



The Construction of Subversive Speech in the Latter Prophets and in Plato's Socratic Dialogues

Citation

Schwartz, Ethan Frank. 2020. The Construction of Subversive Speech in the Latter Prophets and in Plato's Socratic Dialogues. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts & Sciences.

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The Construction of Subversive Speech in the Latter Prophets and in Plato's Socratic Dialogues

ABSTRACT

This dissertation compares “subversive speech”—i.e., speech that challenges and destabilizes otherwise recognized authority—in the Latter Prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the early-to-middle dialogues of Plato. The biblical prophets have long been associated with subversive activity, such as critique of cult and king, which the corpus prominently thematizes in a variety of ways. Most historical-critical biblical scholarship has treated these issues only as windows onto the development of Israelite institutions or ancient social dynamics. Without denying these connections to historical realities, I argue that more attention ought to be paid to how subversive speech is literarily constructed—how biblical authors and redactors used it to theorize prophecy. These literary constructs, I suggest, are themselves historical data even if they do not correspond to “actual” prophetic figures and activities.

I make this case through a sustained comparison to Plato's presentation of Socrates, which is relevant for two reasons. First, Socrates's philosophical challenges to Athenian society are perhaps the closest ancient Mediterranean analogue to subversive prophecy. Second, the “literary turn” in recent Plato studies, which treats Plato's Socrates as more a fictive character than a historical figure, provides a model for studying literary construction within a historical-critical framework. Ultimately, while acknowledging the important cultural, historical, and generic differences between the biblical prophetic literature and Plato's dialogues, I argue that

both corpora use subversive speech to problematize authority and to develop their respective orienting ideals: *tôrâ* in the biblical material, philosophy in the Platonic.

The introductory chapter sets forth the problems that subversive prophetic speech poses, reviews previous approaches to these problems, and makes the case for addressing them through a historical-critical comparison with Plato. Each of the subsequent three chapters explores one mode in which both of these corpora construct subversive speech. Chapter 2, “From ‘Athens and Jerusalem’ to ‘Delphi and Deir ‘Alla’: The Divinatory Construction of Subversive Speech in Micah 6:1–8 and in the *Apology*,” argues that both corpora present subversive speech by coopting and transforming ancient Mediterranean divinatory phenomena. Chapter 3, “Subversive Speakers and Their Audiences: The Politics of Poetry in Ezekiel and in the *Republic*,” explores how they configure the poetic language of subversive speech in relation to its public function. Chapter 4, “The Subversive Construction of Superordinate Authority: Literary Framing in the Latter Prophets and in Socrates’s Last Days,” argues that both employ large-scale literary framing to contextualize subversive speech not as a transgression of authority but as an expression of a reconceptualized authoritative ideal. In the concluding chapter, I summarize my findings and suggest two potential avenues for further inquiry.

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NOTE ON CITATIONS AND TRANSLATIONS

Citations of the Hebrew Bible follow the Masoretic Text as printed in the *BHS*. Citations of medieval Jewish biblical commentaries follow Menachem Cohen, ed., *Mikraot Gedolot Haketer*, Heb. (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1992–2019). Translations of Hebrew texts are my own unless otherwise noted. Citations of Greek texts follow OCT. Several different translations are used, depending on the author and work. Translations of Plato's *Gorgias* follow Robin Waterfield, trans., *Gorgias*, Oxford World's Classics (1994; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Those of the *Republic* follow Allan Bloom, trans., *The Republic of Plato*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1991). Those of all other Platonic texts follow John M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). Translations of Aristophanes's *Clouds* follow Alan H. Sommerstein, trans., *Lysistrata and Other Plays*, rev. ed., Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin, 2002). Translations of Herodotus's *Histories* follow Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories* (New York: Anchor, 2009). Translations of Thucydides's *Histories* follow Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to The Peloponnesian War* (New York: Free Press, 2008). Translations of Xenophon's *Apology* follow Robert C. Bartlett, ed., *The Shorter Socratic Writings* (1996; repr., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006). Citations and translations of extrabiblical prophetic and divinatory texts from the ancient Near East follow Martti Nissinen et al., eds., *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, 2nd ed., WAW 41 (Atlanta: SBL, 2019). Citations and translations of Ugaritic texts follow Simon B. Parker, ed., *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, WAW 9 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997). I have preserved the exact language of preexisting translations wherever possible. In the few places where my argument absolutely necessitated modifications, I have indicated so. In citations of secondary literature that transliterates the vocalized name of the biblical deity, I have

removed the vowels. All abbreviations for both primary and secondary texts follow *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL, 2014).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“If they are not prophets, they are yet the children of prophets (אם אין נביאים הן בני נביאים הן)” (b. Pes. 66a). With this famous quip—an ironic twist on Amos’s insistence that he was *neither* a prophet nor the child of one (whatever that means)—Hillel the Elder reassured some Jews who were panicking about their uncertainty regarding a halakhic matter relating to the Paschal offering. They would eventually figure it out, he insisted. Sometimes, you just have to take comfort in being, at least, the child of prophets—in being able to depend upon the merits of those around you and behind you. With this in mind, it is my pleasure and honor to open this dissertation on the prophets themselves by acknowledging those upon whose expertise, support, and kindness *I* was able to depend—even (and especially) in the moments when, as in the story about Hillel, the path was uncertain.

I had the tremendous privilege to complete this dissertation—and, really, my doctoral studies as a whole—under the guidance of three accomplished scholars. My adviser, Jon D. Levenson, has shaped my approach to biblical studies since even before I met him, when I first read *Sinai and Zion* in college. (While I have since reread it many times, I confess that I did not, as he might prefer, purchase a new copy for each occasion.) Thanks to his gracious willingness to overlook a mishap with challah at a certain shabbos lunch (המבין יבין), I have been able to benefit from his Eminent mentorship these past several years. His combination of a rigorous commitment to historical criticism and a sincere interest in ancient texts as sources of ideas is a model for what I would like to achieve in my own work. D. Andrew Teeter introduced me to the literature of the Second Temple period, taught me to see redaction as a process animated by coherence as well as conflict, and challenged me to think about texts on a larger scale. Finally, Jacqueline Vayntrub pushed me to question the intellectual genealogies of our own field and

gave me the tools to think differently and more productively about the relationship between text and history. While this is a dissertation that none of these three scholars would have written, it is also one that could not have been written without each of them. Their distinct influences may be found on every page.

Beyond my dissertation committee, I have benefited from the mentorship and support of many others at Harvard. Giovanni Bazzana has always enthusiastically supported my efforts to integrate the study of early Christianity and the Classics into my research. I was fortunate to catch Peter Machinist just before his retirement, benefitting from his encyclopedic knowledge and careful instruction in courses about ancient Israelite religion and the intellectual history of biblical studies. Gojko Barjamovic introduced me to Assyriology and first encouraged me to pursue the comparative study of ancient Near Eastern prophecy. Elise Ciregna of the Committee on the Study of Religion made the administrative aspects of doctoral work as straightforward as possible and reliably reassured me during my occasional alarm that I had missed a deadline or forgotten a form. Rachel Rockenmacher and Sandy Cantave Vil of the Center for Jewish Studies provided crucial support as well.

I did much of the work on this dissertation during my year as a Graduate Exchange Scholar at my beloved alma mater, The University of Chicago. I am grateful to the administrators at both Harvard and U of C who facilitated this exchange. The three professors with whom I studied during that year had a substantial impact not only on the dissertation but also on my thinking more generally. Jeffrey Stackert's methods seminar filled an important lacuna in my coursework and reignited my interest in pentateuchal studies. Simeon Chavel's course on biblical narratives of divine encounter introduced me to the rich possibilities for mobilizing literary theory toward a historical-critical approach. Agnes Callard's seminar on the

Socratic elenchus reconnected me with my roots as a philosophy major and transformed my understanding of the Platonic texts that constitute such an important part of this study.

I have benefited from numerous other scholars' support over the years. I had the privilege to begin my work in academic Jewish studies in college under the mentorship of Michael Fishbane and Paul Mendes-Flohr. Their influence may still be seen in my interests and my approach to texts. Benjamin D. Sommer oversaw my master's studies, teaching me that even the largest theological reflections are always beholden to the smallest matters of philological rigor. He has continued to offer support on both the intellectual and practical sides of biblical studies. Shai Held has been a gracious, impactful mentor since I first studied with him at Yeshivat Hadar in 2011. My scholarship is richer for the fact that I constantly ask myself whether he would consider it Torah—even in those instances when I suspect that he would not. Other scholars whose guidance has enriched my work at various points include Joel S. Baden, Cate Bonesho, Sam Brody, Shaye J. D. Cohen, Julie B. Deluty, Raanan Eichler, Liane Feldman, Susannah Heschel, Jonathan Kaplan, Karen L. King, Paul J. Kosmin, Nathan Mastnjak, Alan Mittleman, Martti Nissinen, Kimberley C. Patton, Annette Yoshiko Reed, Baruch J. Schwartz, Kenneth Seeskin, Malka Z. Simkovich, Mark S. Smith, David Stern, Dov Weiss, Roslyn Weiss, and Thomas A. Wetzell.

Numerous friends and colleagues have provided support and collaboration. Robert Wallace has in many ways been my longest running interlocutor. I am as grateful for the conversations we had in high school over a decade ago as I am for the ones we had about this dissertation a matter of days ago. Reed Carlson and Eric Jarrard have been model friends and colleagues since I first arrived at Harvard. I am so fortunate to have gone through every stage of doctoral work together with them, from coursework to the job market. Avital Morris's wit,

warmth, and dedication improved everything from individual formulations in the dissertation to my overall state of mind while writing it. Even though we lived in the same place for only a single year of my doctoral work, she was constantly present for it. Theo Motzkin has been a part of this dissertation ever since he was my *ὑπόπτερον ζεῦγος* (*Phaedr.* 246a) and roommate during CUNY Upper Level Greek in the summer of 2017, when the seeds of the project began to germinate. His intellectual and personal support have been unfailing. Others whom I want to be sure to mention include Jacob Abolafia, Zach Conn, Will Friedman, Eric M Gurevitch, Matthew Hass, Zoe Jick, David Zvi Kalman, Danya Lagos, Yitz Landes, Mark Lester, Zach Margulies, Jeremy Rozansky, Shira Telushkin, Sarah Wolf, David Wolkenfeld, Sara Wolkenfeld, and Sarah Zager. I must also thank my students at Harvard, Catholic Theological Union, and Loyola University Chicago. Their energy continually reinvigorated my commitment to this work.

I am grateful to acknowledge the numerous organizations, groups, and conferences that have provided settings for me to present and to receive feedback on my work. These are the Association for Jewish Studies, the Chicago-Yale Pentateuch Colloquium, the Enoch Graduate Seminar, the Harvard Hebrew Bible Workshop, the Harvard Jewish Studies Workshop, the Harvard Semitic Philology Workshop, the Hayim Perelmuter Conference at Catholic Theological Union, the Hebrew Bible Regional Seminar, the Jewish Theological Seminary, the Power of the Word Conference at the University of Oxford, the Religion and Movement Conference at The University of Chicago, the Society of Biblical Literature, the Society for Classical Studies, the Society of Jewish Ethics, the University of Chicago Hebrew Bible Workshop, and the Ways of Knowing Conference at Harvard Divinity School.

I am fortunate to be able to say that my family has been the most involved and most indispensable presence in my doctoral studies and throughout my life. I must first and foremost

express my love and appreciation for my wife, Leah Sarna. We were literally sitting in the shadow of the Parthenon during a detour on the way back from Israel (so much for “Athens and Jerusalem”) when I first floated the idea of a dissertation comparing the prophets and Socrates. Her enthusiastic response gave me the courage to pursue this somewhat unusual topic, and from that point onward, there was scarcely an idea to make it into these pages that I did not discuss with her. I am so fortunate to have her as a partner in all things—including, not least, raising our son, Cyrus, who was born less than 24 hours after I defended this dissertation. While I doubt that he will always make things quite as convenient as the timing of his arrival, I do hope that one day the texts discussed here will excite and challenge him as they have me.

For so many reasons, this achievement would be impossible without the lifelong support of my parents, Ellen Rozenfeld and Milford Schwartz. They are the ones who most fundamentally taught me to love learning, to embrace challenge, and to decline the easy way out—qualities to which, I hope, this dissertation is a testament. It is because of their hard work and absolute commitment to their children’s flourishing that I had the privilege of choosing a career path rooted in my interests and passions. My sister, Emily Schwartz, has always enthusiastically assumed the important dual role of keeping me sane and keeping me from taking myself too seriously. Both tasks are in high demand during doctoral work. In recent years, she has also become a dedicated, hardworking teacher in her own right, and I have been moved and motivated by her example. My parents-in-law, Ruth Langer and Jonathan D. Sarna, always provided encouragement and shared generously of their experience as I learned to navigate professional academia. And my siblings-in-law, Talya and Aaron Sarna, quite literally put a roof over my head during my fourth year of study, when I was commuting to Cambridge from New York. This home-away-from-home made a challenging year immeasurably easier.

No part of these reflections brings me greater joy than the chance to acknowledge my Bubbe, Betty F. Rozenfeld. She has been a constant presence throughout my studies, speaking with me by phone several times a week. She was always eager to remain apprised of my writing progress—sometimes, to no one’s surprise, doing so more successfully than I myself did. To whatever extent the final product represents a drive for learning, a commitment to excellence, a spirit of dialogue, and a love of Yiddishkeit, it is because of how she has modeled these qualities for me and the rest of our family throughout her life. Even as I recall the blessed memories of my other grandparents—Irving H. Rozenfeld, Lee Schwartz, and Milford Schwartz Sr.—I am so grateful that I am able to share this achievement with Bubbe. It is to her that I dedicate this dissertation, a small expression of boundless admiration and love.

I completed my doctorate amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. At the point of my writing these final words of the dissertation, the virus has stricken more than 4.1 million people worldwide and claimed the lives of more than 285,000. By the time it reached the United States, prompting quarantines, lockdowns, and university closures, I was fortunate to have advanced enough in my research and writing so as to be able to complete and to defend the dissertation from the comfort of my home. Ultimately, this was possible only because of the efforts of those who do not share this privilege—those who, whether by choice or because of the inequities of our society (or both), are on the front lines in the battle against this plague. It is on behalf of such people, the selfless and the powerless, that the prophets discussed in this dissertation raised their thunderous voices. I am overwhelmed and humbled with gratitude to them.

Ethan Frank Schwartz
ל"ג בעומר תש"פ
Chicago, Illinois

For Bubbe.

שאל אביך ויגידך—אלו נביאים... זקניך ויאמרו לך—אלו זקנים.
—Sifre Deuteronomy §310

ταῦτα οὖν σκοπώμεθα καὶ μετὰ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ἡμῶν:
ἡμεῖς γὰρ ἔτι νέοι ὥστε τοσοῦτον πρᾶγμα διελέσθαι.
—*Protagoras* 314b

CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

1.1. Overview

Why does the Hebrew Bible tell us about the prophets? At first blush, this seems like an absurd question. The prophets are among the most prominent protagonists of the biblical story—or, in Abraham Joshua Heschel’s memorable formulation, “the men whose inspiration brought the Bible into being.”¹ Why ever would—how ever *could*—it *not* tell us about the prophets?

When we articulate what exactly makes the prophets such compelling figures, however, the question becomes more intelligible. Although the prophetic literature customarily designated the “Latter Prophets” (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Minor Prophets) in the Masoretic Text is diverse, it gives particular prominence to prophetic speech that is religiously, socially, or politically subversive. Targets of vociferous prophetic critique include institutions like the temple cult (e.g., Isa 1:10–17; Am 5:21–27), the priesthood (e.g., Mal 2:1–9), and the royal house (e.g., Jeremiah 38); as well as authoritative ideas like the relationship between Israel and YHWH (e.g., Hosea 2; Ezek 33:24–29), the inviolability of Zion (e.g., Jer 7:1–15), and prominent folk wisdom (e.g., Ezek 12:21–25). The prophets issue this critique from the perspective of what they present as YHWH’s authentic demand of Israel. Accordingly, Joseph Blenkinsopp has called them “dissident intellectuals,” explaining, “They collaborated at some level of conscious intent in the emergence of a coherent vision of a moral universe over against current assumptions cherished and propagated by the contemporary state apparatus.”²

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (1955; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001), xxi.

² Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel*, LAI (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995), 144.

This conception of the prophet is familiar to those who inhabit religious and cultural worlds that have inherited the Bible as scripture—so much so that the word “prophetic” is often used simply as a religiously infused shorthand for social critique.³ “In modern Christian usage,” John Barton has observed, “to call someone a prophet is generally to imply that he has something to say that poses a challenge to a complacent world.”⁴ The same is true in many Jewish contexts.⁵ Yet this familiarity obscures a fundamental paradox: the canonical status of the very

³ The ubiquity of this usage is reflected in recent works such as David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); and Albert J. Raboteau, *American Prophets: Seven Religious Radicals and Their Struggle for Social and Political Justice* (2016; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

⁴ John Barton, *Oracles of God: Perceptions of Ancient Prophecy in Israel after the Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13. It is especially prominent in mainstream and liberal Protestant contexts; see, e.g., Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012); idem, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th anniversary ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018); Randall K. Bush, *The Possibility of Contemporary Prophetic Acts: From Jeremiah to Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2014); John Goldingay, “Old Testament Prophecy Today,” *The Spirit & Church* 3 (2001): 27–46; James Limburg, *The Prophets and the Powerless* (Lima: Academic Renewal Press, 2001); Leonard Lovett, “Ethics in a Prophetic Mode: Reflections of an Afro-Pentecostal Radical,” in *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture*, eds. Amos Young and Estrelida Y. Alexander (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 153–65; Lee Roy Martin, “Fire in the Bones: Pentecostal Prophetic Preaching,” in *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of Preaching*, ed. Lee Roy Martin (Cleveland: CPT, 2015), 34–63; idem, “Towards a Biblical Model of Pentecostal Prophetic Preaching,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 37 (2016): 1–9; Cheryl J. Sanders, “Pentecostal Ethics and the Prosperity Gospel: Is There a Prophet in the House?” in *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture*, eds. Amos Young and Estrelida Y. Alexander (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 141–52; and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

⁵ See, e.g., Hayyim J. Angel, “Amos: The Social Justice Prophet,” *Conversations* 31 (2018): 19–26; Sheldon H. Blank, “The Prophetic Element in Progressive Judaism,” in *Aspects of Progressive Jewish Thought* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1955), 30–36; Walter Jacob, “Prophetic Judaism: The History of a Term,” *Journal of Reform Judaism* 26, no. 2 (1979): 33–46; Jill Jacobs, *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law and Tradition* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2009), 44–48; Barry L. Schwartz, *Path of the Prophets: The Ethics-Driven Life* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2018); and Melissa Weintraub, “Warriors, Prophets, Peacemakers, and Disciples: A Call to Action in the Face of Religiously Inspired Violence,” in *Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice*, eds. Or N. Rose, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, and Margie Klein (Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2008), 237–48. Jewish identifications of prophecy and social justice are often closely associated with Heschel due to his personal combination of a sustained theological interest in the prophets and commitment to certain activist causes. In fact, Heschel himself acknowledged and affirmed this link; see idem, “The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement,” in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (1996; repr., New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 224–26. For discussion, see Arnold Eisen, “Prophecy as Vocation: New Light on the Thought and Practice of Abraham Joshua Heschel,” *Heb., Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 16 (2005): 835–50; Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 160–61; Susannah Heschel, “Theological Affinities in the Writings of Abraham Joshua Heschel and Martin Luther King, Jr.,” in *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism*, eds. Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 168–86; Edward K.

corpus that preserves and authorizes subversive prophetic speech is more readily associated with the sort of institutional authority that the prophet subverts. The biblical picture of the subversive prophet protesting injustice and excess is so literarily and conceptually compelling that it obscures the terms on which we encounter it, for the very book that positions the subversive prophets on the margins of power is arguably the most powerful book in human history. Yet while this paradox might be chalked up to an accident of reception history, the reality is more complicated. This is why it drew Blenkinsopp's attention in his 1977 book, *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins*, which opens by characterizing the canonization of the prophets as "a historical and theological problem of the first order."⁶ It is native to the Bible itself.

