Introduction
Prophetic Strength and Weakness

One of the great poet-prophets of modern Hebrew literature, Haim Nahman Bialik, writing in 1915, likened poets to those who "[cross] a river when it is breaking up, by stepping across floating, moving blocks of ice."[1] As masters of "allegory, of interpretation and mystery," poets flee what is fixed and inert in language.[2] Unlike masters of prose, who walk confidently across a frozen solid river of language, the poet "dare not set his foot on any one block for longer than a moment" and must instead leap from block to block, avoiding the looming abyss.[3] This book focuses on the way modern scholars and poets interpreted and reinvented the figure of the biblical prophet. However, I want to begin by reading a biblical text the way Bialik's poet might, reading prophecy itself not as "ice frozen into a solid block" but instead as an unstable negotiation with an abyss.[4]

In other words, rather than beginning a book on prophecy with a prosaic definition, we could say, paraphrasing Bialik, that the idea of prophecy writhes, flutters, or flickers in the hands of poets. Prophecy does not present a set of stable, fixed, self-assured qualities; to use Bialik's language, it is "extinguished and lit again," alternately "grow[ing] empty and becom[ing] full."[5] Prophets stride with towering authority and speak with majestic resonance, and yet at the same time they also stutter and grow dumb – are emblematic of exile, failure, and alienation. Prophecy "flickers" in this way, constantly moving between emptiness and fullness, authority and anxiety, strength and weakness, often within the same text. Modern representations of prophecy vacillate between emptiness and fullness, strength and weakness, but this instability can be traced to representation of prophecy in the biblical text itself, for example, to the way Jeremiah imagines Moses.

[1] Haim Nahman Bialik, "Revealment and Concealment in Language," in *Revealment and Concealment: Five Essays*, trans. Jacob Sloan (Jerusalem: IBIS Editions, 2000), 25.
[2] Ibid., 24. [3] Ibid., 26. [4] Ibid., 24. [5] Ibid., 25.

In one of the most terrible passages in the biblical prophetic corpus, God tells Jeremiah: "Even if Moses and Samuel stood before me, my heart is not inclined to this people. Send them out from upon me and let them go" (Jer. 15:1). At this moment, the prophetic oracle imagines a divinity so angry, so hard-hearted, that he is unwilling to forgive the people under any circumstances. There is no prayer or petition that can reverse their destiny, which will come, as the oracle goes on to predict, in the form of four kinds of gruesome death: the sword to slay, the dogs to tear, the fowls of the heaven and the beasts of the earth to devour and desecrate the bodies. The evocation of "Moses and Samuel," ancient prophets associated with heroic events from many centuries past, in the midst of oracles just preceding the destruction of Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE, seems to express extreme divine wrath, prophetic hyperbole. However, in this micro-scene, there is also something – if not exactly hopeful – then creative, lively: a glimpse of a counterhistory.

Jeremiah, a weakened prophet, stands before God, unable to petition on behalf of the nation, unable to alter the coming catastrophe. In *this* reality, God is cast as a tyrant, a Pharaoh, and Jeremiah gets the role of a diminished Moses, pleading for his people. All right, "send them out from upon me and let them go," says God-as-Pharaoh, echoing the verbs of the Exodus story. In this distorted, nightmare version of the Exodus narrative, the people do not leave Egypt to go to freedom, but instead go to exile, captivity, and horrendous forms of death. As for Jeremiah, he is later exiled from Judah to Egypt, as if to metaphorically unravel the Exodus narrative.

Still, in the alternate reality conjured up by the oracle, it is not only the failed prophet Jeremiah standing before God, but Moses and Samuel themselves, two of Israel's great prophets of yore, who return from the past to petition on behalf of the people. It's true that God declares he will refuse to heed their prayer, but there are precedents: God already threatened to destroy the entire nation for the sin of the Golden Calf, but eventually Moses was able to "turn [God] from [his] fierce wrath" (Exod. 32:12) and stay the planned punishment. In the phantasmagoric space opened up by the oracle, couldn't Moses and Samuel change God's mind once again?

