

Prophecy

Prophecy (from the Greek *prophemi* meaning “to say beforehand, foretell”) can be defined as the ability to foretell future events or conditions through an innate supernatural or paranormal ability to speak from a viewpoint of divine authority. Prophecy is therefore similar to mediumship or channeling in its purported ability to receive emanations from a divine being or higher intelligence, and convey these revelations to others. Prophets are found in all the world’s major religions, and R. J. Stewart describes prophecy as “a spiritual and psychic event that has influenced the development of humankind upon the planet, and which forms, as a secondary ramification of the prophetic event itself, one of the foundations for cultures and religions through history” (Stewart, 1990, 7). Similarly, J.-P. Vernant defines prophetic divination as an “irruption of divine immutability and omniscience into the inconstant flux of human existence” (Vernant, 1991, 315).

In the West there are two traditions in which prophecy plays a major role: ancient paganism (as practised in the Graeco-Roman world, and as theorised in Greek philosophy) and Judaeo-Christianity. In both cases, prophecy is clearly distinguished from sorcery, magic and forms of ‘inductive’ divination (divination using specific technical apparatus), being reliant on direct communication from a divine source which supercedes human will or inference. However it is impossible to distinguish Christian prophecy from ‘natural’ forms of pagan divination where information is gained through dreams, visions or inspirations, because the spiritual authority may be identified in a variety of different ways (e.g. God, angels, saints, daimones, heroes or deceased ancestors). From a psychological point of view, prophecy can be defined as a type of intuitive knowing which bypasses the usual sensory channels and rational intellect. From the perspective of Platonic and esoteric philosophy, such intuitive knowing is *ontologically prior* to rational deduction or sense-perception as it is conveyed directly from the Divine Mind to the highest part of the human soul, known as the intuitive intellect, and is then subject to rational interpretation and analysis.

Pagan Prophecy

In the Greek tradition, three contexts for prophecy can be distinguished: prophecy in archaic literature, oracular prophecy in classical Greece, and the Platonic philosophical tradition which theorises on the nature of prophetic utterance. Let us consider each in turn.

i) Archaic literature.

Archaic Greek poetry is placed at the early stage of a long tradition of prophecy in the ancient world, and yet has distinct features. In the works of Homer and Hesiod (7th-8th c. BCE), oracles were not used for divination and had no bearing on prophecy. The distinction between inspired seer and rational prophet, and the Judeo-Christian image of prophet as spiritual leader, had not yet developed, and the archaic Greek seer was closer in spirit to a poet or healer than priest. Indeed the gods themselves could assume a prophetic role as they played an active role in the world and took on various disguises, often taunting humans with ambiguous messages and forcing them back on their own devices.

ii) Oracles

The most famous prophets of the ancient world were the priestesses and priests of the oracle sanctuaries, such as Delphi, Dodona, Claros and Didyma. Of note are the succession of female prophetesses known as the Sybils, of whom ten were identified by the Roman period, each associated with a specific location. At Delphi, for example, the priestess (here called the Pythia), was seen to receive oracles from the god Apollo, becoming possessed and in a state of ‘enthusiasm’. How did this

happen? There are four theories: a) that the Pythia sat over a chasm which emitted an intoxicating substance, enabling her to enter an altered state of consciousness and receive the god; b) that a daimon (that is a lesser spirit in the train of Apollo, not Apollo himself), interacted with the priestess; c) that the earth itself sent out streams of energies, opening up the Pythia's soul to receive impressions of the future; and d) that Apollo manifested as a light which illuminated the soul of the Pythia, but did not fully possess her. Plutarch (46-120 CE) discusses b) and c), suggesting that the gift of the gods is conveyed by the earth's exhalations. Iamblichus (c.245-325 CE) tells us that the gods consist of light, and specifies exact rituals in his work *De mysteriis* for the invocation of daimonic and divine intelligence. Modern scholarship has revealed that gases did indeed rise up through fissures in the bedrock and in nearby springs - in particular ethylene, which may have triggered the Pythia's trance state, but cannot necessarily be held responsible for the prophecies she uttered. Although in an ecstatic condition, she spoke in a controlled manner, and her message was subject to debate and interrogation in order to arrive at its correct interpretation.