The paradox posed by the subversive prophets is first and foremost discursive, borne out in the synchronic shape of the biblical canon. Though scholars continue to contest the precise features and dynamics of "canon," it is safe to say that the canonization of a text constitutes a bid for its authority.⁷ Surprisingly, the Bible authorizes various institutions alongside the prophetic critique of just those institutions. It is difficult to square, for instance, how a canon that accords revelatory status to the pentateuchal Priestly source could also enshrine Amos's declaration on

Kaplan and Samuel H. Dresner, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophetic Witness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); and Edward K. Kaplan, *Spiritual Radical: Abraham Joshua Heschel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

⁶ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 2.

⁷ For an overview of the debate about canon, see Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures*, LAI (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 4–58. It should be noted that by "canon" and "canonization," I understand a gradual scribal process of shaping and authorizing the literary profile of the scriptural collection underlying later biblical canons, not the one-time fixing of those canonical lists; cf. Stephen B. Chapman, "Second Temple Jewish Hermeneutics: How Canon Is Not an Anachronism," in *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation: Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity*, eds. Jörg Ulrich, Anders-Christian Jacobsen, and David Brakke, *Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity* 11 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 281–96.

behalf of the deity, “I hate, I abhor your festivals (שְׂנֵאתִי מְאֹדֶיךָ חַגֶיכֶם)” (Am 5:21a). Yet while one might construe this tension as theological indecisiveness, as if the canonizing scribes could simply have picked one or the other, I would suggest that it reflects a deeper, discursive disjunction between subversive prophecy and the very authorizing function of canonization itself. Canon is the textual reflex specifically of *institutional* authority structures, such as priesthood and kingship—in other words, the typical targets of prophetic critique. In Michael Walzer’s incisive formulation, “It isn’t only that religious charisma breaks through all authority structures and calls into question all processes of authorization; equally important is the fact that social criticism can never be authoritative.”⁸ The canonical preservation and authorization of subversive prophetic speech submits it to a discursive modality that it fundamentally resists.

This discursive paradox maps onto a historical one. We are prone to (mis)read the subversive prophets in light of the contemporary democratization of writing. Nowadays, writing has little connection with authority. Activists who challenge society from its margins can disseminate treatises to readerships of thousands with little more than a social media account and at no material or monetary cost. It is therefore all too easy to imagine Amos tweeting at Amaziah and watching the “likes” roll in (like a mighty stream). However, in the world that produced the texts of the Bible, writing was unrecognizably different—not simply in terms of technology, which is obvious enough, but in terms of its very cultural structures. Most scholarship on the materiality of writing in ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism situates scribal production as an elite practice undertaken in close social (and even physical) proximity to state and cultic power, which were more messily intertwined than anachronistic assumptions of “church and

⁸ Michael Walzer, *In God’s Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 87.

state” would suggest.⁹ Only these centralized institutions could have supported the material requirements of textual production, at least on the scale consonant with canonization.

The affinity between canon and institutional authority may therefore be understood as a discursive reflection of a concrete overlap in social setting. The uncanniness of reading P alongside Amos corresponds historically to the bizarre yet entirely plausible image of a clerical scribe sitting within the temple precinct as he copied out the words, “I hate, I abhor your festivals!” with ink and parchment purchased on the government budget.¹⁰ Subversive prophetic speech was preserved—if not, in some cases, outright authored—under the auspices of the very institutions that it targeted. With these discursive and historical perspectives, then, we may return to our opening question with a more precise understanding of the terms and the stakes: Why does the Hebrew Bible tell us about the *subversive* prophets?

⁹ See, e.g., David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Davis, *Scribes and Schools*; Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence From the Iron Age, ABS 11* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010); William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). However, this is not a matter of consensus. Reinhard G. Kratz, for instance, has argued that the critique of institutional authority implies that “professional scribes almost certainly had little to do with the formation of biblical texts. Rather, the biblical books’ authors and copyists arose from persons who stemmed from scribal schools and official bureaucracy but distanced themselves internally and perhaps also externally, setting out on paths of their own instead.” Idem, *Historical and Biblical Israel: The History, Tradition, and Archives of Ancient Israel*, trans. Paul Michael Kurtz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 63.

¹⁰ This is not to suggest that texts like P are uncomplicated, stenographic representations of the institutions that they depict. To the extent that P presents a cultic ideal, it may well be read as its own kind of implicit critique of inadequate cultic realities. Indeed, this is precisely how Jonathan Klawans characterizes the P-like temple vision in Ezekiel 40–48; see idem, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 94–97. Qumranic texts such as the Temple Scroll (11QT) may be understood similarly—with the advantage that we have better external documentation of the inadequate contemporary priesthood under attack. Nevertheless, there remains quite a rhetorical difference between implicit critique narratively situated *within* the cultic institutions (as in P) and the prophets’ fiery indictments from outside of them. If indeed Second Temple scribal activity was associated with the temple, it is easier to imagine these scribes promoting the first type of critique than the second—to say nothing of their promoting them alongside one another.

1.1.1. Subversive Prophetic Speech in Previous Scholarship

This “prophetic problem,” so to speak, has been the subject of considerable scholarly interest virtually since the rise of modern biblical studies. Broadly speaking, it has fallen under the purview of two of the dominant approaches to biblical prophecy as a whole, corresponding to two of the most influential students of antiquity in Germany around the turn of the twentieth century: (1) a “historical-ideational” paradigm, which approaches the prophet as an individual thinker and is associated with Julius Wellhausen; and (2) a “sociological-comparative” paradigm, which approaches the prophet as a social type and is associated with Max Weber. In practice, these paradigms are not firmly distinct. Nevertheless, the categories are heuristically useful for broadly characterizing some of the concerns and orientations that have productively shaped the study of biblical prophecy for over a century. The following subsections provide an overview of how they have each framed the discussion of subversive prophetic speech in particular.

1.1.1.1. The Historical-Ideational Paradigm

The historical-ideational approach to prophecy focuses on the prophet as an individual thinker whose ideas must be understood in light of the historical situations in which he prophesied. It therefore tends to adopt a diachronic perspective, focusing on how prophecy both reflected and affected the development of Israelite religion. For Wellhausen, these interests were closely linked to the prophets’ subversive speech. In particular, he saw the prophetic critique of the cult as a key datum for reconstructing the historical place of institutional religion in the downward spiritual spiral from ancient Israel to Second Temple Judaism. The eighth-century prophets, he argued, testify to their historical priority over the Pentateuch and its cultic apparatus (a schema famously summarized in the slogan *lex post prophetas*) because they advanced their critique of

the cult in complete ignorance of the notion that Moses himself sanctioned it.¹¹ “Their zeal is directed,” he wrote, “not against the [cultic] places, but against the cultus there carried on, and, in fact, not merely against its false character as containing all manner of abuses, but almost more against itself, against the false value attached to it.”¹² The prophets did not attack the degradation of cultic religion; they attacked the cult *as* the degradation of religion in the first place. They protested—in vain, ultimately—as organized worship displaced spontaneous worship as Israel’s primary means of relating to YHWH.

With this argument, Wellhausen set one of the most important agendas for the historical-ideational study of subversive prophetic speech: determining whether the prophetic critique of the cult constituted a rejection of the very essence of organized sacrifice or a “mere” rhetorical condemnation of its corrupt administration and/or popular overemphasis.¹³ Given the patent anti-Jewish animus of Wellhausen’s endorsement of the former, it is no surprise that many scholars

¹¹ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. Sutherland Black and Allan Menzies (1885; repr., Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 55–59.

¹² *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³ It is crucial to emphasize that Wellhausen sets the subversive prophets in opposition specifically to an *organized, institutionalized* cult, not to the very idea of sacrifice itself. The (correct) perception that he mapped his liberal Protestant critique of Catholicism and High Church Protestantism onto ancient Israel has often led scholars sloppily to characterize his project as a rejection of sacrifice in favor of prayer, as if the latter as such were somehow more Protestant than the former. (Never mind that in Jewish and Catholic worship, the organized, ritual substitution for sacrifice—the sort of thing Wellhausen despised—is prayer!) In fact, Wellhausen’s move is far more sophisticated. In his view, sacrifice and prayer are simply two modes of worship, *both* of which may be perverted if they are subjected to ritualization and equated with the whole of religion. “With the Hebrews, as with the whole ancient world,” he acknowledges, “sacrifice constituted the main part of worship.” *Ibid.*, 52. He goes on to say of the prophets in particular, “It is true that in their polemic against confounding worship with religion they reveal the fact that in their day the cultus was carried on with the utmost zeal and splendor, and was held in the highest estimation. But this estimation does not rest upon the opinion that the cultus, as regards its matter, goes back to Moses or to Jehovah Himself, gives to the theocracy its distinctive character, and even constitutes the supernatural priesthood of Israel among the nations, but simply upon the belief that Jehovah must be honoured by His dependents, just as other gods are by their subjects, by means of offerings and gifts as being the natural and (like prayer) universally current expressions of religious homage.” *Ibid.*, 56. Scholars who reject Wellhausen’s schema by objecting that the prophets could not possibly have imagined religion without sacrifice have therefore set up a straw man; see, e.g., Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, rev. and enl. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 80–81. Wellhausen’s actual argument is not that the prophets rejected sacrifice but that they rejected *cult*—the type of organized, ritualized sacrifice that P envisions.

have taken up the latter. As part of his systematic refutation of *lex post prophetas*, Yehezkel Kaufmann enthusiastically affirmed the moral sublimity of the prophetic critique of the cult while emphasizing that it “established [only] a hierarchy of value; both cult and morality are God’s command and part of his covenant[,] ... but while the cult is sacred only as a symbol, morality is essentially godlike.”¹⁴ Most challenges to Wellhausen’s strict opposition of subversive prophet and institutionalized cult have taken basically this form, regardless of where they come down on the relative chronology of the prophetic literature and the Pentateuch.¹⁵ Blenkinsopp has argued that the prophets were opposed not to the cult itself but rather to its

¹⁴ Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, trans. Moshe Greenberg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 357; cf. *ibid.*, 345.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Bryan D. Bibb, “The Prophetic Critique of Ritual in Old Testament Theology,” in *The Priests in the Prophets: The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets*, eds. Lester L. Grabbe and Alice Ogden Bellis, JSOTSup 408 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 31–43; Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy*, 80–81; Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, trans. John McHugh, The Biblical Resource Series (1961; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 454–56; Bohdan Hrobon, *Ethical Dimension of Cult in the Book of Isaiah*, BZAW 418 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010); Edmond Jacob, “The Biblical Prophets: Revolutionaries or Conservatives?” *Int* 19 (1965): 53; Otto Kaiser, “Kult und Kultkritik im Alten Testament,” in *Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf: Studien zum alten Testament und zum alten Orient; Festschrift für Oswald Loretz zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres*, eds. Manfred Dietrich and Ingo Kottsieper (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1998), 401–26; Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, 76–100; Klaus Koch, *The Prophets*, vol. 1, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 50–56, 116–17; Walter Kornfeld, “Die Gesellschafts- und Kultkritik alttestamentlicher Propheten,” in *Leiturgia, Koinonia, Diakonia: Festschrift für Kardinal Franz König zum 75. Geburtstag*, ed. Raphael Schulte (Vienna: Herder, 1980), 181–200; Theresa V. Lafferty, *The Prophetic Critique of the Priority of the Cult: A Study of Amos 5:21–24 and Isaiah 1:10–17* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2012); C. Lattey, “The Prophets and Sacrifice: A Study in Biblical Relativity,” *JTS* 42 (1941): 155–65; Baruch A. Levine, “An Essay on Prophetic Attitudes toward Temple and Cult in Biblical Israel,” in *Minḥah Le-Naḥum: Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum M. Sarna in Honour of His 70th Birthday*, eds. Marc Brettler and Michael Fishbane, JSOTSup 154 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 202–25; Ernest C. Lucas, “Sacrifice in the Prophets,” in *Sacrifice in the Bible*, eds. Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 59–74; Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, LAI (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 130, 188–89; Harry M. Orlinsky, *Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1960), 122–44; H. H. Rowley, “Ritual and the Hebrew Prophets,” *JSS* 1 (1956): 338–60; Gene M. Tucker, “The Law in the Eighth-Century Prophets,” in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, eds. Gene M. Tucker, David L. Petersen, and Robert R. Wilson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 208–209; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1965), 4; Moshe Weinfeld, “Ancient Near Eastern Patterns in Prophetic Literature,” *VT* 27 (1977): 189–93; and Ziony Zevit, “The Prophet versus Priest Antagonism Hypothesis: Its History and Origin,” in *The Priests in the Prophets: The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets*, eds. Lester L. Grabbe and Alice Ogden Bellis, JSOTSup 408 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 189–217.

implication in the economic disenfranchisement of non-elites.¹⁶ He proposes a more complex, even quasi-collaborative relationship between subversive prophecy and cultic establishment, situating the deuteronomic reform as nothing less than a concessional effort to implement the prophetic critique as a concrete matter of policy.¹⁷ Recently, Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer has argued for similarly complex dynamics in the early Second Temple period, calling attention to the postexilic persistence of subversive prophecy in ways that the Wellhausen schema effaces.¹⁸

Against this widespread tendency to nuance Wellhausen's sharp dichotomy of prophet and cult, however, many scholars have doubled down on it. Johannes Lindblom and Adolphe Lods credited the eighth-century prophets with denying the efficacy of ritual itself.¹⁹ Later, William McKane argued that softening the prophetic challenge to the cult amounts to a misleading and surreptitious attempt to domesticate them. "The prophet's searing truthfulness and dismissal of surface appearances," he stressed, "is so uncompromising and highly individual that it cannot receive an institutional expression."²⁰ Paul D. Hanson made the same point through a contrast with early postexilic prophets like Haggai and Zechariah, whom he harshly accused of "giving up the independent stance always maintained by the classical prophets vis à vis the institutions of the temple and royal court," i.e., "giving up the revolutionary element which was

¹⁶ Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy*, 80–82, 93–94.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 115–21.

¹⁸ Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, *Priestly Rites and Prophetic Rage: Post-Exilic Prophetic Critique of the Priesthood*, FAT 2/19 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006).

¹⁹ Johannes Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (1962; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 351–56; and Adolphe Lods, *The Prophets and the Rise of Judaism*, trans. S. H. Hooke, *The History of Civilization* (1937; repr., London: Routledge, 1955), 68.

²⁰ William McKane, "Prophet and Institution," *ZAW* 94 (1982): 265; cf., more recently, Terry Fenton, "Israelite Prophecy: Characteristics of the First Protest Movement," in *The Elusive Prophet: The Prophet as Historical Person, Literary Character and Anonymous Artist*, ed. Johannes C. de Moor (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 129–41.

always an essential ingredient of genuine prophecy.”²¹ In one essay, Barton was especially forthcoming in wondering whether the conciliatory reading is not more problematically tendentious than the one that it attempts to soften. Arguing in favor of dichotomous opposition, he chided, “I do not think the fact that [scholars like Wellhausen] were liberal Protestants, who were therefore happy to find their own ideas about the character of true religion endorsed by the prophets, vitiates the essential truth of their perception.”²²

1.1.1.2. The Sociological-Comparative Paradigm

The sociological-comparative approach to prophecy focuses on how prophets brokered authority between different social groups. If the historical-ideational paradigm reflects a vertical and often developmentalist framework, then this paradigm is more lateral, focusing on the dynamics of societal organization across multiple cultures. It originated with Weber, who, like Wellhausen, ascribed special importance to subversive prophetic speech. He located the very essence of the prophet in his destabilizing relationship to institutional authority: “The personal call is the decisive element distinguishing the prophet from the priest. The latter lays claim to authority by virtue of his service in a sacred tradition, while the prophet’s claim is based on personal revelation and charisma.”²³ The prophet’s critique of the cult corresponds directly to this tension, challenging the routinized ritual demands of the tradition with the more dynamic social demands

²¹ Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (1975; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 247.

²² John Barton, “The Prophets and the Cult,” in *Temple and Worship in Biblical Israel*, ed. John Day (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 121.

²³ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff (1963; repr., Boston: Beacon, 1993), 46.

of explosive charisma.²⁴ As such, “the holders of established power faced these powerful demagogues with fear, wrath, or indifference as the situation warranted.”²⁵ Yet at the same time, the prophets also attracted supporters.²⁶ By situating them at the intersection of different (and often competing) social groups operating in the public sphere, Weber drew attention to the fact that subversive prophecy was “objectively political.”²⁷

In these ways, Weber set the terms for scholarly interest in the “social location” of Israelite prophecy, as Peter L. Berger put it in one programmatic essay.²⁸ The goal of such inquiry is to reconstruct how the prophetic type *as such*, rather than any individual prophetic personality, usually functioned (and was *expected* to function) in ancient Israelite society. The most influential study on this issue is certainly Robert R. Wilson’s *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, which positions “intermediation”—ostensibly between humanity and divinity but actually between domains of social power—as the prophet’s fundamental function.²⁹ Subversive prophetic speech comes to the fore in Wilson’s distinction between central intermediaries, who operate within institutional power structures, and peripheral intermediaries, who challenge them from without.³⁰ Unsurprisingly, Wilson categorizes a majority of the biblical prophets as

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁵ *Idem*, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (New York: The Free Press, 1952), 271.

²⁶ *Idem*, *Sociology of Religion*, 60.

²⁷ *Idem*, *Ancient Judaism*, 275.

²⁸ Peter L. Berger, “Charisma and Religious Innovation: The Social Location of Israelite Prophecy,” *American Sociological Review* 28 (1963): 940–50; cf. Burke O. Long, “Prophetic Authority as Social Reality,” in *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology*, eds. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 3–20.

²⁹ Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), esp. 27–88.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, esp. 69–86.

peripheral intermediaries, although he acknowledges that some (e.g., Isaiah) are not easily accommodated by either label.³¹ His analysis of Jeremiah's subversive activity is illustrative:

The anthropological evidence indicates that central intermediaries tend to favor carefully controlled changes that maintain the stability of the social order and preserve the society's continuity with traditional religious, political, and social views. Deuteronomists who had become part of the establishment would thus have become increasingly annoyed at Jeremiah's prophecies and may have felt that his sharply worded oracles would alienate members of the establishment who supported Josiah's continuing reforms.³²

Attention to social function shows that the prophets were not subversive simply because they advocated change. After all, Israel had other changemakers too. Rather, they were subversive because of *how* they advocated that change: withering, uncompromising rhetoric posed from the ultimate outsider status of the divinely appointed individual.

Subsequent scholars have built on these approaches in a variety of ways. Rodney R. Hutton has problematized the central-peripheral dichotomy: "The 'disruptive' function of the prophet is not something that stands over against antithetical social configurations[.] ... The prophet represents not a shattering of the social consensus from the outside in, but rather a stretching of that consensus to its limits from the inside out."³³ In a pair of incisive essays, Ronald S. Hendel has drawn on Mary Douglas's sociological account of ritual in order to plead for recognition that the subversive prophets "meant what they said and wrote, even if the implications were novel or radical at the time. We should not domesticate prophetic speech to suit our modern ecumenical tastes. They were ... religious radicals and eccentrics."³⁴ Finally, in

³¹ Ibid., 272–73.