Against despair, the evocation of Moses and Samuel holds out the glimmer of an alternate reality in which powerful prophets could sway the deity to withdraw his wrath, forgive the people, and defeat their enemies. In evoking these figures from the distant past, Jeremiah is both diminished and paradoxically given greater authority. Unlike Moses and Samuel, who were powerful, successful intercessors, Jeremiah fails to intercede. However, through recalling them, the text inserts Jeremiah into

a line of prophetic transmission, prophets "like Moses."[6] Thus, even as this prophetic oracle grieves the loss of prophetic intercession, along with the coming loss of national sovereignty, it also helps construct a fantasy of prophetic strength, of successful prophetic intercession. The pathos of loss, as Judith Butler puts it, is "oddly fecund, paradoxically productive."[7]

The "paradoxical productivity" of the passage from Jeremiah can also be read in the context of the longer prophetic passage in which it has been positioned. These verses summoning Moses and Samuel are part of a longer prophecy relating to drought, intercession, and war (Jer. 14–15:4). Biblical scholars since the beginning of the twentieth century have come to read Jeremiah as a text made of layers, each with its own distinct style and ideology. Over the years, early oracles were amplified and revised – a composition method William McKane has called a "rolling corpus."[8] Jeremiah 15:1–4 can be read as a more recent layer added or "rolled" into older oracles, which were also concerned with questions of intercession.

The pericope starts with a communal prayer for rain during a drought, but shifts to a more general description of a community in crisis, perhaps during a time of war or famine. This communal crisis also leads to a collapse of social institutions: "For prophet and priest wandered about the land, had no knowledge" (Jer. 14:18).[9] In this early oracle, utter despair afflicts the speaker; in this, it is similar to what Adele Berlin calls the "trauma literature" of the book of Lamentations.[10] In a situation of national crisis – perhaps the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem – the prophetic channel is utterly blocked; the institution of prophecy has

[6] I've written previously about how Jeremiah 1 creates a "catastrophic" prophetic line of transmission that interrupts a more traditional line of transmission of kings and priests. See Yosefa Raz, "Jeremiah 'Before the Womb': On Fathers, Sons, and the Telos of Redaction in Jeremiah 1," in *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective*, ed. Christl M. Maier and Carolyn J. Sharp (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 86–100.

[7] Judith Butler, "Afterword: After Loss, What Then?" in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 468. See also discussion in Chapter 4.

[8] William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), l.

[9] The primary meaning of the verb *sāḥărû*, translated here as "wandered," seems to be going about in circles, though there may also be a secondary meaning related to trafficking, i.e., continuing on with business as usual, though without knowledge. Also, on the basis of Syriac usage, it could mean "to beg." McKane, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, 331.

[10] Adele Berlin argues that Lamentations "centers on the 'present' – the moment of trauma, the interminable suffering. The book is not an explanation of suffering but a re-creation of it and a commemoration of it." Adele Berlin, *Lamentations: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 18. See, for example, Lamentations 2:14: "Your prophets envisioned for you [Zion] / illusion and lies / . . . and they prophesied to you oracles of delusion and deception."

broken down. There is no intercession, there is no lineage: there is not even a weakened form of prophecy.

However, the "summoning" of Moses and Samuel – added to the earlier despairing oracle – offers another way of understanding the breakdown of prophecy during a time of crisis. Scholars have theorized that it is part of a sermonic insertion characteristic of a later layer of the text, linguistically and stylistically similar to the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history.[11] This late addition is radically different in style and ideology. On the one hand, it turns beautiful liturgical passages on drought and war into a scene of inflexible anti-petition. On the other hand, it "rescues" the possibility of prophecy by preserving it as a fantasy about Moses and Samuel, rather than sinking into traumatic despair.

Summoning Moses and Samuel creates an imaginative scenario that preserves prophecy at a moment of crisis. Although Moses, Samuel, and Jeremiah cannot intercede at this terrible moment, an alternate timeline is melancholically imagined in which they could have. When we read the entirety of Jeremiah 14–15:4 together, we see an example of the aforementioned "rolling corpus." This composite text ultimately presents a complex and ambiguous statement regarding intercession and the prophetic role; though it is bleak and despairing, it creates an imaginary scenario in which the possibility of prophecy is both weak and strong. In this composite text, prophetic authority is ambiguous. Rather than the clear-cut power of a statement like a block of frozen solid ice, it has a power that is "extinguished and lit again, flash[ed] on and off . . . grow[n] empty and become full," to return to Bialik's image. The oracle petitions God during a time of drought and war, sinks into despair, summons the great prophets, even as Jeremiah stands before God, diminished, unable to reverse catastrophe. At the same time, by prophesizing a disaster that comes true, perhaps Jeremiah is the most powerful prophet of all: bringing pestilence, the sword, famine, and captivity in the wake of his terrible word.

