream while asleep, with ascending power based on the format of the dream – from allegory, to voice, to a person or an angel speaking, to God speaking. Despite the words which prophets used in the Bible to describe their experience, he ascribes this level to all the biblical prophets. The third level is a waking vision, which he ascribes only to the patriarchs. Even this level of "daydream," however, retains a naturalistic understanding of prophecy.⁸ Only the highest level of the waking vision of Moses, in which he saw and heard God, is unique.⁹

The ramifications of the Rambam's analysis are remarkable:

1) He perceives a continuum which establishes the essentially intellectual nature of prophecy. By allowing the first level of mere "inspiration" into the spectrum, he affirms the mental character of revelation. This is a psychiatric explanation of spiritual experience. It places all prophecy in a dream state – even extending to Moses' daydream of God talking.

2) He argues that the Torah and the prophets used language figuratively. God did not literally speak to the prophet; the prophets who say "The Lord said to me" could have easily added, but did not feel the necessity to add, "in a dream." The ordinary reader believes this was sensual communication, but only because the prophetic imagery is "the characteristic of the imaginative faculty."¹⁰ This metaphorical approach is the Rambam's hedge against the disbelief which will follow from the contradiction between reason and biblical literalism.¹¹

3) He views prophecy as a development of degree of the abilities which exist in all people to a lesser degree.

The continuum with the natural also necessarily negates the supernatural. In the context of his times, it is possible that this disavowal of supernatural prophecy is aimed at Islam, a religion which is based on the centrality of a single, post-biblical prophet. The Rambam cuts prophecy down to size. He distinguishes Moses from all other prophets, implicitly slighting Muhammad.¹² The end of prophecy at the close of the Hebrew Bible, based on the spiritual depression of Jewish exile, bolsters this polemic.¹³ Prophecy will return

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only in the messianic era, according to the rabbinic understanding which the Rambam shares.

BARUCH SPINOZA (1632-1677)

In his *Theological-Political Treatise*,¹⁴ Spinoza initially defines prophecy as "sure knowledge revealed by God to man."¹⁵ Yet he also states: "A prophet is one who interprets God's revelations to those who cannot attain a certain knowledge of the matters revealed, and can therefore be convinced of them only by simple faith."¹⁶ Contrary to the Rambam, Spinoza regards the power of prophecy as entailing "not a peculiarly perfect mind, but a peculiarly vivid imagination."¹⁷ The prophets' imagination, according to Spinoza, is the mind of God.¹⁸ Yet Spinoza denies that this gift is superhuman, any more than a tall person or great poet is superhuman.¹⁹

As noted by Seymour Feldman²⁰ Spinoza agrees with the Rambam that imagination is inferior to intellect.²¹ Spinoza thus regards Solomon as the highest biblical model, and frequently quotes Ecclesiastes and Proverbs²² which were understood to be Solomon's compositions. Spinoza, however, regards the Bible as a book written and edited by human beings and holds that the biblical text is Divine to the extent there are truths in it, although the entire Bible can serve as an everyday guide for social peace and morality.²³

According to Spinoza, people with highly developed minds engage in abstract reasoning and restrain their imaginations, and thus are typically not prophets. It is a serious mistake and superstition to believe that knowledge and truth can be obtained from prophets, who themselves are uncertain of truth and therefore characteristically seek signs of God's revelation.²⁴ Indeed, prophetic revelation taught the Israelites little of God, as their worship of the Golden Calf immediately after Sinai demonstrated.²⁵ Moses should be viewed, therefore, not as a philosopher, but as a teacher of "right living," as "parents treat irrational children."²⁶ Spinoza concludes: "[T]he gift of prophecy did not render the prophets more learned, but left them with the beliefs they had previously had, and therefore we are in no way bound to believe them in matters of purely philosophic speculation."²⁷ Prophets "were also men, subject to human limitations."²⁸ On the other hand, Spinoza concedes that prophets' imaginations may have enabled them to "have perceived much that is beyond the limits of intellect."²⁹

Like the Rambam, Spinoza believes in the reliability of human reason.³⁰

Spinoza is also in accord with the Rambam's view that there is a difference between reading of the Bible by philosophers and by the masses. While to the Rambam God is transcendent (external), to Spinoza God is immanent (natural). According to Yosef Ben-Shlomo,³¹

the God of which Spinoza speaks is not the God who is also the cause of any world outside Himself, which He created. The God to whom Spinoza refers is what we call immanent, internal cause of the entire world; everything in the world is a part of Him or within Him.