³² Ibid., 243.

³³ Rodney R. Hutton, *Charisma and Authority in Israelite Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 136.

³⁴ Ronald S. Hendel, "Away from Ritual: The Prophetic Critique," in *Social Theory and the Study of Israelite Religion: Essays in Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Saul M. Olyan, RBS 71 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 78; cf. idem, "Prophets, Priests, and the Efficacy of Ritual," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, eds. David P. Wright,

a return to Weber’s “political” construal of prophetic activity, Walzer has offered an important consideration of subversive prophetic speech from the perspective of political theory: “The prophets were social critics, perhaps the first social critics in the record history of the West.”³⁵

So much for what makes this paradigm “sociological”—but what makes it “comparative” as well? For Weber, social roles were ideal types with particular manifestations not only within cultures but also across them. His project is therefore relentlessly comparative, cutting across the Bible, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, and numerous others. While his heirs have been significantly less cavalier in their comparisons, they still make rich and productive use of comparative data—from both contemporary anthropology (especially relating to spirit possession) and the ancient Near East (especially Mesopotamia)—in order to calibrate their definitions of the prophetic social type. Wilson’s study, for instance, begins with over one-hundred pages of comparative groundwork before he turns to the biblical prophetic texts.³⁶

However, the unquestionable doyen of this comparative enterprise is Martti Nissinen, whose recent, magisterial study, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives*, synthesizes and builds upon several decades of field-defining work in the

David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 185–98. Although I have categorized Hendel’s approach as sociological-comparative, it will be noted that his question about the extent of the prophetic critique of the cult has generally fallen under the purview of the historical-ideational scholarship discussed above. Indeed, despite Hendel’s patent sociological-comparative thrust, some aspects of his approach—especially his close philological and literary analysis of specific prophetic texts—are more typical of the historical-ideational paradigm. In these ways, Hendel clearly shows that, ultimately, these categories are heuristic. While they are helpful for characterizing trends in the scholarship, they should not be pressed too far.

³⁵ Walzer, *In God’s Shadow*, 86; cf. idem, “Prophetic Criticism and Its Targets,” in *The Jewish Political Tradition*, vol. 1, eds. Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum, Noam J. Zohar, and Yair Lorberbaum (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 217–19.

³⁶ Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 21–134.

comparative study of ancient Near Eastern prophecy.³⁷ Nissinen positions both biblical and extrabiblical prophecy along the typological continuum of divination as a whole, endeavoring “to create a somewhat coherent picture of prophetic divination in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean by way of comparing the scattered and disparate source materials.”³⁸ This picture includes a subversive dimension. Nissinen draws attention to texts from both Old Babylonian Mari and Neo-Assyrian Nineveh that depict prophets issuing moral and cultic rebukes to kings.³⁹ He concludes that even if subversive speech characterizes the biblical prophets—which he indeed questions—it does not, in any case, set them apart from their extrabiblical counterparts.⁴⁰

1.1.1.3. Limitations of the Prevailing Paradigms

The historical-ideational and sociological-comparative paradigms have facilitated undeniable contributions to the scholarly understanding of biblical prophecy. However, their accounts of subversive prophetic speech in particular have each proven surprisingly limited. Historical-ideational scholarship, for its part, has often posited historical accounts of subversive prophecy that do more to *raise* the question of its canonical authorization than to *address* it. This confusion can be seen already in Wellhausen, whose reconstruction of cultic ascendancy offers no explanation for why the Priestly canon has preserved pre-cultic prophecy in such a way as to facilitate his reconstruction in the first place. Many subsequent historical-ideational accounts

³⁷ Martti Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy: Near Eastern, Biblical, and Greek Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Nissinen’s collected essays were recently published as idem, *Prophetic Divination: Essays in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy*, BZAW 494 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019).

³⁸ Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 43–44.

³⁹ Ibid., 82–83, 211–13, 220–23, 270–75.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 261.

replicate some form of this problem. This approach has also struggled with the very rhetorical ambiguity that it aims to address. A sufficiently passionate indictment of a corrupt priesthood might well sound exactly like a fundamental rejection of the cult itself. How can we reliably and responsibly distinguish the two? As Meir Weiss has pointed out, there is reason to worry that “the differences of opinion are mere reflections of the critic’s theological or philosophical outlook, or of methodological assumptions that advance preconceived conclusions.”⁴¹

Meanwhile, the sociological-comparative approach has suffered from the lack of an adequate comparandum. To be sure, it has broadly succeeded in challenging the idea that biblical prophecy is radically discontinuous with other divinatory phenomena. However, as we will discuss in greater detail in the following chapter, it has found nothing quite resembling, in either quality or quantity, the subversive prophetic speech that the Bible features so prominently. Nissinen has reasonably suggested that the relative absence of subversive prophecy in the Neo-Assyrian archives is the inevitable result of the fact that they were curated under royal auspices.⁴² Yet if he is correct, this only makes the preservation and promotion of subversive prophecy in the Bible even more surprising, given that, as discussed above, the scribal curation of the biblical prophetic literature was *also* likely connected with state and cultic power!

Despite the divergences between the historical-ideational and sociological-comparative paradigms, their shortcomings with respect to subversive prophetic speech can be traced to a central dimension of their shared historical-critical orientation. Both are fundamentally concerned with recovering some aspect of the putative historical world *behind* the text. Both

⁴¹ Meir Weiss, “Concerning Amos’ Repudiation of the Cult,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, eds. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 213.

⁴² Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 275.

largely remain rooted in a similar construal of the text as an imperfect, tantalizing reflection of the world that produced it. In this way, the “prophetic problem” as I have defined it with reference to Blenkinsopp—the canonical authorization of prophets who challenge authority—rests on yet a deeper “prophetic problem”: Who really were the prophets—whether as individuals, groups, or social types—and what did they say? Such an approach to subversive prophetic speech fixates on the modifier “subversive” while neglecting a crucial aspect of the modified “speech”: this speech is spoken by characters within a highly developed literary world of signification—a world that is surely grounded in, but not reducible to, the historical or sociological worlds in which it was written and which it claims to depict. Subversive prophetic speech is not simply represented. It is *constructed*.

1.1.2. The Thesis of this Study

A fuller understanding of subversive prophetic speech necessitates reorienting the discussion toward how, and to what ends, this speech is literarily constructed. This means learning to ask new, unfamiliar questions of old, familiar issues. In order to do so, this dissertation enlists the help of another ancient literary character—one whose name is synonymous with asking just these sorts of questions: Socrates, as he is presented in Plato’s dialogues. Consider his most famous account of his philosophical activity, which he offers defiantly at his trial:

Indeed, men of Athens, I am far from making a defense now on my own behalf, as might be thought, but on yours, to prevent you from wrongdoing by mistreating the god’s gift to you (τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δόσιν ὑμῖν) by condemning me; for if you kill me you will not easily find another like me. I was attached to this city by the god (ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ)—though it seems a ridiculous thing to say—as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up (ἐγείρεσθαι) by a kind of gadfly (μύωπος τινος). It is to fulfill some such function that I believe the god has placed me in the city (οἷον δὴ μοι δοκεῖ ὁ θεὸς ἐμὲ τῇ πόλει προστεθηκέναι). I never cease to rouse (ἐγείρων) each and every one of you, to persuade (πειθων) and reproach (ὀνειδίζων) you all day long and everywhere I find myself in your company. (*Ap.* 30d–e)

Now compare this with what is perhaps the most famous account that a subversive biblical prophet gives of his own prophetic activity:

Amaziah, priest of Bethel, sent word to Jeroboam, king of Israel, saying, “Amos has conspired (קָשָׁר) against you among the House of Israel; the land cannot handle all of his words. For thus says Amos: ‘By the sword shall Jeroboam die, and Israel shall be exiled from their land.’” Then Amaziah said to Amos, “You seer (חֹזֶה), go away! Run off to the land of Judah! Make a living there; prophesy (תְּנַבֵּא) there. Just don’t keep prophesying (לְהִנְבֵּא) in Bethel—for it is the king’s sanctuary, the royal house!” Amos answered and said to Amaziah, “I am not a prophet; nor am I prophet’s disciple (לֹא-נְבִיא אֶנְכִי וְלֹא בֶן-נְבִיא אֶנְכִי). Rather, I herd cattle; I pick figs. But YHWH took me away (וַיִּקְחֵנִי) from the flock and said to me, ‘Go prophesy (תְּנַבֵּא) to my people Israel.’ So listen up now to the word of YHWH. You say, ‘Don’t prophesy (תִּנְבֵּא) against Israel; don’t spout (תִּטְטֵף) against the House of Isaac.’ And yet just thus says YHWH: ‘Your wife shall be a harlot in the city, your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be divided up with a cord. And you—upon impure land shall you die, and Israel shall be exiled from their land.’” (Am 7:10–17)

Like Socrates, Amos functions here as a “gadfly.”⁴³ Both are divinely appointed to issue fundamental challenges to their respective societies, compelled by an overwhelming commitment to a higher ideal and unwilling to be silent even in the face of bodily harm. Moreover, both do so at historical moments of political upheaval, when such challenges likely would have been especially destabilizing.⁴⁴

From these examples, it is clear that Socrates’s philosophical challenges to Athens bear formal and discursive similarities to the subversive prophets’ theological challenges to Israel. No

⁴³ On the confrontation with Amaziah as a narrative expression of prophetic subversiveness throughout the book of Amos, see Shalom Spiegel, “Amos vs. Amaziah,” in *The Jewish Expression*, ed. Judah Goldin (New York: Bantam, 1970), 38–65.

⁴⁴ The Latter Prophets unfold against the backdrop of imperial domination, opening with the Neo-Assyrian threat and spanning the trauma of the Babylonian exile and tumult of restoration under Persia. For a classic account of the connection between the rise of literary prophecy and the Neo-Assyrian crisis, see John S. Holladay Jr., “Assyrian Statecraft and the Prophets of Israel,” *HTR* 63 (1970): 29–51. Meanwhile, amid Socrates’s activity at the turn of the fourth century BCE, Athens was reeling from its defeat in the Peloponnesian War. On how this impacted Socrates’s reception by his contemporaries, see, e.g., Kenneth Seeskin, *Dialogue and Discovery: A Study in Socratic Method* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 75–77

wonder that Blenkinsopp's aforementioned description of the prophets—"dissident intellectuals" who "collaborated at some level of conscious intent in the emergence of a coherent vision of a moral universe over against current assumptions cherished and propagated by the contemporary state apparatus"—could easily be mistaken for a description of Socrates. This alone would be enough to recommend greater attention to Plato within the study of subversive biblical prophecy.⁴⁵ However, what makes subversive Socratic speech doubly relevant is the literary medium through which we encounter it. Plato did not challenge Athenians' fundamental conceptions of justice, piety, courage, or love by writing treatises or lectures; he is not a disembodied voice addressing anonymous readers with abstract ideas. Rather, he depicted Socrates himself issuing these challenges in the course of his life while talking to particular individuals with names, personalities, and biographies. As a writer of dramatic *dialogues*, Plato vividly thematizes the spoken and embodied dimensions of subversive speech. In fact, he makes these dimensions constitutive of Socratic philosophizing, which, as we shall see, is essentially dialogical. The Socrates whom we know as a gadfly—indeed, as a philosopher at all—is first and foremost a character within a literary world.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The similarities have generally been acknowledged only in passing and apart from the study of biblical prophecy itself; see, e.g., Jacob Howland, *Plato and the Talmud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 105–31; Seeskin, *Dialogue and Discovery*, 150; and Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections," in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green, SUNY Series in the Jewish Writings of Leo Strauss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 398–404. Scholarship on comparative ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean prophecy has occasionally invoked Plato's numerous comments on divination; see, e.g., Anselm C. Hagedorn, "Looking at Foreigners in Biblical and Greek Prophecy," *VT* 57 (2007): 432–48; Armin Lange, "Literary Prophecy and Oracle Collection: A Comparison Between Judah and Greece in Persian Times," in *Prophets, Prophecy, and Prophetic Texts in Second Temple Judaism*, eds. Michael H. Floyd and Robert D. Haak, LHBOTS 427 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 249–75; and Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*. However, such work has generally paid little attention to Plato's central task of presenting Socrates as a dramatic model of the philosophical life.

⁴⁶ Cf. Charles H. Kahn, "Did Plato Write Socratic Dialogues?" *CIQ* 31 (1981): 319.

This dynamic should sound familiar, for it is precisely the issue at the heart of the prophetic problem. The effort to excavate the prophets from their literary setting has a striking intellectual-historical analogue in the “Socratic problem” that once vexed Plato scholars: How much of what Socrates says, does, and thinks in Plato’s dialogues may be attributed to the historical Socrates versus Plato’s own literary creation? Eventually, however, scholars rejected the very premise of the question by reconceptualizing Plato’s dialogues—even his allegedly early, “Socratic” ones—as constructive works of philosophical literature rather than efforts to give a stenographic report of a historical individual’s life. If this is so, then *everything* Socrates says and does in Plato’s dialogues is, to a certain extent, Plato’s own literary creation. Like the biblical prophets, Socrates generates a disjunction of experience between dramatic contemporaries and later readers: he disturbs those he confronts *in* the text and fascinates us whom he confronts *as* text. Yet whereas biblical scholars have tended to view this disjunction as a historical riddle to be solved, Plato scholars have turned their attention to the literary process that mediates it. Doing so has allowed them to ask new, productive questions about how Socrates’s subversive speech plays a constructive role within Plato’s literary effort to model a new vision of philosophy over against prevailing cultural pretenses to authority.

In this way, Plato’s subversive Socrates is more than an ancient comparandum for subversive prophetic speech. He provides a new way of approaching what this speech is: a literary configuration of the relationship between gods and gadflies—between the putative sources of authority and those who appear to challenge them. This does not mean denying that it is a window onto various historical or sociological issues. Rather, it means taking interest in the very window itself as a historical datum worthy of critical analysis. If subversive prophetic speech is a “historical and theological problem,” as Blenkinsopp put it, then the *literary*

construction of subversive prophetic speech is a record of how biblical writers *theorized* this problem. This approach follows Bruce Lincoln in “treat[ing] authority as an aspect of discourse and [being] more attentive to its labile dynamics than to its institutional incarnations.”⁴⁷

Understood this way, the prophetic literature is already working through—and providing guidance *for* working through—the problematics of authority that subversive prophecy raises.

The question is no longer, “Why does the Hebrew Bible tell us about the subversive prophets?” but rather, “What is the Hebrew Bible trying to tell us by telling us about the subversive prophets?” Answering this question is the goal of this dissertation.

1.2. Approach

Within biblical studies, the dominant paradigm of historical criticism has long been defined by its construal of the text as a tantalizingly, frustratingly imperfect reflection of history—whether the history it depicts, the history attending to its composition, or the history of its own literary development.⁴⁸ On this view, the Bible encodes meaning in much the same way that Heraclitus famously characterized the Delphic oracle: it “neither speaks [plainly] nor obscures but signals (οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει).” Appropriately enough for a study of ancient prophecy, historical criticism may be compared to the divinatory attempt to hear the deeper meaning behind what at first seems clear. Jon D. Levenson has made the same point with a different analogy: “historical criticism ... resembles psychoanalysis. It brings to light what has been repressed and even forgotten, the childhood, as it were, of the tradition. ... [It] uncovers old conflicts and

⁴⁷ Bruce Lincoln, *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.

⁴⁸ On the multiple senses of “history” in historical criticism, see John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 33–44; and David J. A. Clines, “Historical Criticism: Are Its Days Numbered?” *Teologinen Aikakauskirja* 114 (2009): 542.

dissolves the impression that they have been resolved rather than repressed.”⁴⁹ What biblical texts ostensibly “say” on the surface can never truly be what they “mean,” since their claims belie the deep substructure of their historical development—and have, perhaps, been unconsciously formed in opposition to that substructure. As a textual psychoanalyst, the historical critic pushes past what biblical texts claim to say.

The historical-ideational and sociological-comparative approaches to subversive prophecy are both reflexes of the deeper epistemological orientation of historical criticism. Take once again Amos’s declaration, “I hate, I abhor your festivals!” A scholar working in the historical-ideational paradigm might ask of this rebuke: Was it uttered by the historical Amos of Tekoa? What economic situation prompted it at a particular time in Israelite history? Meanwhile, a sociological-comparative approach might ask: What kind of social support would have allowed a prophet to utter such a rebuke? What does it reveal about the relations between prophets and other social groups? While these sets of questions seek to reconstruct different kinds of information, they share a basic reconstructive impulse in the first place. Both inquire as to how Amos’s declaration “signals” indirectly regarding the history it depicts and reflects.

This epistemological premise enjoyed virtually universal acceptance in biblical studies in the twentieth century, and it continues to frame much of the field. However, the past several decades have also witnessed a pronounced and often hostile turn away from this mode of historical criticism. As postmodern literary theories took root throughout the humanities, many came to see the pretense of recovering an objective history that lies behind the text as at best a

⁴⁹ Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 4.

delusion, at worst a sinister hegemonic imposition.⁵⁰ Already in 1980, Leander E. Keck observed, “Somewhat to the surprise of its practitioners, the historical-critical method is on the defensive today, pressured this time not from the theological right wing only but also from the critical ‘left.’”⁵¹ Today, historical criticism is one of those things, like God or democracy, that people are constantly proclaiming dead. Ascendant approaches tend to emphasize synchronic finality over diachronic development and, perhaps more importantly, the positional subjectivity of the interpreter over the historical objectivity of the text. Put in terms of our example from Amos, such approaches to subversive prophetic speech might ask: How is the meaning of Amos’s rebuke configured differently from readerly positions of power versus marginalization? How might it contribute to contemporary struggles for justice?

To the extent that, as mentioned above, this dissertation is premised upon a critique of the regnant historical-critical epistemology, it might justifiably give the impression that my approach is part of the broad turn away from historical criticism in recent decades. Mindful of this, I am sympathetic with the spirit of Hannah Arendt’s declaration at the opening of the pivotal third chapter of *The Human Condition*: “In the following chapter, Karl Marx will be criticized. This is unfortunate at a time when so many writers who once made their living by explicit or tacit borrowing from the great wealth of Marxian ideas and insights have decided to become

⁵⁰ For overviews, see John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, rev. and enl. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 104–236; Robert P. Carroll, “Poststructuralist Approaches: New Historicism and Postmodernism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 50–66; and Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, “Mastering the Tools or Retooling the Masters? The Legacy of Historical-Critical Discourse,” in *Her Master’s Tools? Feminist and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse*, eds. Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner, GPBS 9 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 1–29.

⁵¹ Leander E. Keck, “Will the Historical-Critical Method Survive? Some Observations,” in *Orientation by Disorientation: Studies in Literary Criticism and Biblical Literary Criticism, Presented in Honor of William A. Beardslee*, ed. Richard A. Spencer (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980), 115.

professional anti-Marxists.”⁵² The bifurcation of biblical studies between approaches that either exclusively privilege or utterly dismiss the recovery of the history behind the text has left little room for serious contention with the claims of biblical texts themselves as legitimate objects of historical inquiry. A fuller understanding of subversive prophetic speech demands that it be reconceived as an account to be understood rather than an enigma to be resolved, but this need not—and, I would urge, *must* not—entail an abdication of historical criticism.