iii) Platonic philosophy

Plato (c.429/23-348 BCE) clearly distinguishes divination by inspired prophets, possessed by a kind of madness or frenzy (*mantike*), from deductive diviners who inquire into the future through rational means such as the interpretation of bird-omens (see *Phaedrus*, §244). This follows from his precise epistemology, whereby altered states of consciousness may be the result of divine possession and are to be clearly differentiated from the exercising of the human rational faculty. Following Plato, the Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 BCE) also distinguishes between natural and inductive forms of divination in his *De divinatione*, and this paradigm would deeply inform the Christian insistence on the distance between divine revelation bestowed by grace and the limits of human reason. In his *Cave Allegory* (*Republic*, Book 7), Plato suggests that the true prophet is the person who has escaped from the cave of ordinary reality, seen the archetypal Ideas underlying creation, and has returned to rescue mankind from their illusions.

Christian Prophecy

For Christians, Prophecy is said to be one of the nine gifts of the Spirit described in I Corinthians 12:7-10, and indeed Paul encouraged everyone to prophesy (I Corinthians 14:27-28). In the Hebrew Bible, the *nabi* or prophets were believed to have supernatural powers, and were accorded special status as servants of God. Prophecy here has the dual sense of prediction and proclamation, i.e. the prophets were both foretellers of the future and preachers of the faith. In this sense, preachers such as St Francis of Assisi, John Wesley and Martin Luther King would also be seen as prophets. Israelite prophecy was of immense significance, and in the Greek translation of the Old Testament we find five books of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and the Book of the twelve minor prophets. These prophets (dating from the eighth century BCE) claim divine authority, and often clash with the temporal powers. They have an inner compulsion to prophesy, often in a state of ecstasy, trance or inspiration and sometimes in large groups (eg. Numbers 11: 16-30; 1 Kings 22). Little is known of ancient Israelite divinatory or oracular practice, but insofar as they 'consulted the Lord', prophets can be seen as diviners. We have the example of Deborah, an Israelite prophetess (Judges, 4:14) who prophesied the defeat of Sisera and the Canaanites. In Deuteronomy 18: 9-22 we read of the prohibition of pagan practices, although in essence the gifts of the Hebrew prophets are indistinguishable from those of the pagan practitioners. In Deuteronomy 22 we learn that true and false prophecy are to be distinguished according to their accuracy. An essential feature of ancient prophecy is the apocalyptic vision, which draws on creation myth, mythic cycles of time and eschatology; examples might be the ancient war between the Titans and the Olympians, or the dramatic imagery of the Book of Revelation.

Some Later Prophets

From the later medieval period, prophecy took two main directions: the apocalyptic or millenarianist prophecies (which often contained political propaganda and agendas) and spiritual or mystical revelations. One of the most well-known European prophets was Nostradamus (1503-66), who worked in the tradition of astrological prognostication. He has been credited with predicting many world events, and his book *Les Propheties* of 1555 has rarely been out of print. In the mid nineteenth century, Helena Blavatsky (1831-91), founder of the Theosophical Society, published *The Secret Doctrine* (1855) in which Eastern wisdom and modern science are reconciled by 'mahatmas' whose wisdom Blavatsky claimed to channel. More recently, The American 'sleeping prophet' Edgar Cayce (1877-1945) became renowned for his psychic readings whilst in a trance state, including several that prophesied major physical changes to our planet. There are many examples of 'new-age' prophetic texts, for example the Seth material, channeled to the American writer Jane Roberts (1929-84), and the best-selling 'Law of Attraction' books (2004-9) claimed by spiritual teacher Esther Hicks to be the utterances of spirit entities called Abraham. An example from the literary genre would be *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield (1993), a story of spiritual initiation which sold over twenty million copies by 2005.

See also: Altered States of Consciousness; Angels, Apparition; Astral plane; Astrology; Automatic writing; Cayce, Edgar; Channeling Clairvoyance; Consciousness; Demons; Discarnate entity; Divination; Hallucination; Hypnagogic state; Imaginal; Intuition; Mediation; Mediumship; Mystical experiences; New Age; Paranormal dreams; Precognition; Premonition; Possession; Scrying; Spiritualism; Theosophy; Unconscious mind.

Further Reading

Iles Johnston, Sarah. 2008. *Ancient Greek Divination*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
Sawyer, John F. A. 1987. *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Stewart, R. J. 1990. *The Elements of Prophecy*. Shaftesbury, Dorset: Element Books.
Vernant, Jean-Pierre. 1991. *Mortals and Immortals*. Princeton University Press.

Angela Voss

1,560 words