As Hegel quips: "The allegations of those who accuse Spinoza of atheism are the direct opposite of the truth; with him there is too much God."

ARYEH KAPLAN (1935-1983)

Aryeh Kaplan's *Meditation and the Bible*³² is a radical interpretation of prophecy based on both plausible textual readings and Jewish mystical tradition. Kaplan's position is that the biblical prophets derived their vision from the advanced practice of meditation. Simply stated, meditation develops the ability to control one's own mental processes, parallel to the manner in which athletes control their physical processes. In Jewish exegetical tradition, Kaplan contends, meditation is referred to by the word *hitbodedut*, an internal separation from the "normal reverie" or "stream of consciousness" which we experience, producing a "state of pure consciousness,"³³ and by the word *hitbonenut* [intellectual concentration].³⁴ Kaplan argues that this was also Rambam's understanding.³⁵

To Kaplan, prophecy is a craft, involving a teacher, apprenticeship and technique.³⁶ Physical positions, such as standing or kneeling with hands outstretched (Solomon's prayer), hands uplifted (priestly blessing), or face between knees (Elijah), as well as music and repetition of Divine names,³⁷ are techniques mentioned in the Bible.³⁸ The idolatrous contemplation of the Asherah³⁹ exemplifies parallel methods which were condemned by the Bible. Prophets are often viewed as mad because they go into trances.⁴⁰

According to Kaplan, during the First Temple era, "there were literally millions of individuals involved in prophetic mysteries."⁴¹ Biblical meditation is not apparent because the prophets (except Ezekiel) do not make the practice explicit. The biblical prophetic guilds (discussed above) are those "seeking to

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attain prophecy" but not necessarily with success.⁴² The practice was initially repressed because mystic experience led people to "idolatry and sorcery."⁴³ Where the quest for prophecy and mystical enlightenment had played a key role in the general life of the populace, it was now relegated to the background. The focus shifted, and now the Oral Law, with all its intricacies, became the focus of national life.

Yet, Kaplan contends, meditation continued in "small secret societies" during the time of the *geonim* and the *kabbalah*.⁴⁴ He posits that in prophetic times there was no special formal worship service, as each prayed alone. If the need arose, a prophet would "channel a particular level of spiritual energy." Consistent with historical scholarship, Kaplan explains that this is the reason a Jewish prayer leader is called a *hazan*, from the prophetic word *ho-zeh*.⁴⁵ Kaplan advocates that the prophetic-meditative techniques again be "revealed and taught" before the messianic age.⁴⁶

COMPARISON

These three thinkers certainly differ in theology and their view of the Bible. To the Rambam, God is infinitely distant, while to Spinoza, God inheres in everything. Kaplan affirms a conventional Jewish theology in which God is both transcendent and immanent,⁴⁷ yet his kabbalism might encompass a philosophy of "pantheism" wherein all is part of God.⁴⁸ The Rambam considers the Bible metaphorical, so that it is read in accordance with reason. Spinoza reads the Bible according to its plain meaning, and attributes its irrationalities or impossibilities to human authorship. Kaplan perceives hidden meanings in the biblical text.

The three think alike in separating mind and heart, yet this leads them to different conclusions about prophecy. For the Rambam, the superiority of the intellect over the imagination means that the former must play a primary role in prophecy, which he accepts as a source of truth. Spinoza agrees with him as to the superiority of intellect, but this leads him to the conclusion that prophecy – a manifestation of feelings – is an inferior teacher and not the source of scientific truth. Kaplan's path of meditation actually transcends the heart-mind dichotomy by disciplining both.