Just this sort of approach constitutes the intellectual achievement of the “literary turn” in Plato studies. On the one hand, many Plato scholars have shifted their focus away from the Socrates of the historically objective world and toward the Socrates of Plato’s literarily constructed world. On the other hand—and this is the crucial part—they have *not* thereby renounced an orienting concern with history altogether. As Rachana Kamtekar has explained,

Historians of philosophy aim to understand what historical philosophers thought about various topics of philosophical interest, and why they thought these things[.] ... One must reconstruct the intellectual context in which Plato has his characters say what they say, including assumptions that we would not accept.⁵³

That the subject matter is to be understood in full accord with the philological and cultural constraints of its historical context remains axiomatic. In other words, this approach is still historical-critical. What has changed is the focus: not the putative historical referent behind Plato’s literary claims but rather the substance and literary strategies of the claims themselves.

What might such an approach to our example from Amos look like? It would take up the dimension in which, contra Heraclitus, Amos’s claim *does* “speak plainly”: inasmuch as it *is*

⁵² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 79.

⁵³ Rachana Kamtekar, *Plato’s Moral Psychology: Intellectualism, the Divided Soul, and the Desire for Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 6–7; cf. David Wolfsdorf, *Trials of Reason: Plato and the Crafting of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.

advancing a claim in the first place—a claim about YHWH, cult, and justice, and how all of these figure into prophecy. This claim was made in history, and the philological and cultural realities attending to this history must constrain our understanding of the claim being made. To the extent that such a reading requires judgments about the history of composition, it still involves a degree of “recovery.” However, in this case, the aim is not to recover the history to which the claim may or may not signal. Even if no one named Amos of Tekoa ever said this—and indeed, even if Israelite prophets did not say such things at all—an ancient writer *did* claim as much, thereby constructing an idea of prophecy. A recalibrated historical criticism takes such constructions seriously as historical data even if they do not correspond to any historical persona or event. The purpose of the following subsections is to provide a more robust theoretical and methodological framework for such a recalibration.

1.2.1. Native Theories

Philosophy, at least as it has generally been conceptualized in the Western academy, involves the explicit assertion of argument-based claims. To the extent that Plato is studied as a philosopher, then, the very character of philosophy encourages (or, at a minimum, facilitates) the turn in Plato scholarship away from the putative history behind Plato’s claims about Socrates and toward the substance of the claims themselves. The Hebrew Bible does not share this generic disposition toward propositional claims. What Levenson has observed about the historical prologue to the covenant is characteristic of most biblical literature, including prophecy: “Israel does not begin with the statement that YHWH is faithful; she infers it from a *story*.”⁵⁴ Therefore, if recent

⁵⁴ Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, New Voices in Biblical Studies (1985; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 39.

approaches to Plato's Socrates are to guide our inquiry into biblical claims about subversive prophetic speech, we require a more developed theoretical account of what it means to read non-propositional ancient literature for the claims that it makes.

In her recent work on biblical poetry, Jacqueline Vayntrub has offered just such an account in terms of what she calls "native theories." "All literature," she explains, "emerges out of a tradition and implicitly some theory of its existence, though this native theory may not present itself in the texts in the manner to which we are accustomed."⁵⁵ Vayntrub contends with the venerable scholarly effort to ground the essence of biblical poetry (and ancient poetry more generally) in a still more ancient culture of oral transmission—of which the Bible as we know it offers only the faintest echo. The quasi-psychoanalytic impulse in historical criticism is on vivid display here, most obviously when the Romantic critics spoke explicitly of the oral substratum as the "childhood" of civilization.⁵⁶ Over several centuries of biblical scholarship, "orality has become a catch-all scholarly category for a set of reconstructed ancient cultural practices,"⁵⁷ and even as the field has undergone some seismic changes, there remains a "basic, unchallenged assumption that poetry begins life as something that someone spoke somewhere."⁵⁸

Without necessarily denying the idea of oral origins, Vayntrub calls for a different orientation toward the evidence that furnishes the search for orality in the first place:

The very way in which biblical poetry is presented—its framing as specific types of character speech—shapes our reading of the texts. This is not a view of orality as an *earlier stage* of the received written text which was composed, performed, and transmitted by speakers. Instead, this is a view of orality as a *literary trope* in the written

⁵⁵ Jacqueline Vayntrub, "Proverbs and the Limits of Poetry" (PhD diss., The University of Chicago, 2015), 351; cf. idem, *Beyond Orality: Biblical Poetry on Its Own Terms*, The Ancient Word (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 220.

⁵⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 1–2, 45–55.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

texts, a perspective that attends to how characters and speakers perform certain kinds of speech in the written text.⁵⁹

As a matter of course, dominant historical-critical approaches to biblical poetry question the ascription and perhaps the specific content of poetic texts; Lamech's song, for instance, was, on such a view, uttered neither by a historical figure named Lamech nor in the precise wording preserved in Genesis. However, the very connection between oral recitation and poetry is instinctively understood as a historical kernel of the development of Israelite literary culture. By contrast, Vayntrub urges us to recognize this connection as a *claim* that the Bible itself implicitly asserts; it *wants* its readers to understand poetic recitation in a particular way. In effect, Vayntrub takes dominant modes of historical criticism to task for being insufficiently critical: "perhaps," she wonders, "this approach does not go *far enough* in its interrogation of all the claims the biblical authors make."⁶⁰ Although the Bible does not theorize poetry in the explicit manner in which, as we will see later, Plato does, its presentation of poetic texts encodes theories about what poetry is, who recites it, when it is/was recited, and what types of information it communicates. The term "native theories" expresses this implicit mode of expression: they are native to the literary presentation itself.

The notion of native theories offers an umbrella under which to gather a body of scholarship that, despite tremendous diversity in subject matter and methodology, shares a discernible interest in the claims advanced by non-propositional ancient texts. For instance, Julia Kindt opens her study of Delphic narratives with a resolution to approach these narratives as

what they are: accounts of prediction and fulfillment that reveal something interesting and meaningful about those human beings who are trying to "make sense" of the world with the help of the gods. What I propose is a change in focus: rather than asking whether

⁵⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 11

a certain response was really delivered at Delphi in the form it came down to us, I suggest we ask how a particular author, writing at a particular point in time and for a particular purpose, told Delphic oracle stories within his work. Rather than test these narratives for a factual authenticity they never claimed to have, we should examine the way in which these sources present the success or failure of human efforts to interpret them. Rather than speculate about who invented a particular response and for what reason, we may want to enquire into the world view and outlook contained in these responses and the narratives that surround them.⁶¹

Lisa Maurizio has similarly stressed that because Delphic narratives “are not amenable to analyses which seek to determine their authenticity,” we ought to “consider seriously the religious beliefs that informed their transmission and determined the inclusion, omission or ‘fabrication’ of details.”⁶² In a groundbreaking study of Mesopotamian scribal culture, Marc Van De Mieroop has shown that the seemingly pedantic cuneiform lexical lists in fact constituted “a scientific activity intended to foster understanding of the world” and to give “structure to reality.”⁶³ Eva Mroczek’s work on Second Temple literature takes an approach that she describes as “immanent, focusing on native literary theories—what we can decode from the texts themselves about how their elite producers understood their own literary world.”⁶⁴ Olivia Stewart Lester has shown how Revelation and Sibylline Oracles 4–5 “construct their own viewpoints as true prophecy,” evincing a “shared rhetorical tendency obscured by later religious and canonical boundaries.”⁶⁵ Reed Carlson’s recent Harvard dissertation draws on comparative

⁶¹ Julia Kindt, *Revisiting Delphi: Religion and Storytelling in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge Classical Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 10.

⁶² Lisa Maurizio, “Delphic Oracles as Oral Performances: Authenticity and Historical Evidence,” *CIAnt* 16 (1997): 312.

⁶³ Marc Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy before the Greeks: The Pursuit of Truth in Ancient Babylonia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 41.

⁶⁴ Eva Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5; cf. *ibid.*, 143–44.

⁶⁵ Olivia Stewart Lester, *Prophetic Rivalry, Gender, and Economics: A Study in Revelation and Sibylline Oracles 4–5*, WUNT 2/466 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 1, 3.

ethnography in order to dismantle reductionist and scientific accounts of biblical spirit phenomena, instead exploring them as sites for constructing selfhood.⁶⁶

These studies also share an attendant prioritization of literature as *the expression*, rather than simply *a reflection*, of native theories. Vayntrub, for instance, is after native *biblical* theories of poetry, *not* native *Israelite* theories of poetry. In fact, she pointedly contrasts these designations: “the inclusion and configuration of literary categories in a hierarchy or taxonomy are not natural facts of ancient Israelite literary culture, they are specific claims the authors make.”⁶⁷ This bespeaks a crucial aspect of native theories: the domain to which they *are* native, so to speak, is not a culture or a civilization but a body of literature. “Because these [poetic] performances have come to us in writing,” Vayntrub explains, “it is their representation as speech in the text that must be the central point of analysis for the scholar.”⁶⁸ There is no pretense of achieving a synoptic understanding of larger cultural patterns of thought, for the texts themselves—and, in Mroczek’s words, “how their *elite producers* understood their own literary world”—are not merely the starting point for analysis but also its goal.

All of these studies—and others like them—reflect a shift away from reconstructing the history *behind* the text and toward the theories constructed *by* the text. This approach remains critical because it aims to *describe*, not to *inscribe*, the claims of the text. It could well be described as a posture of “critical charity” inasmuch as it assumes that provisionally taking the claims of ancient texts seriously can, perhaps paradoxically, facilitate a more critical engagement

⁶⁶ Reed Carlson, “Possession and Other Spirit Phenomena in Biblical Literature” (Th.D. diss., Harvard Divinity School, 2019).

⁶⁷ Vayntrub, *Beyond Orality*, 5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

with how, and to what ends, they function as claims.⁶⁹ Moreover, this approach remains specifically *historical-critical* because, like recent Plato scholarship, it assumes that the expression of native theories is constrained by the semantic and cultural realities of their historical context. Louis-André Dorion has argued that studying Plato's Socrates as a construct rather than a historical signal marks not a departure from historicity but a productive move toward "a fair historical understanding of the efficiency of different representations of Socrates in the history of philosophy."⁷⁰ In just this way, native theories are, as literarily articulated constructs, no less historical as such, even as they do likely differ from the events, personae, and cultural forms that they employ.

It is within this broad but discernible approach that the present study of prophecy is situated. I am interested in how subversive speech figures into native biblical theories of prophecy. Plato clearly understood Socrates's assumption of the role of gadfly as central to, if not outright constitutive of, the posture of Socratic philosophy. The less explicitly theoretical character of prophetic literature should not prevent a consideration of Socrates's prophetic counterparts in a similar manner. To adapt Kindt's description of her approach to Delphi, I suggest that we ask how a particular author, writing at a particular point in time and for a particular purpose, presented subversive prophecy within his work. Before asking reconstructive

⁶⁹ A vivid example of this "critical charity" may be found in Hindy Najman, *Seconding Sinai: The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism*, JSJSup 77 (Leiden: Brill, 2003). There is perhaps no ancient Jewish claim more fundamentally contested by historical-critical scholarship than that of the Mosaic authorship of certain biblical texts. However, Najman shows that charitable attention to the poetics of Mosaic voicing can facilitate a deeper critical engagement with ancient Jewish concepts of scriptural authority and interpretation. Giving explicit scholarly expression to the implicitly expressed claims of Mosaic authorship is not the same as historically affirming Mosaic authorship itself.

⁷⁰ Louis-André Dorion, "The Rise and Fall of the Socratic Problem," in *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. Donald R. Morrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 21; cf. Charles H. Kahn, "Plato as a Socratic," *Studi italiani di filologia classica* 3/10 (1992): 380–82.

questions about whether, when, and by whom subversive prophetic speech was uttered, we ought to ask how its presentation in the texts encodes a process of theorizing what prophecy is and why subversive speech is such an important part of it.

1.2.2. Literature, History, and Text

Inasmuch as native theories are essentially literary, an approach oriented toward them both entails and necessitates a theory of literature as the creative construction of meaning. Literature so understood is “fictive” in the sense described by Barbara Herrnstein Smith:

When we speak of *mimesis* or representation in an artwork, we recognize that it does not constitute the imitation or reproduction of existing objects or events, but rather the fabrication of fictive objects and events of which there are existing or possible instances or types[.] ... To say that an artist has represented a certain object or event is to say that he has constructed a fictive member of an identifiable class of natural (real) objects or events.⁷¹

“Fictive” is not the same as “fictional”—a distinction that can already be seen in the nuance of their shared Latin ancestor, *ingere*, which means both “fabricate, contrive” and “mold, shape.” “Fictional,” an epistemological designation about how a work of literature relates to history, corresponds to the former meaning; “fictive,” a discursive designation about how a work of literature relates to ideas and values, corresponds to the latter. “To recognize a poem as mimetic [or ‘fictive’] rather than natural discourse, as a verbal artwork rather than an event in nature,” Smith explains, “is to acknowledge it as the product of a human design in accord with certain valued effects.”⁷² Native theories may be recognized as one of these “valued effects.” An

⁷¹ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Poetry as Fiction,” *New Literary History* 2 (1971): 269; cf. Benjamin Harshav’s helpful distinction between “internal field of reference” and “external field of reference” in idem, “Fictionality and Fields of Reference: A Theoretical Framework,” in *Explorations in Poetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1–31.

⁷² Smith, “Poetry as Fiction,” 280.

approach oriented toward them explores how they are encoded in the “human design” of their literary expression, based on the semantic constraints of philology and the cultural and historical contexts of their composition.⁷³ Such an approach therefore constitutes one way of answering F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp’s important call to “rethink historical criticism as a specifically literary method of study and reading.”⁷⁴

Plato’s presentation of Socrates readily accommodates such a conception of literature. Because, as Charles H. Kahn has observed, “Plato is the only major philosopher who is also a supreme literary artist,” any attempt to understand his thought must “do justice to the genius of Plato not only as a thinker but also as a writer.”⁷⁵ The name “Plato” is not like the name “Homer”—not an avatar for a collectivized literary tradition but a real person, an embodied mind. So long as he was esteemed as the highest (even sole) authority on Socrates’s life and thought, his writing was compelling enough to create the illusion of an unobstructed vantage upon conversations that really happened.⁷⁶ However, once scholars like Kahn began to appreciate that his dialogues were part of a broadly attested tradition of “Socratic conversations” (Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι), their “imaginative and essentially fictional” character came into sharper

⁷³ Note the telling similarity between Vayntrub’s approach to orality as a literary trope and Smith’s claim that “a poem is never spoken, not even by the poet himself. It is always re-cited; for whatever its relation to words the poet could have spoken, it has, as a poem, no initial historical occurrence. What the poet composes as a text is not a verbal act but rather a linguistic structure that becomes, through being read or recited, the representation of a verbal act.” *Ibid.*, 273–74. On a “commitment to asking semantic questions” as the defining feature of historical criticism, see Barton, *Biblical Criticism*, 105; cf. *idem*, “Reflections on Literary Criticism,” in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, eds. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards, RBS 56 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 535–36.

⁷⁴ F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Rethinking Historical Criticism,” *BibInt* 7 (1999): 238; cf. Barton, *Biblical Criticism*, 19–20.

⁷⁵ Charles H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue: The Philosophical Use of a Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), xiii.

⁷⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 2–3.

focus.⁷⁷ So understood, Plato’s authorial crafting of his dialogues is clearly fictive discourse—in Smith’s words, “the product of a human design in accord with certain valued effects.”

Prophetic literature—along with biblical, ancient Jewish, and much other ancient literature more generally—differs from Plato’s dialogues with respect both to how it purports to relate to the history it depicts and how it was produced as literature in the first place. These differences mean that if a fictive construal of subversive prophetic speech on the model of recent Plato scholarship is to be cogent, it must be qualified in some important ways. Let us begin with its relationship to history. One might object that such an approach misconstrues the historical claims of prophetic texts. Meir Sternberg, for instance, argued with some insistence that regardless of whether biblical narrative *is* historically accurate and free of creative license, it does *claim to be* those things. Generically, therefore, it is to be classified as history (or historiography).⁷⁸ Inasmuch as a fictive over against a historical construal is nothing less than a stance on how a text encodes meaning at all, might it not risk entirely misconstruing the substance of that meaning?

Another objection on the issue of history is that my approach prematurely forecloses the possibility that these texts *do* make reliable historical reference. Take, for instance, Isaiah’s involvement in Judahite political affairs (Isaiah 7; 36–39; cf. 2 Kings 16; 18–20). These narratives might certainly be fruitfully read for native theories about the relationship between prophets and royal authority, among other things. However, where (and how) does one draw the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 2; cf. *ibid.*, 1–35; and Dorion, “Socratic Problem,” 6–18. Where Kahn says “fictional,” I would say “fictive.”

⁷⁸ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Art of Reading*, ISBL (1985; repr., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), esp. 23–35. Although Sternberg does not consider the Latter Prophets under the mantle of “narrative,” his observations about the generic significance of historical claims do seem applicable to the Latter Prophets inasmuch as they purport to present the words and activities of the prophet.

line between fictive construction and historical representation? In other words, if my approach guards against mistaken ascription of historical reality to fictive construction, might it not, by the same token, risk imputing fabrication to what did in fact happen? Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III have expressed such a concern in their efforts to provide methodological ground for reading the Bible as largely reliable ancient historiography.⁷⁹

These conceptually separate objections—that a fictive construal of prophetic literature mischaracterizes its literary genre and hastily severs any possible link with history—may both be addressed with attention to the conventions of ancient historical writing. While biblical narrative does advance historical claims without explicit claims to literary creativity, this means only that it is not *fictional*; it may yet be *fictive*. In fact, there is good reason to suspect that ancient understandings of historical writing would have assumed a degree of fictiveness inasmuch as telling history was never of mere antiquarian interest but always oriented toward contemporary moral, political, or social import, as Joshua A. Berman has recently emphasized.⁸⁰ Even Thucydides, widely regarded (over against Herodotus) as the first critical historian, famously conceded that he sometimes recorded speeches according to “what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions (ὡς δ’ ἂν ἐδόκουν ἔμοι ἕκαστοι περὶ τῶν αἰεὶ παρόντων τὰ δέοντα μάλιστα εἰπεῖν)” (*Hist.* 1.22). In other words, Thucydidean oratory is a fictive construction of political leadership.

Therefore, focusing on fictiveness is not an ontological statement about what prophetic literature *is* so much as a heuristic decision about how to read it *in a given scholarly context*.

⁷⁹ Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 3–152. A direct statement of this concern may be found in *ibid.*, 129–30.

⁸⁰ Joshua A. Berman, *Inconsistency in the Torah: Ancient Literary Convention and the Limits of Source Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), esp. 27–32.

Knowing, as we do, that ancient reports of the past were fictively constructed—and not knowing, as we do not, how to distill the one from the other—there are dimensions of the texts (including native theories) that may be better understood by prioritizing fictiveness. This is the case even if it provisionally obscures whether, for instance, a king named Hezekiah did in fact consult a prophet named Isaiah son of Amoz at the turn of the seventh century.

The second way in which a fictive construal of prophetic literature must be qualified is with respect to literary development and textual production. Inasmuch as native theories are “compositional values the texts themselves demonstrate in their self-presentation,” Vayntrub stresses that addressing them means “first generat[ing] a basic synchronic description of the texts and their configurations before we might be able to trace their changes over time.”⁸¹ This raises the question, however, of whether an interest in native theories entails the assumption of degrees of compositional unity and authorial purpose that the scribal production of the Bible is unable to bear. As Karel van der Toorn has emphasized, ancient Near Eastern scribes “did not write as individuals but functioned as constituent parts of a social organism. ... To them, an author does not invent his text but merely arranges it; the content of a text exists first, before being laid down in writing.”⁸² This is, so to speak, Homer, not Plato. Can a process of literary development subject to no single human mind, accruing like sediment within what A. Leo Oppenheim famously called the “stream of tradition,” justifiably be credited with the fictive construction of native theories?⁸³

⁸¹ Vayntrub, *Beyond Orality*, 10.