On the Modern Reinvention of Prophecy

The passage from the book of Jeremiah shows us how Jeremiah invents his own version of Moses. Post-Enlightenment scholars and poets also

[11] Moshe Weinfeld suggests that this layer can be more precisely dated to the second half of the sixth century, after the composition of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history. Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 7.

invented their own versions of the prophets, who became complex mirrors of their own relation to authority and power. This book focuses on the relations among these modern prophets, poets, and scholars. Through these figures, *The Poetics of Prophecy* tells a complex story about the intertwined genealogies of the biblical text, European Romantic poetry, and biblical scholarship from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century.

Poets and prophets were long associated in antiquity and in medieval literature, linked by common ideas about inspiration, vision, and imagination. A rich archive of texts, figures, and mythologies existed for poets who wished to draw on prophetic models. Beside biblical and classical texts and figures, poets could turn to Sibylline oracles, medieval dream visions, and remnants of pre-Christian European shamanic traditions, such as the Celtic and Scandinavian traditions depicted in the Merlin stories told by Geoffrey of Monmouth. Other models included medieval visionaries such as Hildegard of Bingen and Joachim of Fiore, and inspired poets like Caedmon and Thomas the Rhymer. Medieval poets such as Ibn Gabirol and Dante presented themselves as possessing prophetic power. However, premodern texts were also ambivalent about equating the role of a prophet and the role of a poet. The sura of "The Poets," for example, goes to great lengths to show that Muhammad is no mere poet.[12] Conversely, poets who adopted prophetic affectations had to be careful of overreaching their position, risking blasphemy.

However, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, a new "poetics of prophecy" began to emerge that drew on the visionary strain in European tradition, while fashioning itself as a break from the past. Prophets were no longer speaking only for God or on behalf of a biblical moral code, but could unabashedly declare themselves spokespersons for the revolution, the nation, or the imagination. As William Blake put it in 1790: "As a new heaven is begun . . . Now is the dominion of Edom, & the return of Adam into Paradise" (*Marriage* 3:1,4, E 34).[13] German and British Romantics returned to the figure of the poet as a prophet with new energy, rewriting dialogic call narratives as scenes of poetic inspiration, enthusiastically

[12] Michael Zwettler, "A Mantic Manifesto: The Sura of 'The Poets' and the Qur'anic Foundations of Prophetic Authority," in *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, ed. James Kugel (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 75–120.

[13] Quotations from Blake are, unless otherwise noted, from William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom, newly revised ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), and are cited by title, chapter and line numbers, and page number in that edition.

collapsing the distinctions between the two roles. At times, they drew the poet-prophet stirred by strong emotions, reaching for the heightened aesthetic experiences of the sublime. At others, their poet-prophet was a figure impassioned by the politics of his or her time, calling for revolution or – what would become especially significant in the nineteenth century – national awakening. A range of poets, artists, and philosophers took up a "poetics of prophecy" in opposition to what they perceived as the empty formalism of neoclassicism and its purely technical achievements.

This renewed fascination with prophets was no longer relegated to the domain of secret practitioners of the occult or religious enthusiasts, but was mirrored in the works of biblical scholars and intellectuals, who emphasized the role of prophets and prophecy in their accounts of the literary, historical, and political development of ancient Israel. In *The Poetics of Prophecy*, I show that from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth century, poets and scholars have been surprisingly entangled in a joint project of reinventing prophecy. On the one hand, scholars, intellectuals, and artists discovered models of strong prophecy in biblical texts, which they could use to shore up aesthetic and nationalist ideals; on the other hand, a countertradition of a destabilizing, indeterminate – what I will call weak – prophetic power can be traced from the biblical text to modern formulations.

Though the poet-prophet had been a foundational figure in English literature at least since Edmund Spenser and John Milton, a key figure in the creation of the modern "poetics of prophecy" is the English exegete Robert Lowth, one of the first scholars to systematically read the Bible as a literary work, an approach that would become widespread in the nineteenth century as "the Bible as literature."[14] Lowth marks a particularly significant moment in the modern understanding of prophecy: his work classified biblical poetry according to more or less classical categories, which made it easier to popularize in later literature and scholarship. In particular, he introduced the concept of a "parallelism of members" to describe the poetry of the Hebrew Bible, thus enabling biblical prophecy to be formally evaluated as poetry. Lowth's literary approach to the Bible was soon adopted in Germany by figures such as Johann David Michaelis and Johann Gottfried Herder, as well as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Novalis. Following Lowth's work and its popularization by Hugh Blair, poets like William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge,