All three thinkers are alike in their naturalistic view of prophecy. Despite Spinoza's rebellion against the Rambam, the continuity of their thinking has

long been recognized.⁴⁹ The vernacular conception of prophecy as an arbitrarily-bestowed, supernatural message to be transmitted to others has no place in the interpretation of the Rambam, Spinoza or Kaplan. Rather, all three understand prophecy to be the extension of a highly developed skill.

In common parlance, the Rambam says that, in prophecy, deep and significant ideas are dramatized in a form which forcefully conveys them: the philosopher is able to paint a picture for an audience. Spinoza says that a prophet is a person with an extremely vivid imagination, whose creativity can train ordinary people to live their lives in a better manner. Kaplan describes, and to some degree prescribes, meditation as a unique method by which people can control or train their own consciousness.⁵⁰ The process is neither the linear reasoning typical of Western thought nor mere rapture. After intensive and extensive instruction and practice, the individual attains higher states not available through other means – e.g., philosophy, scientific endeavor, or textual study. This path allows the possibility of a unique, Divine content. If consciousness can be refined through meditation, Kaplan suggests, vision may result. But this is not a certainty; Kaplan does not (any more than the Rambam or Spinoza) believe revelation is guaranteed to the practitioner. Further, Kaplan suggests that this is actually an old practice, which was widely attempted in ancient Israel, and which yielded the wave of prophecies which make up major parts of the Hebrew Bible.

Missing from Kaplan's paradigm is how the special, meditative vision of the prophet is then translated into the poetic rhetoric of the literary prophets. For the Rambam, this is a two-step process of high philosophical development exciting a special creative talent; for Spinoza it is the salutary art of an inspired speaker or writer. There is an apparent disconnection between the highly individualistic, internal process of meditation and the very social, external process of biblical prophecy. Perhaps this is one of the difficulties of the prophetic call, and a cause of the personal agony so many of the biblical prophets describe.

Clearly, Kaplan's view of prophecy as the fruit of meditation is entirely compatible with the Rambam's understanding. The intellectual development and spiritual control which the Rambam describes would logically lead to the practice of meditation. He assumes, in accordance with rabbinic understanding, that prophecy was interrupted by the emotional and spiritual malaise of

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the Jewish people under conditions of exile. Spinoza would allow for the continuation of prophecy (e.g., by means of poetry or literature), but his super-rationalism would diminish its future significance in favor of the development of philosophy. Kaplan's approach, which is simultaneously rational and mystical, suggests the possibility of hastening the return to prophecy previously assumed to be due only in a messianic era. As forecast by the prophet Joel (3:1):

*After that,
I will pour out My spirit on all flesh;
Your sons and daughters shall prophesy;
Your old men shall dream dreams,
And your young men shall see visions.*

NOTES

1. J.H.Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996) pp. xvii-xviii.
2. Book II, Ch. 32-38, S. Pines, tr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); M. Friedlander, tr. (London: Pardes Publishing House, Rev. Ed. 1904).
3. Ch. 32.
4. Ch. 36, Pines p. 369.
5. Ch. 37.
6. Ch. 37 and 41.
7. Ch. 45.
8. The Rambam actually contends that certain biblical characters who claimed to have been contacted by angels (e.g., Hagar and the wife of Manoach) were merely highly motivated (Ch. 42).
9. Ch. 45.
10. Similarly, when prophets describe God as doing something, it is actually done by people or animals, who themselves were initially "caused" by God (Ch. 48). These are the "Aristotelian quibbles" for which Spinoza later reproaches the Rambam.
11. Ch. 47; Friedlander, p. 249.
12. An alternative possibility is that Maimonides was merely reflecting the views of the Aristotelian wing of Islam.
13. Ch. 36.
14. (*TTP*), S. Shirley, tr. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing. Co., 1998): "Of Prophets and Prophecy," Modern Library (ML), *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (New York: Carlton House, 1927) pp. 36-63.
15. ML, p. 36.
16. Shirley, p. 9.
17. ML, pp. 44, 47.
18. ML, p. 45.