⁸² van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 47; cf. *ibid.*, 27–49.

⁸³ A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 13.

In answering this objection, it is important to distinguish the social or institutional features of scribal activity from its specifically *literary* features. The collectivized, depersonalized model for which van der Toorn compellingly argues might seem to necessitate an atomistic model of redaction, in which each redactional stratum is effectively a distinct text with its own author: the scribe who added it. However, D. Andrew Teeter has urged an alternative approach that takes seriously the degree to which

virtually all of [the Hebrew Bible] has been affected, to a greater or lesser degree, by the framing interests of later history[.] ... That does not mean that this literature was composed whole cloth in this period; certainly that is not the case. But it is to claim that literary processes active during this period ... had a major effect on the understanding of these books and how they were to be received in subsequent times. The texts of the Hebrew Bible record the evolutionary development of a *history of meaning*. To the extent that this is true, a genuinely historical approach to the Hebrew Bible must give full weight to the contribution of *all* the periods of history inscribed in its compositional development, including, not least, the latest.⁸⁴

In this model, episodic scribal redaction is characterized by compositional integrity *in each of its successive stages*. A redactor does not merely juxtapose an earlier composition with his own later composition. Rather, he creates *a single, new composition* that happens to consist of earlier and later material. Any given redactor is, to wit, no less the “author” of the material he inherits than of the material he produces.⁸⁵ Such a conception bears certain formal similarities with

⁸⁴ D. Andrew Teeter, “The Hebrew Bible and/as Second Temple Literature: Methodological Reflections,” *DSD* 20 (2013): 351–52.

⁸⁵ Barton has issued an influential critique of this kind of emphasis on redactional artistry, arguing that it effectively posits a “disappearing redactor”—that is, a redactor so successful at reshaping his literary precursors so as to erase any substantive evidence for redaction in the first place; see *idem*, *Reading the Old Testament*, 56–58. While his critique is conceptually cogent, I would object that arguments for purposeful redactional artistry need not amount in practice to arguments for compositional seamlessness. A redacted text may manifest both compositional coherence and the telltale literary traces of redactional intervention. For instance, Barton goes after attempts to understand the redactional juxtaposition of the J creation narrative (Gen 2:4b–3:24) as a kind of elaboration of the creation of humanity in the sequentially prior P creation narrative (Gen 1:1–2:3), arguing that they amount to arguments for the virtual authorial unity of Genesis 1–3. However, he has drastically overstated the case. Genesis 1–3 may readily be understood as a coherent progression from the broad story of cosmogony to the particular primordial history of humankind—but this hardly means that the patent signs of redaction, such as the numerous contradictions and the conspicuous Priestly hinge in Gen 2:4a, are thereby erased; see, e.g., David M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 317–19;

Brevard S. Childs's often (and mistakenly) maligned "canonical approach." However, this is owing not to any theological conceit but rather to a shared appreciation for the compositional integrity of discrete redactional stages—of which the various canonical forms are, by definition, those to which we have the most direct access.⁸⁶

This orientation to literary development has proven particularly productive for the study of the Latter Prophets. For instance, H. G. M. Williamson and Jacob Stromberg have argued that Second and Third Isaiah represent not just augmentative addenda but thoroughgoing transformations by means of both direct intervention and indirect recontextualization.⁸⁷ Anja Klein and William A. Tooman have similarly argued that late Ezekelian material draws allusively on earlier strata while aiming to reconfigure the shape and message of the entire book.⁸⁸ Such features led Odil Hannes Steck to insist that the study of prophetic literature begin

Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 129–37; and Jeffrey H. Tigay, "Conflation as a Redactional Technique," in *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey H. Tigay (1985; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 54. The redactor of the P and J primordial narratives might well have authored neither, but in juxtaposing them, he in effect became the author of a new text, "Genesis 1–3," which cannot be reduced to either of its literary precursors even as it preserves ample evidence for their chronological priority and original compositional independence. Such an appreciation of purposeful and even artful redaction means acknowledging the evidence for diachronic textual development while also reading with greater charity than allowed by those who equate disunity with "unreadability."

⁸⁶ On the similarities with and differences from the canonical approach, see Stephen B. Chapman, "Brevard Childs as a Historical Critic: Divine Concession and the Unity of the Canon," in *The Bible as Christian Scripture: The Work of Brevard S. Childs*, eds. Christopher R. Seitz and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013), 63–83.

⁸⁷ Jacob Stromberg, *Isaiah after Exile: The Author of Third Isaiah as Reader and Redactor of the Book*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); and H. G. M. Williamson, *The Book Called Isaiah: Deutero-Isaiah's Role in Composition and Redaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). For a sharply contrasting view of the book of Isaiah, see Benjamin D. Sommer, "Allusions and Illusions: The Unity of the Book of Isaiah in Light of Deutero-Isaiah's Use of Prophetic Tradition," eds. Roy F. Melugin and Marvin A. Sweeney, *JSOTSup* 214 (1996; repr., Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 156–86.

⁸⁸ Anja Klein, "'Biblicist Additions' or the Emergence of Scripture in the Growth of the Prophets," in *Supplementation and the Study of the Hebrew Bible*, eds. Saul M. Olyan and Jacob L. Wright, *BJS* 361 (Providence: Brown University Press, 2018), 127–34; idem, "Prophecy Continued: Reflections on Innerbiblical Exegesis in the Book of Ezekiel," *VT* 60 (2010): 571–82; idem, *Schriftauslegung im Ezechielbuch: Redaktionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu Ez 34–39*, *BZAW* 391 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008); and William A. Tooman, *Gog of Magog: Reuse of Scripture and Compositional Technique in Ezekiel 38–39*, *FAT* 2/52 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

with “historical synchronic reading” that “does not open the gateway and the door for every possible way of reading” but rather “seek[s] the reading clues indicated, intended, and providing shape from the wording of the book itself.”⁸⁹ Steck’s approach is both historical and synchronic because it sees diachronic literary development as a progressively constructive configuration of meaning.

When redactional development is understood in this manner, the rigid dichotomy between Plato as isolated authorial genius and prophetic books as anonymous traditional refiguration begins to break down. Viewed against the backdrop of the *Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι*, Plato’s authorship consists precisely of refiguring preexistent bodies of traditional Socratic material, such as his trial or his attendance at a particular drinking party. If the redactor of a prophetic text may justifiably be conceived as the author of the material that he has refigured, then by the same token, Plato’s authorship of his Socratic dialogues may loosely be regarded as “redaction” of the Socratic tradition that he inherited. As we have seen, recognition of Plato’s engagement with this tradition did not undermine a fictive construal of his Socrates but actually encouraged this reconceptualization in the first place. Why should it be different for prophetic literature?

The realities of the scribal production of prophetic texts do not therefore vitiate an approach oriented toward the fictive construction of native theories of prophecy. In fact, they might well underscore its importance, for as the process of scribal refiguration carries a text ever remoter from whatever historical reality might attach to the prophetic figure it depicts, its

⁸⁹ Odil Hannes Steck, *The Prophetic Books and Their Theological Witness*, trans. James D. Nogalski (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000), 30; cf. *ibid.*, 9, 20. Note the similarities between Vayntrub’s conception of orality as a “literary trope” and Steck’s statement that “the received location of prophetic messages in descriptions (!) of speaking situations is primarily not a speaking situation that can be immediately reconstructed. Instead, the received location is a book.” *Ibid.*, 9. Accordingly, both Vayntrub and Steck pointedly reject the form-critical pretense of recovering historical personalities or speech-forms.

meaning becomes ever more inseparable from the conceptual framework of the belated redactor-author.⁹⁰ Even Nissinen, for all his emphasis on the cultural continuity between biblical prophecy and ancient Near Eastern divination, acknowledges that, properly speaking, the former

is *literature*—not written prophecy, that is, prophetic oracles recorded in written form, but *distinctly literary prophecy*, that is, a corpus of literary works that, in their present context, are not immediately connected with any flesh-and-blood prophets whose oral performances may or may not loom in the background.⁹¹

The decision to read, say, the Mari documents as *reflections* of prophecy while instead reading Ezekiel as a creative *construction* of prophecy is not, as Provan, Long, and Longman would have it, a bias against the reliability of biblical literature. Rather it is an appreciation of the literary realities of its mode of transmission.⁹² The longer a text was subject to scribal reconceptualization, the more justified we are in privileging fictive construction over historical reference as the generative locus of textual meaning.⁹³

⁹⁰ Cf. Tim Bulkeley, “The Book of Amos as ‘Prophetic Fiction’: Describing the Genre of a Written Work that Reinvigorates Older Oral Speech Forms,” in *The Book of the Twelve and the New Form Criticism*, eds. by Mark J. Boda, Michael H. Floyd, and Colin M. Toffelmire, ANEM 10 (Atlanta: SBL, 2015), 205–19.

⁹¹ Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 146 (emphasis added); cf. Lange, “Literary Prophecy”; Martti Nissinen, “How Prophecy Became Literature,” *SJOT* 19 (2005): 153–72; idem, “Reflections on the ‘Historical-Critical’ Method: Historical Criticism and Critical Historicism,” in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, eds. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards, RBS 56 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 495; and Seth L. Sanders, “Why Prophecy Became a Biblical Genre: First Isaiah as an Instance of Ancient Near Eastern Text-Building,” *HeBAI* 6 (2017): 26–52. On Neo-Assyrian oracle collection as a literary model for the scribal arrangement of individual oracles within individual prophetic books, see Michael H. Floyd, “New Form Criticism and Beyond: The Historicity of Prophetic Literature Revisited,” in *The Book of the Twelve and the New Form Criticism*, eds. Mark J. Boda, Michael H. Floyd, and Colin M. Toffelmire, ANEM 10 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 17–36.

⁹² In Childs’s excellent formulation, “A corpus of religious writings which has been transmitted within a community for over a thousand years cannot properly be compared to inert shreds which have lain in the ground for centuries.” Idem, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979; repr., Philadelphia: Fortress, 2011), 73.

⁹³ I agree with Dobbs-Allsopp that “literature differs not in kind from other types of writing ... but in the degree of its constructedness, embroidery, figuration, metaphorization,” but I do not share his subsequent conclusion that “there is no distinction between literary and nonliterary texts.” Idem, “Rethinking Historical Criticism,” 250.

1.2.3. The Basis and Aims of Comparison

If Socrates were only relevant to subversive prophetic speech because of the productive framework suggested by recent Plato scholarship, it would be sufficient to discuss this framework in theoretical and methodological terms and then set Plato aside, leaving room for a dedicated treatment of the biblical material. However, as mentioned above, Plato's Socrates is relevant not only in this second-order, conceptual sense but also in a first-order, substantive sense: his role as a gadfly is far closer to subversive biblical prophecy than the usual prophetic and divinatory comparanda from Mesopotamia and elsewhere. The goal, therefore, is directly to compare these two projects of constructing subversive speech within their shared ancient Mediterranean context.

Comparison between the Bible and the ancient Near East and Mediterranean is one of the cornerstones of historical-critical biblical studies. Although it burst onto the scholarly scene with the controversy attending to Friedrich Delitzsch's polemical promotion of "Babel" over "Bible" in his 1902 lecture, it underwent a remarkably thoroughgoing normalization during the rest of the century.⁹⁴ The grounding postulate of this comparative orientation was eloquently captured by one of its leading exponents, Frank Moore Cross, who analogized it to the typological dating of paleography. He asked rhetorically,

Are we not to expect the breaking in of the *sui generis*, the radically new, in poetry, in religious ideas, in philosophical speculation? I do not think so. I believe it is as illegitimate methodologically to resort to the category of the *sui generis* in explaining historical sequences as it is contrary to scientific method to resort to the category of miracles in explaining natural occurrences.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible*, trans. Thomas J. McCormack and W. H. Carruth (Chicago: Open Court, 1903). For an overview of Delitzsch's conclusions and the ensuing controversy, see Bill T. Arnold and David B. Weisberg, "A Centennial Review of Friedrich Delitzsch's 'Babel und Bibel' Lectures," *JBL* 121 (2002): 441–57.

⁹⁵ Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 241. Appropriately enough, this was delivered as a lecture in honor of William Foxwell Albright, another scholar whose very name is closely linked with the comparative approach.

By the end of the twentieth century, this had become the starting point for most historical-critical inquiry. Scholars could reasonably disagree on their specific methodology but generally concurred regarding the principle that the Bible is entirely continuous with—and only explicable in light of—its ancient environs. In recent decades, comparison has shifted away from Cross’s interest in direct genetic influence toward a broader interest in cultural context—more lateral than vertical, more synchronic than diachronic. As Nissinen has recently stressed, “The comparative agenda does not need to be addicted to the question of influence and causality.”⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the basic postulate of typological continuity remains foundational: “What I do assume,” Nissinen quickly clarifies, “is the cultural connectedness of different parts of the ancient Eastern Mediterranean world including Mesopotamia.”⁹⁷

It might therefore seem that comparison between the biblical prophets and Plato’s Socrates needs no justification. After all, ancient Greece is generally positioned along the same spectrum of Mediterranean cultural continuity as ancient Israel.⁹⁸ Although biblical studies eventually became more naturally associated with Assyriology and Egyptology, comparison with the Classics has always ebbed and flowed.⁹⁹ In fact, the more the field comes to emphasize, as

⁹⁶ Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 43.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁸ On direct contact between Greek and West Semitic culture, see, e.g., William Foxwell Albright, “Neglected Factors in the Greek Intellectual Revolution,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 116 (1972): 225–42; and Walter Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Period*, trans. Margaret E. Pinder and Walter Burkert (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁹⁹ For overviews of the history and significance of biblical-Classical comparative work, see Anselm C. Hagedorn, *Between Moses and Plato: Individual and Society in Deuteronomy and Ancient Greek Law*, FRLANT 204 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 14–37; Otto Kaiser, *Zwischen Athen und Jerusalem: Studien zur griechischen und biblischen Theologie, ihrer Eigenart und ihrem Verhältnis*, BZAW 320 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 1–39; and Thomas Römer, “The Hebrew Bible and Greek Philosophy and Mythology—Some Case Studies,” *Sem* 57 (2015): 185–203.

discussed above, the importance and extensiveness of late redactional activity within an increasingly interconnected Mediterranean world on the cusp of Hellenism, the more natural do comparisons with Greek material become.¹⁰⁰ Although Plato wrote considerably later (in the fourth century) than the purported rise of subversive prophecy (in the eighth century), he is roughly contemporaneous with the part of the Second Temple period that many believe to have facilitated the literary consolidation and shaping of the prophetic books. Crucially, this entails the shared experience of political subordination to and cultural interaction with imperial Persia.¹⁰¹

However, historical-critical comparison between the biblical and Classical worlds has tended pointedly to exclude Plato and Aristotle.¹⁰² This might seem surprising given the venerability of this comparison within the Western tradition. From Tertullian, who famously asked what Athens has to do with Jerusalem (*Praescr.* 7), down through Leo Strauss, who eloquently and incisively reframed the question for the modern age, Greek philosophy and the Bible have been cast as ciphers for the opposed principles of reason and revelation.¹⁰³ Yet it is

¹⁰⁰ Cf., e.g., David M. Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 153–203; and idem, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*.

¹⁰¹ See, e.g., Ehud Ben Zvi, “The Yehudite Collection of Prophetic Books and Imperial Contexts: Some Observations,” in *Divination, Politics, and Ancient Near Eastern Empires*, eds. Alan Lenzi and Jonathan Stökl, ANEM 7 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2014), 145–69; Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi, eds., *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud*, BibleWorld (London: Equinox, 2009); Lange, “Literary Prophecy”; and Margaret C. Miller, *Athens and Persia in the Fifth Century BC: A Study in Cultural Receptivity* (1997; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁰² For recent exceptions, see Russell E. Gmirkin, *Plato and the Creation of the Hebrew Bible*, Copenhagen International Seminar (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); and Kaiser, *Athen und Jerusalem*, 39–103. However, Gmirkin’s book, at least, is less significant than it might appear. His rather sensationalist claim for the direct literary dependence of the Genesis–2 Kings upon Plato’s *Laws* is far outside the scholarly mainstream and, in any case, unconvincing; cf. Anthony L. Abell, review of *Plato and the Creation of the Hebrew Bible*, by Russell E. Gmirkin, *RBL* (2019); and, on Gmirkin’s earlier but similarly problematic monograph, John Van Seters, review of *Berosus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus: Hellenistic Histories and the Date of the Pentateuch*, by Russell E. Gmirkin, *JTS* 59 (2008): 212–14.

¹⁰³ See especially Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return?: The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” in *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart

precisely in this relief that historical-critical disinterest in this venerable comparison becomes intelligible. Its essentializing impulse—construing the Bible and Greek philosophy as stable, ideal types in opposition to each other and wholesale intellectual revolutions in opposition to their respective cultures—is anathema to the typological principles of diachronic cultural development and synchronic cultural continuity. In this way, the neglect of Greek philosophy as a comparandum in biblical studies is but a subtle manifestation of the suspicion of tradition that animates historical criticism as a whole.¹⁰⁴

While this is perhaps sociologically understandable, it is methodologically unsound. If Plato and Aristotle are culturally continuous with, say, Homer and Solon, and if Homer and Solon are legitimate comparanda for the historical-critical study of the Bible in a Mediterranean purview, then by a kind of cultural transitivity, Plato and Aristotle should also be admissible to these comparative efforts. Their exclusion, arbitrary indeed from a historical point of view, only has the ironic effect of further reifying the essentialized boundary between Greek philosophy and the rest of the ancient Mediterranean world.

This ahistorical and uncritical compartmentalization has inhibited the understanding of subversive prophetic speech by positioning perhaps its most substantive ancient Mediterranean parallel, subversive Socratic speech, outside the realm of legitimate comparison. In order to overcome this entrenched compartmentalization, this study aims to infuse historical-critical comparison with the more heuristic, provisional orientation of the broader comparative study of

Green, SUNY Series in the Jewish Writings of Leo Strauss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 87–136; and idem, “Jerusalem and Athens,” 377–405; cf. Hermann Cohen, “Classical Idealism and the Hebrew Prophets,” in *Reason and Hope: Selections from the Jewish Writings of Hermann Cohen*, ed. and trans. Eva Josppe (1971; repr., Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1993), 66–77.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. Levenson, *Historical Criticism*, 106–26.

religion. William E. Paden, for instance, has called for “comparative patterns [that] are not timeless archetypes ... but rather are exploratory and refineable.”¹⁰⁵ He explains further,

By defining the exact feature of the object being compared, the exact point of analogy or parity, the comparativist understands that the object at hand may be quite incomparable in *other* respects and for other purposes. Two objects can belong to the same reference class in one stipulated respect, but differ from other objects in that class in every other way and for every other purpose. The comparative pattern picks out one point of resemblance that has interpretive utility and leaves untouched all other meanings and contexts connected with that object that are not intrinsic to the limited theoretic function of the pattern. ... This aspectualism challenges essentialistic categories in religious studies. Religion, ritual, and myth are not entities, but start-up words for looking into general, variegated areas of related phenomena. It is aspects of these conceptual building sites that we choose to look at, and the aspect chosen is already adumbrated by the lens of explanatory interests.¹⁰⁶

The alleged anomalousness of subversive prophecy is an illusion resulting from the restriction of the comparative horizon to a typologically continuous cluster of divinatory phenomena. Paden, by contrast, offers a framework within which to reconceive subversive speech as a provisional node for comparison in the first place. The biblical prophets and Plato’s Socrates intersect at this node even if they cannot otherwise be easily accommodated within a single coherent category. The literary strategies by which the two corpora employ subversive speech to construct new religious and philosophical ideals may fruitfully be compared, and even appreciated for their commonalities, without thereby facilely equating the substance of those ideals themselves.¹⁰⁷ In fact, as we shall see, a provisional openness to the similarities between their subversive

¹⁰⁵ William E. Paden, “Elements of a New Comparativism,” in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, eds. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 186; cf. Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 15–17.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁰⁷ A succinct articulation of the differences from the perspective of biblical studies may be found in Jon D. Levenson, “Category Error,” review of *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, by Yoram Hazony, *Jewish Review of Books* 3, no. 3 (2012): 11–14.

protagonists might ultimately serve to underscore the divergences between the ideals to which those protagonists give such stirring dramatic expression.