[14] For a history of the term, see David Norton, *A History of the English Bible as Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 262–316.

and Elizabeth Barrett Browning took on the persona of the prophet in Britain, as did, in various and idiosyncratic ways, American intellectuals and poets like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Emily Dickinson. The figure of the poet-prophet continued to shape national literatures throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, remaining an important touchstone for poets such as Alexander Pushkin, Taras Shevchenko, Stefan George, Kahlil Gibran, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), H. N. Bialik – the poet with whom this book opened – as well as Else Lasker-Schüler, Allen Ginsberg, and Mahmoud Darwish.

The description offered here of the evolution of literary engagement with prophecy, from Lowth to Herder and then to various national poets, is fairly common in literary studies. Yet in analyzing the "poetics of prophecy," it is not enough to remain simply within a literary genealogy; "the poetics of prophecy" was also shaped by the development of modern biblical scholarship. As scholars made strides in understanding the biblical text through refining the tools of both higher and lower criticism, the underlying paradigms of the new field of modern biblical scholarship were themselves conversely influenced by Romantic poetry. Thus, rather than focusing only on biblical scholarship or only on literary studies, the chapters of this book toggle back and forth between the two fields, highlighting connections between poets and exegetes, linking Romantic poetry to the development of modern biblical scholarship. Both these processes occurred against a background of the loss of a sense of naïve revelation, of "a unitary Bible" that might seamlessly hold together the past and the future.

Paradoxically, European culture's heightened fascination with the seemingly religious figure of the prophet and its renewed obsession with the visionary arrived just as the religious authority of the biblical text was being challenged by various processes of secularization. Thus the "poetics of prophecy" is a particular case of what Jonathan Sheehan describes as "the Enlightenment Bible."[15] The Enlightenment has at times been described as a simplistic linear march toward democracy and secularism, in which the Bible gradually diminished in importance from the eighteenth century onwards.[16] With new scientific discoveries in geology, geography, biology – and later, with the theory of evolution – the Bible could no longer function as a source of absolute authority for human knowledge about

[15] Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).
[16] Ibid., xi.

the natural world.[17] Furthermore, biblical scholars, starting with Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth century, introduced great uncertainty into assumptions about the Bible's divine authority by pointing out contradictions and scribal errors in the holy text. As philological and archeological evidence emerged, they threw the historical veracity of the biblical text into doubt. Together with scholarly doubts about the authority of scriptures, various iterations of Deism, rationalism, and freethinking questioned the notion of religious revelation, unsettling miraculous prophetic narratives; more broadly, a worldview in which all biblical texts as well as extrabiblical historical events could be read as elements in a great unfolding prophetic-apocalyptic drama became difficult to sustain.

Sheehan argues, though, for a nuancing of this simplistic secularizing narrative. As part of a generation of scholars critiquing what Talal Asad has called "the triumphalist history of the secular," Sheehan claims that as the Bible "became strange" to the faithful, an eighteenth-century counter-reaction took place that restored biblical authority.[18] Through projects like translation, scholarship, literature, and pedagogy, the authority of the Bible was recuperated and transformed into "an essential element of that transcendent moral, literary, and historical heritage that supposedly holds together Western society."[19] I propose to read prophecy as a particularly vivid case of this recuperation. In addition to recuperating the prophetic texts from archaism, irrelevancy, and doubt, the scholars and poets who created a "poetics of prophecy" often had to redeem prophecy from an over-literalist reading. Literary or aesthetic readings of prophetic texts attempted to regulate earlier waves of religious enthusiasm that had swept through Europe, particularly German pietism and radical English Protestant movements, both of which put a more literal reading of prophetic and apocalyptic texts at their center.[20]

Post-Enlightenment, interpreting prophecy was no longer exclusively limited to discerning the true word of God. As prophetic texts were charged with new meanings by readers of the Bible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, prophetic authority took on a different valence. Exegetes, philosophers, artists, and poets tried to define what made a prophet strong and successful, hoping to find new models for artistic

[17] Ronald Hendel describes two key discoveries that challenged a naïve belief in the biblical text: the New World and the geological antiquity of the earth. Ronald Hendel, *The Book of "Genesis": A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 176–78.

[18] Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.

[19] Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible*, ix.