19. Shirley, pp.239-240 n. 3. Spinoza agrees with Maimonides that God's communication to Moses was unique, but adds that of Christ (ML, pp. 39, 42). When the *TTP* was written, Spinoza was supported by and addressing Christians; he placed Moses and Jesus on par, a view taken neither by Jews nor by Christians.
20. Shirley, p. xv.
21. Spinoza holds that "ideas fictitious, false, and the rest, originate in the imagination." *On the Improvement of the Understanding*, J. Gutman, ed., *Ethics Preceded by On the Improvement of the Understanding* (New York: Hafner Press, 1949), p. 29. The "power of the mind over the emotions," for Spinoza, consists in large part in "the separation by the mind of the emotions from the thought of an external cause, which we imagine confusedly." *Ethics* Pt. V, Prop. XX Note, Gutman, p. 266.
22. ML, p. 47.
23. Shirley, pp. xxxiii-v.
24. ML, pp. 48-49.
25. ML, p. 60.
26. ML, p. 60.
27. Shirley, p. 27.
28. Shirley, p. 29.
29. Shirley, p. 21.
30. Shirley, p. xxxviii, cf. Rambam's aim of explaining prophecy "in accordance with reason and Scripture" (Ch. 45). Spinoza's ideas continue Jewish philosophy, although his break with Judaism was inevitable, according to Z. Levy, *Baruch or Benedictus: On Some Jewish Aspects of Spinoza's Philosophy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989).
31. *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spinoza* (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1992) p. 52.
32. Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and the Bible* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1978).
33. Kaplan, p.2.
34. Kaplan, p. 132.
35. Kaplan, p. 9.
36. Kaplan, pp. 65-69.
37. Kaplan, p.72.
38. Kaplan, pp. 69-71.
39. Kaplan, p.107.
40. Kaplan, pp. 101-103.
41. Kaplan, p.152.
42. Kaplan, p.32.
43. Kaplan, pp. 93-94.
44. Kaplan, p. 73.
45. Kaplan, p. 94.
46. Kaplan, p. 152. Although Kaplan cites the Rambam for this view, the Rambam actually forecasts the return of prophecy during the messianic age.
47. A. Kaplan, *The Infinite Light: A Book About God* (New York: NCSY, 1981) pp. 16, 39, 45.
48. L. Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (New York: Behrman House, 1973).
49. L.Roth, *Spinoza Descartes & Maimonides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924) pp. 66, 105-106, 117-144.

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50. Kaplan fully describes the practice in his *Jewish Meditation: A Practical Guide* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).

The rationalist explanation for conflict based on multilateral bargaining, which we discuss below, is a more useful lens with which to view this conflict. In this case, both the Israelis and the Palestinians consist of many different constituencies and so although it appears to be a bilateral conflict it is in fact multilateral. In such settings, it can be that even with fully rational individual actors, agreements are not possible since the states end up being inconsistent in their decision-making as they are collectively aggregating the preferences of many different actors. This rationalist explanation...⁴⁵ As mentioned in the introduction, we see two necessary ingredients for a war between rational agents. If prophecy can be verified by a comparison of the prophets' message with the immediate notion of truth the believer finds in himself, then this immediate knowledge must be epistemologically independent of the prophets' message. To deny that miracles are the principal method of verifying prophecy implies that there is a strong independent source of knowledge of what is true, a source that does not come with prophecy.⁴⁶ On the reservations that rationalist Muslim theologians since al-Nazzām (d. 1042) have had about the possibility of miracles, see al-Ghazālī (d. 1105) and al-Shahrastānī (d. 1153).⁴⁷ All three concern the distinct ways of how prophets receive their revelation and how they perform miracles. First, al-Ghazālī reports that it is possible for prophets to receive imaginative revelation.⁴⁸ He gives a concise account of Ibn Sīnā's view that.