The comparative dimension of this study, therefore, may be posed as an adaptation of Tertullian's question: What can the gadfly of Athens teach us about the gadflies of Jerusalem? This is pursued neither with the grandiose aspiration of universal archetypes nor a novelistic delight in cataloguing diversity, but because a full, substantive understanding of a perplexing local phenomenon necessitates a broader purview.¹⁰⁸ This broader purview remains historical-critical inasmuch as it privileges comparanda with cultural, geographical, linguistic, or ethnic proximity to the target corpus. At the same time, it draws on the methodological insights of comparative religion in order to cut across categories that have been quite ahistorically and uncritically reified within biblical studies. In this way, comparison with Plato's subversive Socrates directly contributes to the goal of reorienting the historical-critical study of the prophets around a specifically literary dimension of subversive prophetic speech.

1.2.4. Summary

This dissertation affirms the theoretical importance of the distinction to which Nissinen has pithily drawn attention: "Reading the biblical text as a literary product of history is one thing, while reconstructing history on its basis is another."¹⁰⁹ The allure of using subversive prophetic speech to do the latter has obscured the extent to which it may be illuminated by a more modest attempt at the former. The literary construction of this speech is a historical issue inasmuch as,

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Kimberley C. Patton, "Juggling Torches: Why We Still Need Comparative Religion," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in a Postmodern Age*, eds. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 157–59; and idem, *Religion of the Gods: Ritual, Paradox, and Reflexivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3–22, 314–15.

¹⁰⁹ Nissinen, "'Historical-Critical' Method," 480.

like all literary projects, it was undertaken and achieved in constant (and inevitable) engagement with its cultural and historical context. As Levenson has written,

The contextualization of biblical documents in the cultures in which they were written is not only the hallmark of historical criticism; it is also inevitable. ... There is no communication that is altogether outside culture (even if it mediates a universal truth), and no culture that is outside history (even if it mediates a timeless reality).¹¹⁰

A fuller understanding of subversive prophecy does not demand that we discard historical criticism as a whole—only its specifically divinatory and psychoanalytic impulses. The ideas expressed by or encoded within these texts are more than signals of prior events, whether historical or compositional. They are themselves “events” with their own historicity. Comparison with Plato’s literary construction of subversive Socratic speech provides a framework in which to reconceptualize subversive prophetic speech in this manner.

1.3. Plan

In the present introductory chapter, I have suggested that the limitations of previous accounts of subversive prophetic speech are deeply rooted in the intellectual presuppositions of the prevailing historical-critical approaches, and that the literary approach to Socrates in Plato studies offers a model for overcoming these limitations. The following three chapters are, broadly speaking, devoted to applying the model to different aspects of the construction of subversive speech. Each consists of one section exploring how Plato gives expression to a particular framework and a subsequent section using this framework to understand the prophets.

Chapter 2 is entitled, “From ‘Athens and Jerusalem’ to ‘Delphi and Deir ‘Alla’: The Divinatory Construction of Subversive Speech in Micah 6:1–8 and in the *Apology*.” The *Apology*

¹¹⁰ Levenson, *Historical Criticism*, 110–11.

is perhaps the locus classicus of the subversive Socrates, defiantly committed to a life of philosophic questioning that, he claims, was spurred by the Delphic oracle. I show how Socrates's invocation of the oracle facilitates Plato's construction of a specifically *dialogical* mode of philosophy that both continues and improves upon divinatory modes of knowledge. With the *Apology* as a model for this kind of transformation, I turn to Micah's reference to Balaam in Mic 6:1–8, one of the most celebrated examples of prophetic critique of the cult. Balaam's encounter with the deity, I suggest, plays a central role in Micah's presentation of subversive prophetic speech as both a practical and substantive counterpoint to divination (especially as reflected in Mesopotamian sources). Overall, this chapter shows that while neither the *Apology* nor Micah represents an unqualified break with ancient divination, they do *construct* such a break from within that very cultural world. In this way, the chapter also lays the groundwork for a historical-critical comparison of the prophets and Plato within the broader cultural complex of the ancient Mediterranean.

The negotiation with divinatory phenomena highlights how this speech becomes subversive in the interpersonal space through which the speaker mediates between his divine encounter and his human interlocutors. This latter dynamic is the subject of Chapter 3, “Subversive Speakers and Their Audiences: The Politics of Poetry in Ezekiel and in the *Republic*.” One of the greatest and most widely discussed ironies of Plato is that despite his skepticism and even hostility toward poetry—in the broader sense of *ποίησις* as literary creativity—his dialogues arguably represent the pinnacle of Attic literary style. The biblical prophets present a related but distinct paradox, speaking some of the most stirring poetry in the Bible while disavowing—with various degrees of explicitness—any agency in its creation because of its divine origin. This chapter shows how Plato's *Republic* and the book of Ezekiel

both configure the poetic character of subversive speech in relation to its literarily constructed political function. Out of this shared concern, they offer radically divergent accounts of what the poetry of subversive speech is meant to accomplish and what might prevent it from doing so.

From the mediation between speaker and audience, Chapter 4 turns to that between text and reader. Entitled, “The Subversive Construction of Superordinate Authority: Literary Framing in the Latter Prophets and in Socrates’s Last Days,” this chapter addresses the large-scale literary framing through which readers encounter subversive prophetic and Socratic speech as text. In the case of Plato, I show how two of the dialogues that provide narrative context for the *Apology*—the *Euthyphro* at the beginning, the *Phaedo* at the end—redefine Socrates’s putatively impious (ἀσεβής, ἀνόσιον) subversive speech as a truer form of piety (εὐσέβεια, ὄσιον) that answers to a sublime, authoritative notion of philosophy. Similarly, I argue that Isaiah 1 and the book of Malachi constitute a redactionally orchestrated frame that redefines subversive prophetic speech as an authoritative expression of the תורה of YHWH. Despite the substantial differences in the respective modes of composition of the two corpora, both model how subversive speech can be contextualized not as a transgression of authority but as an expression of a reconceptualized authoritative ideal.

Chapter 5 provides a conclusion to the study as a whole. After summarizing my findings, I offer two possible avenues for further inquiry that are suggested by this approach to subversive prophetic and Socratic speech. The first of these takes up the most (in)famous gadfly of Jerusalem, whose subversive speech came to an end not at the sip of hemlock but upon a cross. I propose that Jesus’s discourses of rebuke to the Pharisees (Matthew 23; Luke 11:37–52) raise the possibility of a Hellenistic Jewish integration of subversive prophetic and Socratic speech as part of the construction of a latter-day exemplar of this activity. The second potential direction for

further study concerns the literary construction of *challenges* to subversive speech itself. I argue that the satirical dimension of the book of Jonah, long appreciated, may be more deeply understood as an indictment specifically of the subversive dimension of prophecy when it is read in light of Aristophanes's slapstick evisceration of Socrates in his *Clouds*.

CHAPTER TWO
FROM “ATHENS AND JERUSALEM” TO “DELPHI AND DEIR ‘ALLA”:
THE DIVINATORY CONSTRUCTION OF SUBVERSIVE SPEECH IN MICAH 6:1–8 AND
IN THE *APOLOGY*

2.1. Introduction

If subversive prophetic speech has shaped the reception of the biblical prophets in general, then it has also more specifically shaped the creation of a dichotomy between the “true” activity of Israel’s prophets and the “false” activity of pagan diviners. Commentators have routinely touted the biblical prophets’ moral clarity and social iconoclasm over against the purported occult magic of their ancient Near Eastern counterparts. Devoting an entire chapter to this topic, Heschel wrote,

Phenomenologically, divination is lacking in the fundamental characteristics which, to the mind of the prophet, are decisive for the prophetic event. Divination is never felt to be an event in which a god directs himself to man, nor is it experienced as an act that follows from a divine decision of a turning. It is man who is approaching a god or some occult power. ... The premise of biblical prophecy is that God is One Who demands and judges, and the prophet is sent to convey the demand and the judgment. The premise of divination seems to be that nature is a storehouse of hidden knowledge that may be unlocked by the diviners. ... The diviner seeks to obtain God’s answer to man’s questions; the prophet seeks man’s answer to God’s question.¹

For Heschel, the experience of the biblical prophet was distinguished from that of the extrabiblical diviner both in procedure (divine initiative) and substance (demand and judgment). He concluded in no uncertain terms, “The biblical prophet is a type *sui generis*.”²

Such essentialization of subversive prophetic speech might well be expected from a thinker who, like Heschel, reads the prophets within an explicitly theological framework.³ What

¹ Heschel, *Prophets*, 586–87.

² *Ibid.*, 605.

³ On Heschel’s position between theology and historical criticism, see Robert Erlewine, “Reclaiming the Prophets: Cohen, Heschel, and Crossing the Theocentric/Neo-Humanist Divide,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought*

is surprising, however, is that it may also be found in many historical-critical treatments of the prophetic literature. In particular, the alleged uniqueness of subversive prophetic speech has cohered well with the historical-ideational paradigm, which, as we have seen, is often developmentalist and focused on the prophet's individuality. In this vein, Harry M. Orlinsky, for instance, offered the following framing for one discussion of the biblical prophets' demand for justice: "The prophetic movement forms the climax of biblical history. Nothing comparable was produced by any of the other Near Eastern civilizations of antiquity."⁴

By contrast, essentialization of subversive prophetic speech flies in the face of the other major historical-critical approach to prophecy: the sociological-comparative. As mentioned earlier, this paradigm has long emphasized that biblical prophecy belongs on the same cultural spectrum as the prophetic texts from Old Babylonian Mari and Neo-Assyrian Nineveh, which display directly analogous speech forms, vocabulary, metaphors, and physical actions. However, its *fundamental* claim is, in fact, still more radical: that the very category of "prophecy" *itself* is to be placed on the yet larger spectrum of divination. Biblical and Mesopotamian prophecy are instantiations of a much broader divinatory complex that includes extispicy, astrology, augury, physiognomy, and numerous other activities. What distinguishes these from prophecy is not phenomenological but practical. Extispicy and the like are *inductive* in that the human practitioner undertakes a technical craft in order to discern and influence a deity's will.

and Philosophy 17 (2009): 180–86; and Jon D. Levenson, "Religious Affirmation and Historical Criticism in Heschel's Biblical Interpretation," *AJSR* 25 (2000): 25–44.

⁴ Orlinsky, *Ancient Israel*, 122; cf. idem, "The Seer in Ancient Israel," *OrAnt* 4 (1965): 153–74. For other historical-ideational affirmations of the uniqueness of subversive biblical prophecy, see, e.g., Barton, "Prophets and the Cult," 111–22; Fenton, "Israelite Prophecy," 129–41; Koch, *Prophets*, 1:4–5, 11; Lods, *Rise of Judaism*, 66–69; McKane, "Prophet and Institution," 251–66; and Norman W. Porteous, "The Basis of the Ethical Teaching of the Prophets," in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy Presented to Theodore H. Robinson by the Society for Old Testament Study on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday, August 9th, 1946*, ed. H. H. Rowley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1950), 143–56.

Prophecy, on the other hand, is *intuitive* in that the deity initiates a transformative, suprarational human experience in order to reveal his or her will and influence human affairs.⁵ This distinction, which has become foundational for the sociological-comparative approach, in fact goes back to none other than Plato (see, e.g., *Phaedr.* 244b–e).⁶

In this way, although technical divination and prophecy may be heuristically distinguished, both are fundamentally channels of human communication with the supernatural realm. Within the sociological-comparative approach, this phenomenological commonality outweighs their practical differences. Indeed, in Nissinen’s recent monograph, he lays out four orienting assumptions for his comparative project—the very first of which reads, “The phenomenon of prophecy should be regarded as another type of divination of the intuitive kind, *not an antithesis of divination at large.*”⁷

As such, it should hardly be surprising that the essential uniqueness so commonly ascribed to subversive prophetic speech has been something of a thorn in the side of scholars operating within the sociological-comparative paradigm. In response, they have tended to push back on the claim that subversive prophetic speech is unique to the Bible. For instance, Nissinen has called attention to a letter from Mari in which the prophet tells Zimri-Lim on Adad’s behalf, “I do not demand anything from you. When a wronged man or wo[man] cries out to you, be

⁵ In this study, I follow the conventional scholarly terminology of “technical” and “intuitive” in order to maintain consistency with the secondary literature. However, it should be noted that one may reasonably object to the term “intuitive” on the grounds that it misleadingly suggests something natural or even unremarkable. In both the Hebrew Bible and elsewhere in the ancient world, prophetic experience is often described as terrifying and extraordinary—quite different from the way that “intuition” is often understood in contemporary English, at least.

⁶ On the debt to Plato here, see Lisa Maurizio, “Anthropology and Spirit Possession: A Reconsideration of the Pythia’s Role at Delphi,” *JHS* 115 (1995): 79–80.

⁷ Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 19 (emphasis added); cf., e.g., Jonathan Stökl, *Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: A Philological and Sociological Comparison*, CHANE 56 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 7–11.

there and judge their case. This only I have demanded from you” (A. 1121 + A. 2731, 52–55).⁸

For a reader familiar with biblical prophecy, it is indeed difficult to read Adad’s call for moral integrity—especially the last line—*without* thinking of something like the famous Micah passage that will draw our attention later in this chapter:

הַגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מֵהֵטוֹב וּמֵה־יְהוָה דּוֹרֵשׁ מִמֶּנִּי כִּי אֲסֹעַשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְהִצַּנְעַת לְכַת עִם־אֱלֹהֶיךָ:	He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what YHWH seeks from you: only to execute justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God. (Mic 6:8)
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Later, at Nineveh, a prophet would lambast Esarhaddon, “What have [yo]u, in turn, given to me?

The [fo]od for the banquet is no[t there], as if there were no temple at all!” (SAA 9 3.5, 25–27).⁹

This condemnation of cultic impropriety recalls Malachi’s denunciation of the priests, to which we will turn in a later chapter:

וְאָמַרְתֶּם הֲנֵה מִתְּלֹאָה וְהִפְחַתֶּם אוֹתוֹ אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת וְהִבֵּאתֶם גְּזוּל וְאֶת־ הַפְּסוּחַ וְאֶת־הַחֹלֵה וְהִבֵּאתֶם אֶת־הַמְּנַחָה הָאֶרֶצָה אוֹתָהּ מִיַּדְכֶם אָמַר יְהוָה:	You say, “Why bother?” and scoff at it—says YHWH of Hosts. So you bring [offerings that are] stolen, blind, or diseased, and thus you make your offerings. Am I supposed to accept <i>this</i> from you?—says YHWH. (Mal 1:13)
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⁸ Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 82–83; cf. Robert P. Gordon, “Prophecy in the Mari and Nineveh Archives,” in *Thus Speaks Ishtar of Arbela”: Prophecy in Israel, Assyria, and Egypt in the Neo-Assyrian Period*, eds. Robert P. Gordon and Hans M. Barstad (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 47–49; idem, “From Mari to Moses: Prophecy at Mari and in Ancient Israel,” in *Of Prophets’ Visions and the Wisdom of Sages: Essays in Honour of R. Norman Whybray on His Seventieth Birthday*, eds. Heather A. McKay and David J. A. Clines, JSOTSup 162 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 75–78; and Abraham Malamat, “Intuitive Prophecy – A General Survey,” in *Mari and the Bible*, SHCANE 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 63. On the critique of royal authority at Mari, see Herbert B. Huffmon, “A Company of Prophets: Mari, Assyria, Israel,” in *Prophecy in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context: Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian Perspectives*, ed. Martti Nissinen, SymS 13 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 54–56. Oswald Loretz called attention to a similar parallel from the end of the Ugaritic Kirta epic, where Kirta’s son, Yaššib, challenges his claim to the throne as follows: “Hear now, O Noble Kirta! / Hearken, alert your ear! / In time of attack you take flight, / And lie low in the mountains. / You’ve let your hand fall to vice. / You don’t pursue the widow’s case (*ltdn dn . almnt*), / You don’t take up the wretched’s claim (*ltpt pt qsr . npš*). / You don’t expel the poor’s (*dl*) oppressor. / You don’t feed the orphan (*ytm*) who faces you, / Nor the widow (*almnt*) who stands at your back” (*KTU* 1.16.VI.45–50); see idem, “Der historische Hintergrund prophetischer sozialkritik im Prophetenbuch nach Texten aus Ugarit und Māri,” in *Götter—Ahn—Könige als gerechte Richter: Der “Rechtsfall” des Menschen vor Gott nach altorientalischen und biblischen Texten*, ed. Oswald Loretz, AOAT 290 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2003), 341–94. In contrast to the Old Babylonian and biblical examples, however, the Ugaritic text presents this critique as human rather than divine speech.

⁹ See Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 209–13.

On the basis of such similarities, Nissinen concludes, “There is enough evidence of the critical potential of prophecy in the available documentation throughout the ancient Eastern Mediterranean” to conclude that this potential is not uniquely biblical.¹⁰

A second strategy by which sociological-comparative scholarship has resisted the alleged uniqueness of subversive prophetic speech is to call into question its prominence within the biblical prophetic corpus in the first place. Although the subversive prophetic passages have proven highly influential within the history of interpretation, they do not remotely constitute a majority or even a plurality within the corpus itself. As mentioned earlier, the biblical prophetic literature is quite diverse. Attempts to equate it solely with social critique do not do justice to this diversity. As such, even if subversive prophetic speech *was* somewhat anomalous against the backdrop of the ancient Near East, it nevertheless constitutes an ultimately negligible datum that hardly justifies arguments for the radical uniqueness of biblical prophecy as a whole. Nissinen, for his part, does not mince words: “The evidence is based on only a small selection of biblical passages representing a tiny proportion of the text of the prophetic books, which raises the question of whether the strong emphasis on them corresponds to the ideological preferences of the scholars rather than their prominence within the biblical text.”¹¹

Both of these objections deserve to be taken seriously. However, we ought to be careful not to overstate the case. Although it is true that subversive prophecy is attested at both Mari and Nineveh, neither of these passages (nor others like them) reflects the specific synthesis of moral demand *and* institutional indictment that makes subversive biblical prophecy so rhetorically and

¹⁰ Ibid., 261.