[20] See my discussion of Jon Mee's work in Chapter 1.

inspiration and political and national leadership, as well as personal integrity and authenticity.

Though these attempts to locate prophetic models and authority often stemmed from contemporary concerns, they were also affected by the instability of the biblical texts, which, as we saw in the case of Jeremiah, tended to represent prophetic strength and weakness as a set of shifting relations, rather than absolute qualities associated with any particular figure. As a result, when modern biblical scholars and intellectuals sought ideal prophetic models in the biblical text, they often had to impose these ideals upon inconsistent and formally difficult texts. At times, modern attempts to define and fix the qualities of an ideal prophet were destabilized by the biblical texts, in which avowals of strength cover over anxiety and trauma. At the same time, occurrences of weakness in the biblical texts could also be generative of new forms of religious and literary imagination.

We can trace a countertradition of poets who mine the biblical text for its moments of failure and weakness, utilizing the destabilizing qualities of the prophetic texts to their advantage. In the hands of these writers, the poet-prophet is not bolstered up into a towering "strong" ideal, but is often consciously represented as a more complicated, ambiguous figure. To return to Bialik's set of images, rather than trying to cross a solid block of frozen ice, the poet-prophets who utilize this countertradition leap nimbly across the moving, floating blocks of ice on the thawing river. Rather than trying to find heroes, create hierarchies, and systematize the biblical text, they use prophecy's basic instability – its weakness – to enliven and enrich their own texts. They actively exploit the fissures of both ancient and modern prophecy to create stirring, innovative, and often radical literary works from prophetic weakness itself.

On the Method of Reception History

Religious texts are often used to invoke authority, and thus the study of these texts allows us to trace the way power is both constructed and unraveled through them. Erin Runions has suggested the term "critical biblical studies" as a way to characterize a "theorized analysis of the way that scriptures are formed, given authority, and made to respond to or uphold power."[21] In this book, I pay particular attention to the question of authority and power in the prophetic texts of the Bible and in their

[21] Erin Runions, "Critical Biblical Studies is Here to Stay: Erin Runions Responds to Essays on *The Babylon Complex*," *The Bible & Critical Theory* 11, no. 2 (2015): 97–105.

afterlives, expanding on Runions's formulation to consider the way the power of scriptures is dialectically formed as a response to failure, anxiety, and weakness.

In order to understand the power of "critical biblical studies," it is helpful to situate this kind of approach, what Runions defines as a subset of reception studies, within the paradigms of biblical studies, which has traditionally been reluctant to examine the biblical text in this way. Rather, historical-critical scholarship emerging in nineteenth-century Germany used, and often still uses, archeological metaphors to describe the philological study of the biblical text.

Though biblical texts in general – from Genesis to Chronicles – might need a good dusting off, the prophetic texts are especially susceptible to what Robert Alter calls the shifting sands of "preconception and misconception."[22] Because many of the prophets "have a queer way of talking," as Martin Luther puts it, employing archaic language, cryptic utterances, and strange juxtapositions, the prophetic texts are especially prone to scribal errors.[23] Furthermore, prophetic texts are often redacted by different communities at multiple points in time and glossed according to changing ideologies and theologies. So just as New Testament scholars embarked on a search for the historical Jesus at the turn of the twentieth century, scholars of prophetic texts in the first half of the twentieth century metaphorically "excavated" the Masoretic text to unearth the *ipsissima verba* (the very words) of the prophet, as if the beautiful and vivid words of the prophet were buried under layers of editorial dust, or "swarm[ing] with . . . clichés" inserted by later redactors, as one scholar put it.[24]

In recent decades, however, the "controlling archeological metaphor" of biblical scholarship has been recognized as itself belonging to nineteenth-century fantasies about origins.[25] The notion of an original kernel of prophecy, which must be unearthed or discovered, like a valuable artifact buried in the ground, is an illusion. Rather, upon examination, the prophetic text itself becomes a discursive object with an unstable origin. Let us return to the example of the book of Jeremiah. Historical-critical

[22] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 204.
[23] Martin Luther, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe der Werke*, Vol. 19 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883), 350. Quoted in Herbert Marks, "On Prophetic Stammering," in *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory*, ed. Regina Schwartz (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 60.
[24] Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School*, 27.
[25] See James L. Kugel, "The Bible in the University," in *The Hebrew Bible and its Interpreters*, Vol. 1, ed. William Henry Propp, Baruch Halpern, and David Noel Freedman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 156.