¹¹ Ibid., 253; cf. Zevit, “Prophet versus Priest,” 191–92.

theologically potent. The Old Babylonian prophecy cited above demands societal justice with no reference to the cult; its Neo-Assyrian counterpart condemns cultic lapses with no invocation of societal justice. Many of the biblical prophets, however, frame the one in terms of the other: cultic impropriety is, to a certain extent, *constituted* by failures to attend to societal justice. Even Nissinen has therefore conceded, “No counterpart [in Mesopotamian prophecy] can be found to those biblical texts that despise the worship of the Israelites or Judahites altogether.”¹²

Meanwhile, I would resist allegations of the relative marginality of subversive prophetic speech in the Bible by suggesting that we can think about prominence compositionally rather than merely statistically. It is certainly true that the biblical prophets do not spend most of their time railing against the establishment, as one might assume if one read only certain contemporary theological reflections on the prophetic literature. However, the instances when they *do* are remarkably well distributed throughout the prophetic corpus: a clear majority of the books within the Latter Prophets includes such material.¹³ Moreover, as we will see in a later chapter, subversive prophetic speech is often depicted at key literary junctures. While it would be incorrect to say that the prophets are *nothing but* social critics, the compositional evidence

¹² Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 250. From this statement, it is unclear where Nissinen stands on the persistent question of whether the biblical prophets’ critique of cultic impropriety constituted an outright reject of sacrifice. Either way, however, it shows that Nissinen acknowledges a qualitative difference between biblical and extrabiblical examples of prophetic social critique. On the issue of the prophets’ critique of *royal* authority, Malamat has been willing similarly to concede important distinctions: “In contrast to the Bible with its prophecies of doom and words of admonition against the king and the people, the messages at Mari were usually optimistic and sought to please the king rather than rebuke or alert him. Such prophecies of peace and salvation[,] colored by a touch of nationalism, liken the Mari prophets to the biblical prophets of peace or ‘false prophets,’ and surely the corresponding prophecies are greatly similar.” Idem, “A Forerunner of Biblical Prophecy: The Mari Documents,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, eds. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987), 42.

¹³ By my estimation, the relatively clear exceptions are Joel, Obadiah, and Nahum, all of which, appropriately enough, are more focused on a foreign adversary than Israel’s own transgressions. Habakkuk may perhaps also be counted in this group, depending whether one understands the perpetrator in Hab 1:3–4 as Israel or the Chaldeans. The case of Jonah is the most complicated for reasons that will be discussed prospectively in the conclusion to this study.

nevertheless suggests that this function *has* been prominently thematized within the literary shaping of the prophetic corpus as we know it.

In both of these ways, the evidence marshaled by sociological-comparative scholars to undermine the purported uniqueness of subversive biblical prophecy testifies against them no less than for them. Subversive prophetic speech does appear to play somewhat of a different role in the Bible, qualitatively and quantitatively, from those that it plays in the other ancient Near Eastern prophetic corpora. That being said, those who are inclined to agree with Heschel that “divination is lacking in the fundamental characteristics which . . . are decisive for the prophetic event” should not be so quick to claim this lack of a satisfying comparandum as a victory. It is a fairly egregious argument from silence to hang the “essence” of biblical prophecy on the absence of similar subversive speech in the Mesopotamian divinatory texts.¹⁴ This is especially the case in light of the thoroughgoing parallels in so many other dimensions of biblical prophecy and extrabiblical divination, to which Nissinen and scholars like him have correctly drawn attention. A century ago, no one could have imagined that even *these* would be attested in such abundance at places like Mari or Nineveh. Who is to say that the writings of a Neo-Assyrian Amos, through whom Ishtar might reject the sacrifices offered at the temple of Egašankalamma in favor of justice that flows like the Tigris and Euphrates, are not soon to be unearthed at a different site?

It is necessary to account for prophetic difference without falling prey to the pitfalls of either essentializing or effacing it. In order to do so, this chapter addresses it as a native claim of the biblical prophetic literature itself. It is simply a fact that many biblical texts do *assert* precisely the kinds of phenomenological differences between prophecy and technical divination that contemporary scholars reject, negotiating the cultural authority of divination in order to

¹⁴ Cf. Levenson, “Heschel’s Biblical Interpretation,” 32.

theorize authentic prophecy.¹⁵ I focus here on one prominent site for this negotiation: Balaam son of Beor, the non-Israelite diviner whom Balak, king of Moab, hires to curse Israel. Numbers 22–24, the most extensive Balaam narrative, and Mic 6:1–8, his only appearance in the Latter Prophets, both thoroughly employ terminology characteristic of technical divination as known from Mesopotamian sources and the plaster inscriptions about Balaam at Deir ‘Alla. They do so, however, in order to invalidate the technical aspect of divination, presenting authentic prophecy as an experience initiated by the deity. In Mic 6:1–8, the specific content of this “intuitive” experience is a demand for moral integrity that undermines pretensions to cultic piety (Mic 6:6–8). In this way, I suggest, the Mican passage constitutes a native biblical identification of subversive speech as the distinguishing feature of authentic prophecy over against divination.

In order to demonstrate that recognizing a native claim to difference need not entail affirming or reinscribing it, I frame my discussion of Balaam in terms of an analogous move in Plato’s *Apology*, the locus classicus of the subversive Socrates. I show how the *Apology* mobilizes the oracle of Apollo at Delphi—the most prestigious divinatory institution in classical Greece—toward the construction of a specifically *dialogical* conception of philosophy. In divination, knowledge results from the confrontation of two entities: the god and the human patron or performer of the divinatory act. For Plato, this binary mode of knowing becomes a model for philosophical learning through dialogue: now, the confrontation is between two

¹⁵ My use of the term “negotiation” in this context is informed by John Carter’s study of the Roman-imperial framework of the Gospel of John. Carter helpfully explains, “The Gospel’s encounter with Rome is much more multifaceted and complex than allowed by a limited and ahistorical binary construct of ‘us against them,’ of opposition to Rome. I will subsequently develop some of the complex ways with which provincials negotiated imperial power, including imitation and a mix of distance and participation, compliance and defiance, putting Rome in its place by turning to the past[.] ... By ‘negotiating’ I do not mean formal discussion between the representatives of John’s community and local Roman officials. Rather, I am interested in how John’s Gospel guides its readers and hearers in engaging the task of how to live in Rome’s world.” Idem, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 13–14.

people. In dialogical philosophy, then, the voice of the interlocutor assumes the role of the fiat of divine pronouncement. The result is that in being activated by the Delphic oracle, Socrates's subversive philosophy ultimately supersedes it and renders it obsolete: people may now learn and cultivate virtue by inquiring of each other, not oracles. In this way, Plato draws deeply upon the cultural authority of divination precisely in order to construct a new intellectual practice—Socratic philosophy—that *does* break with divination in fundamental ways.

Safely removed from the specific hermeneutical issues attending to biblical studies, Plato's construction of philosophy shows that the scholarly binary of radical difference versus fundamental continuity unjustifiably constrains the divinatory discourse available to ancient authors. Through a more nuanced discourse of negotiation, the prophetic and Platonic corpora draw sophisticatedly upon the cultural authority of ancient Mediterranean divination in order ultimately to theorize their respective protagonists' subversive speech over against it. If the biblical writers and Plato thereby asserted that genuine prophecy and philosophy were radically distinct from divination, that does not, of course, mean that they *were* as a matter of historical reality. However, it does mean that *they thought that they were*, and *that* in and of itself is a historical datum worthy of critical investigation. In this way, subversive prophetic and Socratic speech can and should fall under the mantle of the comparative study of ancient Mediterranean divination even though (indeed, because) they resist such comparison. "Athens and Jerusalem" cannot be equated with "Delphi and Deir 'Alla," so to speak—but neither can they be fully understood without them.

2.2. Delphi and Philosophy in the *Apology*

In 399 BCE, Socrates was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death by an Athenian jury for his subversive philosophical questioning of conventional wisdom relating to justice, piety, courage, and all the virtues upon which the society of the great city rested. According to Plato, Socrates opened his legal defense—his very life on the line—with an appeal to authority so brazen that he actually anticipated the uproar it would incite among the jury:

I shall call upon the god at Delphi as witness (μάρτυρα ὑμῖν παρέξομαι τὸν θεὸν τὸν ἐν Δελφοῖς) to the existence and nature of my wisdom (τίς ἐστὶν σοφία καὶ οἷα), if it be such. You know Chaerephon. . . . He went to Delphi at one time and ventured to ask the oracle (ἐτόλμησε τοῦτο μαντεύσασθαι)—as I say, gentlemen, do not create a disturbance (μὴ θορυβεῖτε)—he asked [whether] any man was wiser than I, and the Pythian replied that no one was wiser (μηδένα σοφώτερον εἶναι). (*Ap.* 20e–21a)

Socrates apparently intuits that the jury will instinctively misunderstand this claim as an outrageously smug assertion of self-confidence. He therefore quickly clarifies that he intends it in precisely the opposite way: knowing that he is *not* in fact wise but also trusting the integrity of the oracle, he was left in a state of humble perplexity. Faced with this dilemma, he resolved to seek out “one of those reputed wise, thinking that there, if anywhere, I could refute the oracle (ἐλέγξων τὸ μαντεῖον)” (*Ap.* 21b–c). What Socrates found, however, is that those who are wise in one matter tend incorrectly to fancy themselves wise in all. This, of course, prompted his momentous realization that the oracle was telling the truth in calling him wise, for he is indeed wise “to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know” (*Ap.* 21d).

With Apollo as his witness, Socrates is able to reframe his “account of my journeyings [to those purportedly wise people] as if (ὥσπερ) they were labors I had undertaken to prove the oracle irrefutable (ἵνα μοι καὶ ἀνέλεγκτος ἡ μαντεία γένοιτο)” (*Ap.* 22a). Whenever he subverts interlocutors’ false pretenses to wisdom by submitting them to philosophical questioning, he

“come[s] to the assistance of the god (τῷ θεῷ βοηθῶν)” (*Ap.* 23b), vindicating the otherwise baffling oracular claim that “no one is wiser” than he. Because Socrates describes this activity with the verb ἐλέγχω (“refute,” “prove”; cf. *Ap.* 21b–c; 22a; 29e; 39c–d), the nominal, Latinized form, *elenchus*, emerged as a scholarly shorthand for his pursuit of truth through questioning others. According to Plato’s *Apology*, the “ur-elenchus” through which Socrates strove to understand the oracular pronouncement became the motor of the elenctic activity that would occupy his life and, indeed, eventually bring about his death.

In Xenophon’s *Apology*, too, Socrates appeals to the same auspicious consultation at Delphi. Following a defense of his pious conduct, he recalls,

Once, when Chaerephon asked in Delphi about me (περὶ ἐμοῦ) in the presence of many, Apollo responded that no human being was more free, more just, or more moderate than I. ... He did not liken me to a god, but judged that I surpassed many human beings. Nevertheless, do not rashly believe the god even in these things, but examine (ἐπισκοπεῖτε) one by one the things the god said. (*Ap. Xen.* §14–15)

Like Plato, Xenophon reports that Chaerophon issued a question and received an answer that contrasted Socrates favorably with the rest of humanity. There are, of course, differences in detail: whereas Xenophon omits the content of the inquiry, his responsum is considerably longer and more specific. However, what strikes one most is the Xenophontic Socrates’s radically different reaction to the oracle. There is no trace of disquietude or perplexity, of any effort to understand better what the god meant; for this Socrates, the oracle is clear enough. The only “examination” is enjoined upon the *jury*, whom the defendant leads through a step-by-step proof of each virtue the god ascribed to him (see *Ap. Xen.* §16–18). For Xenophon, Delphi is little

more than a character witness, testifying to those of Socrates's traits that his accusers have impugned. It has no substantive connection with his philosophical activity.¹⁶

In this relief, Plato's invocation of Delphi may be more clearly appreciated as an orienting dramatic goal in his presentation of what elenctic philosophy *is*. Perhaps paradoxically, this is only underscored by the fact that the oracle cannot be construed as the chronological source of the elenchus, even on Plato's own narrative terms.¹⁷ If there was reason to query Delphi regarding Socrates's wisdom in the first place, he must have *already* been practicing philosophy for some time. Thus situated, Plato's Delphi story "bears a strong resemblance to a myth of origin," as Dorion has noted, "meaning a story which assigns a divine origin to a practice which, while being eminently illustrated by Socrates, was certainly inspired by former practices."¹⁸ This coheres well with the literary profile of the *Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι*, which employ dramatic license to convey truths of a philosophical and characterological, rather than narrowly historiographical, nature.¹⁹ To adapt one of Rashi's comments on the single most famous

¹⁶ On the differences between Plato's and Xenophon's uses of Delphi, see Paul A. Vander Waerdt, "Socratic Justice and Self-Sufficiency: The Story of the Delphic Oracle in Xenophon's *Apology of Socrates*," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 11, ed. C. C. W. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 33–34.

¹⁷ Cf., e.g., David D. Corey, "Socratic Citizenship: Delphic Oracle and Divine Sign," *The Review of Politics* 67 (2005): 218; James Daniel and Ronald Polansky, "The Tale of the Delphic Oracle in Plato's *Apology*," *The Ancient World* 2 (1979): 83–85; and Leo Strauss, "On Plato's *Apology of Socrates* and *Crito*," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 41. Conspicuously, the story about Chaerephon does not appear elsewhere in the Platonic corpus.

¹⁸ Louis-André Dorion, "The Delphic Oracle on Socrates' Wisdom: A Myth?" in *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, eds. Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Mnemosyne Supplements* 337 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 432; cf. *ibid.*, 430–31.

¹⁹ Despite Kahn's emphasis on Plato's literary artistry as the key to understanding the dialogues, he adopts an uncharacteristically positivistic approach to Plato's *Apology*. He explains, "The *Apology* reflects a public event, the trial of Socrates, which actually took place, and at which Plato and hundreds of other Athenians were present. The dialogues represent private conversations, nearly all of them fictitious. ... [In the latter case,] Plato has deliberately given himself almost total freedom to imagine both the form and the content of the Socratic conversations. The situation is quite different for the *Apology*. As the literary version of a public speech, composed not by the speaker but by a member of the audience, the *Apology* can properly be regarded as a quasi-historical document[.] ... We cannot be sure how much of the speech as we have it reflects what Socrates actually said, how much has been added or altered by Plato. But if, as we imagine, Plato composed the speech to defend Socrates' memory and to show to

Western myth of origin: the story about Delphi in Plato's *Apology* has not come to teach the *sequence* of Socrates's life.²⁰ Instead, it has come to convey something of the deeper *meaning* and *spirit* of his life—which is to say, the kind philosophy to which his life was devoted.

Plato's Delphic "myth of origin" does not straightforwardly invoke the authority of the oracle in order to legitimize philosophy, as does Xenophon's version. Rather, it more complexly negotiates the Delphic literary tradition and the mechanics of oracular consultation in order to *construct* philosophy. If Socrates's activity partakes of its divinatory origins in a deeper way than is usually recognized, this does not mean that the elenchus and divination may be facilely equated. However, it does raise the possibility that the cultural structure of divination can inform our understanding of *how the elenchus is meant to work as philosophy*. In this section, I suggest that this is the case. By framing the elenchus in terms of divination, Plato presents philosophy as a genuine conversation in which Socrates (and all philosophers) collaborate toward a shared, ongoing cultivation of virtue. In this way, divination does not straightforwardly *underwrite* Socrates's subversive philosophical activity. Rather, it *undergirds* its epistemological and social structure as an irreducibly dialogical mode of learning and knowing—one that ultimately subverts even Delphi itself, beating the storied oracle at its own game.

the world that he was unjustly condemned, it was essential to present a picture of Socrates in court that could be recognized as authentic. Even admitting the larger part played here by Plato's literary elaboration, there are external constraints that make his *Apology* the most reliable of all our testimonies concerning Socrates." Idem, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 88–89. While this reasoning might appear sound, Dorion has convincingly challenged it with two simple observations: (1) there are multiple, differing accounts of Socrates's trial speech, implying an inherent degree of fictive construction; and (2) Plato's *Apology* is so exquisite in its treatment of the very foundations of Socrates's philosophy that it is hard to believe that it has not undergone substantial *ex post facto* reworking, even if it is based on a historical original; see idem, "Socratic Problem," 16–18. As such, I treat Plato's *Apology* as a full exemplar of the genre of Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι, unfolding Plato's fictively constructed Socrates no less than the other dialogues discussed here.

²⁰ Arguing that Gen 1:1 is a temporal relative clause rather than a description of a discrete action, Rashi remarks, "Scripture has not come to teach the sequence of creation (ולא בא המקרא להורות סדר הבריאה)." Rashi on Gen 1:1.

2.2.1. The Purpose and Practice of the Elenchus

As it would turn out, Socrates's contemporaries were not the only ones liable to "create a disturbance" in response to his claim of Delphic authorization. Many modern scholars have been confused and embarrassed that their patron hero, the consummate philosopher, would appeal to a divinatory cult as the ultimate basis for his "love of wisdom." In one classic study of Plato's *Apology*, Reginald Hackforth wrote dismissively that Socrates's "procedure in testing the oracle is incompatible with a serious acceptance of its authority[.] ... His interpretation of the oracle is a typical example of his accustomed irony."²¹ Tellingly, what scandalized Hackforth was not so much the religiosity of Socrates's claim as its specifically divinatory trappings. He goes on to say in no uncertain terms that Socrates's "obedience to the voice of God, heard in the stillness of his own soul, without the intervention of a human medium, contained no element of irony: that was his profound conviction."²² The distinction is less between a religious and a secular Socrates than between, to wit, a Catholic and a Protestant one, with Hackforth clearly favoring the latter—a Socrates moved by a personal, sublime encounter with the divine, not the external apparatus of a ritualistic cult. On this reading, when Socrates answers his accusers with an ostensibly solemn appeal to Delphi, he is really just taunting them.

²¹ Reginald Hackforth, *The Composition of Plato's Apology* (1933; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 94; cf. A. E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work* (1926; repr., Mineola: Dover, 2001), 160. For brief overviews of approaches that deny the sincerity of the religious element in Socrates's presentation of his relationship to Delphi, see Emma Cohen de Lara, "Socrates' Response to the Divine in Plato's *Apology*," *Polis: The Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought* 24 (2007): 194–95; and Mark L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 6.

²² Hackforth, *Composition of Plato's Apology*, 94–95. Taylor remarks similarly, "The claim to conscious of a special mission, imposed not by 'the gods,' nor by 'Apollo,' but 'by God,' comes from the actual defence. The two things have very little to do with one another, and are treated in very different tones; nothing but misconception can come of the attempt to confuse them." Idem, *Plato*, 160.

There is perhaps something appealing about this image of Socrates, the clever hero, mocking the obtuse villains to their faces. However, Hackforth's dismissal of Delphi does not ultimately do justice to the thoroughgoing engagement with divinatory phenomena in the *Apology*.²³ Michael C. Stokes and Mark L. McPherran have more compellingly approached this engagement as a serious attempt to convey fundamental characteristics of Socratic philosophy. The former argued that the appeal to Delphi is "an adventitious short cut to justification of a career for which the full genuine motivation was quite different."²⁴ Forensic oratory, owing both to its brevity and to its publicity, is not conducive to the philosophical subtlety that would be necessary for Socrates to give a comprehensive account of his "examined life."²⁵ As such, he mobilizes Delphi—sincerely, but also strategically—as a kind of cultural shorthand that would effectively convey the spirit of his philosophical quest to his unphilosophical audience.²⁶

McPherran, for his part, has argued that Delphi served to explain how Socrates's elenctic questioning, previously "just" an intellectual practice, took on the urgency of a full-blown religious mission: "The oracle provided ... an enigmatic descriptive component that—given Socrates' prior moral commitments—*prompted* him to go on to discover the factual conditions to

²³ For one, as David D. Corey has pointed out, it is rather glaring that "Socrates persists in describing his philosophical and civic motivations in religious terms *even after* the verdict and penalty have come down, when one might expect him to desist from ironic speech." Corey, "Socratic Citizenship," 217.

²⁴ Michael C. Stokes, "Socrates' Mission," in *Socratic Questions: New Essays on the Philosophy of Socrates and Its Significance*, eds. Barry S. Gower and Michael C. Stokes (London: Routledge, 1992), 69–70; cf. *ibid.*, 67–68; and Strauss, "Apology of Socrates and Crito," 50.

²⁵ In fact, Seeskin has argued that if the *Apology* ironically mocks anything, it is forensic oratory itself; see *idem*, "Is the *Apology of Socrates* a Parody?" *Philosophy and Literature* 6 (1982): 94–105.

²⁶ Cf. Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, "The Paradox of Socratic Ignorance in Plato's *Apology*," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 1 (1984): 129. As a convenient bonus, it would also contradict the charge of atheism.

which it referred.”²⁷ On this reading, Apollo essentially conscripts Socrates as his human spokesperson. The elenchus—which, as we have seen, he was already practicing anyway—is mobilized as the practical means of exposing human hubris in accordance with the famous Delphic maxim, “Know yourself” (γνώθι σαυτόν).²⁸

Stokes and McPherran reflect wider a trend in recent Plato scholarship toward a decidedly more charitable and sophisticated understanding of Socrates’s invocation of Delphi.²⁹ However, for most such scholars, it is ultimately enough that the Delphic imprimatur endows the elenchus with both authority and intelligibility. They tend to stop well short of engaging with its specifically divinatory features. In a crucial bibliographic essay, David Wolfsdorf has offered a comprehensive chronological survey of philosophical discussion of the elenchus since Gregory Vlastos’s watershed 1983 study, “The Socratic Elenchus: Method Is All.”³⁰ Beneath the terminological consensus that Socrates’s philosophy may be described as “elenctic,” there teems surprisingly vigorous disagreement about what this actually means—how precisely the elenchus

²⁷ Mark L. McPherran, “Elenctic Interpretation and the Delphic Oracle,” in *Does Socrates Have a Method? Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato’s Dialogues and Beyond*, ed. Gary Alan Scott (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 140; cf. idem, *Religion of Socrates*, 219–21, 226–29; and C. D. C. Reeve, *Socrates in the Apology: An Essay on Plato’s Apology of Socrates* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 72–73.

²⁸ The maxim γνώθι σαυτόν was purportedly inscribed upon the temple of Apollo at Delphi. For an overview of Socrates’s place within the history of Greek interpretation of the maxim, see Christopher Moore, *Socrates and Self-Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 6–31. On Socrates as a spokesperson for this maxim, see further Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, “Socrates’ Elenctic Mission,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 9, ed. Julia Annas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 141–42.

²⁹ For a brief overview, see Cohen de Lara, “Response to the Divine,” 195.

³⁰ David Wolfsdorf, “Socratic Philosophizing,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Socrates*, eds. John Bussanich and Nicholas D. Smith (London: Bloomsbury, 2015). The version of Vlastos’s essay cited in the present study is the substantial revision found in idem, “The Socratic Elenchus: Method Is All,” in *Socratic Studies*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1–37.

works.³¹ One consistency, however, is that while Delphi is no longer maligned, it has remained notably peripheral to the philosophical substance of the debate.

A convenient portal to this debate may be found already in antiquity, in a dialogue whose Platonic authorship is now contested. The *Clitophon* depicts an uncharacteristically subdued Socrates listening as the eponymous Clitophon, one of his followers, oratorically registers a complaint against him.³² Clitophon concludes,

But if you're finally ready to stop exhorting me with speeches (παύσασθαι πρὸς ἐμὲ τῶν λόγων τῶν προτρεπτικῶν)—I mean, if it had been about gymnastics that you were exhorting me, saying that I must not neglect my body, you would have proceeded to give me what comes next after (τὸ ἐφηξῆς) such an exhortation, namely, an explanation (ἔλεγε) of the nature of my body and of the particular kind of treatment (θεραπείας) this nature requires—that's the kind of thing you should do now. Assume that Clitophon agrees with you that it's ridiculous to neglect the soul itself while concerning ourselves solely with what we work hard to acquire for its sake. ... I will say this, Socrates, that while you're worth the world to someone who hasn't yet been converted to the pursuit of virtue (προτετραμμένῳ σε ἀνθρώπῳ ... ἄξιον εἶναι τοῦ παντός), to someone who's already been converted you rather get in the way of his attaining happiness by reaching the goal of virtue (προτετραμμένῳ δὲ σχεδὸν καὶ ἐμπόδιον τοῦ πρὸς τέλος ἀρετῆς ἐλθόντα εὐδαίμονα γενέσθαι). (*Clito.* 410d–e)

Regardless of whether Plato in fact authored this outburst, it implicitly expresses two fundamental questions about, respectively, the purpose and practice of the elenchus: (1) whether it is meant to produce concrete knowledge or to foster a broader cultivation of virtue; and (2) whether Socrates views his role as that of a unilateral teacher or of a collaborative participant. Contemporary discussion of the elenchus may effectively be traced along these lines.

³¹ In the philosophical literature, terms like “Socratic method” do not enjoy the definitional stability that they do in discussions of contemporary pedagogy.

³² For an overview of the debate regarding the authenticity of the dialogue, see Hayden W. Ausland, “On a Curious Platonic Dialogue,” *Ancient Philosophy* 25 (2005): 417–21.

2.2.1.1. For *What Is the Elenchus Intended?*

Clitophon articulates a “telic” elenchus: it is but the preparatory work for the ultimate goal (τέλος) of virtue, which necessarily consists in knowing something more than that one in fact knows nothing. However well philosophy may expose *pretenses* to knowledge, it must also produce knowledge itself—what properly “comes next after” (τὸ ἐφεξῆς) the elenctic process, from which it is distinct. This is why Clitophon is frustrated that Socrates does not help his interlocutors reestablish their footing on firmer conceptual ground after expertly disabusing interlocutors of their false beliefs. The telic approach would find a more sophisticated defender in Vlastos, who took on what he called “‘the problem of the elenchus’: How is it that Socrates claims to have proved a thesis false when, in point of logic, all he has proved is that the thesis is inconsistent with the conjunction of agreed-upon premises?”³³ He purported to solve this problem by showing that “Socrates’ belief-set consists entirely of true beliefs, from which it follows that [his premises] are true: to show that [his negation of the interlocutor’s thesis] follows from premises which are true, *is* to prove [that negation] true.”³⁴ On such an understanding, the elenchus is able—and meant—to produce soundly justified knowledge.

If the telic approach seeks to bridge elenctic inquiry and its epistemological fruits, others have challenged the very legitimacy of this distinction. The elenchus fails to produce concrete knowledge not because of a defect—whether ostensible (Vlastos) or real (Clitophon)—but because it is not primarily *meant* to do so in the first place. Pierre Hadot, who celebrated the ancients for their appreciation of philosophy as a “way of life,” explained that Socrates’s

philosophical method consists not in transmitting knowledge (which would mean *responding* to his disciples’ questions) but in *questioning* his disciples, for he himself has

³³ Vlastos, “Socratic Elenchus,” 21.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 28. For the full argument, see *ibid.*, 21–29.

nothing to say to them or teach them, so far as theoretical content of knowledge is concerned. ... It presupposes that knowledge and truth, as we have already seen, cannot be received ready-made, but must be engendered by the individual himself. ... It is *because* the interlocutor discovers the vanity of his knowledge that he will at the same time discover his truth. ... In the Socratic dialogue, the real question is less what is being talked about than who is doing the talking.³⁵

In this “coextensive” conception of the elenchus, the distinction between process and telos—between inquiry and knowledge—collapses. Virtue itself consists in “discuss[ing] virtue every day (ἐκάστης ἡμέρας)” (*Ap.* 38a). As Seeskin has put it, almost as if responding directly to Clitophon, “virtue is not only the object of the search but a determining factor in its success.”³⁶ The knowledge that philosophical inquiry is most fundamentally meant to produce is the very state of self-awareness that is synonymous with the perpetual practice of philosophy itself.³⁷

2.2.1.2. For *Whom* Is the Elenchus Intended?

Debate about the “what” of the elenchus intersects with debate about the “who.” A corollary of Clitophon’s telic construal is what might be called a “philanthropic” construal. Because he sees elenctic inquiry as a linear process of initiation into true knowledge, he expects Socrates to play the part of master to his disciple. Just as a teacher of gymnastics ought ultimately to provide

³⁵ Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (2002; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 27–28.

³⁶ Seeskin, *Dialogue and Discovery*, 42.

³⁷ Distinguishing telic from coextensive conceptions of the elenchus is more instructive than the common distinction between “constructive” and “destructive” ones. On the “constructive” view, the elenchus breaks down the interlocutor’s beliefs for the purpose of putting the pieces back together, so to speak, leading them to sounder knowledge. On the “destructive” view, however, the second move is never made; the elenchus only undermines unsound beliefs without producing anything concrete in their place; for a brief overview, see, e.g., Hugh H. Benson, “The Dissolution of the Problem of the Elenchus,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 13, ed. C. C. W. Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 45–46. The opposition of “constructive” versus “destructive” is limited by its assumption that concrete knowledge is the only thing that the elenchus might construct. It does not allow for the possibility that in cultivating epistemological humility, even a “purely destructive” elenchus can be said to have produced something constructive; cf. Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato’s Socrates*, 16–17.

“treatment” (θεραπεία) for his students’ bodies, the philosophical master ought to confer a kind of therapeutic benefit upon his students’ souls.

Although Vlastos’s telic account is considerably subtler than Clitophon’s, it too entails a philanthropic Socrates for similar underlying reasons. To be sure, Socrates is interested in his *own* learning to the extent that he is “constantly exposing the consistency of his beliefs to elenctic challenge” in search of “the coherence of the system as a whole.”³⁸ However, because no one else has come even remotely as close to achieving this coherence, Socratic philosophy is essentially uneven and hierarchical; the interlocutor stands to gain far more than does Socrates himself. Since Socrates presumably understands as much, his motivation for pursuing these conversations must lie primarily in his philanthropic investment in the benefit of those whose views he elenctically challenges. This is why, as Vlastos and most commentators note, the elenchus is essentially *ad hominem*: only if Socrates’s inquiries are specifically and intimately tailored to his interlocutors—not just what they think but also, and more fundamentally, how they *live*—can he help them improve their souls.³⁹

This philanthropic reading strongly recalls Socrates’s self-identification as “the god’s gift (τὴν τοῦ θεοῦ δόσιν)” (*Ap.* 30e) to Athens. However, it also conflicts with his insistence that he has “never been anyone’s teacher (διδάσκαλος). If anyone ... desires to listen to me when I am talking and dealing with my own concerns (τὰ ἐμαυτοῦ), I have never begrudged this to anyone” (*Ap.* 33a). Here, the elenchus appears less a public service than a private pursuit in which Socrates has a vested and unabashed personal interest. This is perhaps implied in his famous

³⁸ Vlastos, “Socratic Elenchus,” 27.

³⁹ See, e.g., Ruby Blondell, *The Play of Character of Plato’s Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 113–14; Brickhouse and Smith, “Socrates’ Elenctic Mission,” 135–37; idem, *Plato’s Socrates*, 13; and Vlastos, “Socratic Elenchus,” 4–11

summation of the examined life, which consists in “testing (ἐξετάζοντος) *myself* and others” (*Ap.* 38a). In the *Hippias Minor*, he says it explicitly:

It is always my custom to pay attention when someone is saying something, especially when the speaker seems to me to be wise. And because I desire to learn (ἐπιθυμῶν μαθεῖν) what he means, I question him thoroughly and examine and place side-by-side the things he says, so I can learn (ἵνα μάθω). ... You’ll find me being persistent about what’s said by this sort of person, questioning him so that I can benefit by learning something (ἵνα μαθῶν τι ὠφελῆθῶ). (*Hipp. min.* 369d–e)⁴⁰

If we normally conceptualize the elenchus in the active (Socrates as agent) and passive (interlocutor as recipient) voices, so to speak, then in these passages, Socrates puts it in the middle voice: he pursues philosophy “for his own benefit.” This is an almost “proprietary” conception of elenctic questioning. Philosophy is first and foremost Socrates’s self-interested examination of his *own* life, his care for his *own* soul.

While this proprietary elenchus has received less attention than the philanthropic, it has not gone unnoticed. Brickhouse and Smith have pointed out that if Socrates is himself to live an examined life, “it must be that in the process of examining others [he] regards himself as examining his own life, too.”⁴¹ Wolfsdorf has shown that Socrates’s elenctic questioning of others often causes him to change his own mind about the issue at hand, implying an interest in his own learning.⁴² Christopher Moore observes that as an emissary of the Delphic imperative to “know oneself,” Socrates could scarcely efface his own self-knowledge.⁴³ The proprietary construal of the elenchus therefore shifts the emphasis from the interlocutor as the passive *object*

⁴⁰ Cf. *Gorg.* 454a–b; 457e–448b; 505e–506a; and *Meno* 80c–d.

⁴¹ Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato’s Socrates*, 14; cf. idem, “Socrates’ Elenctic Mission,” 137.

⁴² Wolfsdorf, *Trials of Reason*, 21–22.

⁴³ Moore, *Socrates and Self-Knowledge*, 4–6.

of the inquiry to Socrates as the reflexive *subject* of the inquiry. While therapeutic benefit to others is an inevitable and indeed desirable side effect of Socrates's learning through dialogue, it is not its primary motivation.

2.2.1.3 Toward a Divinatory Elenchus

Unlike Hackforth, more recent scholars are perfectly happy to accept Plato's Delphic authorization of the elenchus at face value. Having done so, however, they are also perfectly happy to interpret the purpose and practice of the elenchus quite apart from these divinatory origins. In other words, they do not see Delphi as bearing directly on the character of Socratic philosophy—only indirectly on how it would have been presented and received in fourth-century Athens. In this way, these scholars are not as far from Hackforth's "voice of God, heard in the stillness of his own soul" as they might at first appear to be. They implicitly distinguish properly "philosophical" content from incidental "cultural" framing. Attention to Plato's negotiation of divinatory authority means challenging this distinction. Doing so may furnish additional, crucial evidence for navigating how, and to what ends, the elenchus functions in its telic, coextensive, philanthropic, and proprietary possibilities.

2.2.2. Plato's *Apology* as Oracular Literature

We have seen that the "literary turn" in Platonic studies was prompted by the recognition that Plato's dialogues are not literarily *sui generis* but conform to an otherwise attested genre, *Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι*. Because the *Apology* is a speech rather than a conversation, it somewhat

strains this genre.⁴⁴ However, there is another with which it accords quite well: the Delphic “oracle story.” These center around an oracular consultation at the prestigious site. The protagonist solicits a responsum that he hastily interprets in his favor, neglecting alternative, cautionary possible meanings that might have become obvious with a reflective pause. His rash misunderstanding brings about his doom and vindicates the subtler interpretation of the oracle. In her work on these stories, Kindt argues that this highly stereotyped plot suggests the contours of a discernible Delphic genre, even a specific literary tradition, that gives narrativized expression to a moralistic condemnation of hubris.⁴⁵

Herodotus’s story of Croesus, king of Lydia, is the classic example. Croesus asks Delphi whether his military advances against Persia will be successful, sending lavish offerings to the shrine in hopes of soliciting a favorable outcome (*Hist.* 1.46–52). In separate consultations, the oracle advises that he will “destroy a great empire” (*Hist.* 1.53) and that his reign will end only “whenever a mule becomes king of the Medes” (*Hist.* 1.55). Taking these to mean that he will conquer Persia and reign to perpetuity, Croesus confidently attacks. Unfortunately for him, the results directly contradict his expectations: he is routed and deposed (*Hist.* 1.84–87). When he issues a grievance against Apollo, the Delphic oracle explains that the empire to be destroyed was Lydia itself, while Cyrus, half-Persian and half-Mede, was the “mule” already upon the Persian throne. “Since [Croesus] misunderstood that oracle and failed to question the god further (ἐπανειρόμενος),” the Pythia explains, “let him admit that here he himself is at fault” (*Hist.* 1.91).

⁴⁴ In fact, Kahn sets the *Apology* outside the genre of Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι altogether, placing it rather in the genre of “courtroom speech revised for publication.” Idem, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 88. It should be noted that this determination is closely linked with Kahn’s view, addressed above, that the *Apology* is not fictive.

⁴⁵ See Julia Kindt, “Delphic Oracle Stories and the Beginning of Historiography: Herodotus’ *Croesus Logos*,” *CP* 101 (2006): 34–51; and idem, *Revisiting Delphi*.

Where divination presents the opportunity for transformative, dialogical exchange between deity and inquirer, Croesus is capable only of static, monological assertion of his preconceptions. As Kindt observes, he is “too preoccupied with himself to communicate with the gods successfully. As a result he is ultimately unable to benefit from the superior vantage point of the gods.”⁴⁶

Many scholars have noted that Plato’s *Apology* reads like a tendentious, indeed, downright topsy-turvy iteration of just this sort of oracle story. The protagonist is implicated in an oracular responsum—but he did not solicit it. The responsum seems favorable toward the protagonist—but he does not accept it at face value, instead striving to understand it better. The oracle is ultimately vindicated through the protagonist’s actions—but in a manner affirming him rather than delivering his comeuppance. The *Apology* contains all the core dramatic elements of an oracle story but configures them entirely in opposition to what someone familiar with the genre would have been culturally conditioned to expect. As Stokes aptly put it,

What impresses is the neatness and comprehensiveness with which Plato’s story reverses every single major feature of the story-pattern. Truth can be stranger than fiction; but it does not normally exhibit an attention to the detail of the fiction. Plainly put, the exactitude with which Socrates’ story reverses, turns upside-down, a standard Delphian story presents evidence of a design to turn the pattern upside-down.⁴⁷

The *Apology* works as literature by breaking every part of the literary mold into which it is so carefully cast. Put differently, the Delphic oracle genre is ripe for Plato’s literary exploitation precisely because of its formulaic structure. Being able to count on the audience’s expectation of so predictable an outcome allows Plato to tell a straightforward but compelling story that vividly conveys how and why Socrates is different—indeed, unprecedented.

⁴⁶ Kindt, *Revisiting Delphi*, 25.

⁴⁷ Stokes, “Socrates’ Mission,” 61.

Yet this is not only how Plato's *Apology* works as *literature*. It is also how it works as *philosophy*, for the two, as we have repeatedly seen, are fundamentally connected. However aesthetically satisfying it may be to watch Socrates upend the usual Delphic tropes—and it certainly *is* satisfying—the manner in which he does so is meant to convey something substantive about his understanding of the examined life. Kindt explains,

There is a deep congruence between oracle stories and Socratic philosophy because both focus on the *process of knowing*. I would argue that this congruence is at the very core of why the oracular features so prominently in Socrates' courtroom speech. The oracular literally lends itself to an enquiry into (or an exemplification of?) the elenctic method of practising philosophy: both the interpretation of oracles (as depicted in oracle stories) and Socrates' method of investigation (as depicted by Plato) ultimately aim at unmasking human ignorance; both are based on a dialogical approximation of truth; both are ultimately directed towards a deep insight into the nature of things.

Moving beyond the linear preoccupation with Delphic legitimization that has constrained most scholarship on the elenchus, Kindt points to how Plato used the genre of Delphic narrative to configure structural affinities between oracular and elenctic inquiry. The effort to understand an oracular pronouncement as deeply as possible by further questioning it and considering it from every angle—as well as the epistemological humility that would prompt one to do so in the first place—are models of philosophical learning through dialogue.

The Delphic literary genre provides essential context for Socrates's attempt to “refute” (ἐλέγχω) the oracular responsum. Many have struggled to understand how such an attempt could be compatible with Socrates's profession of pious commitment to Delphi; this alleged incompatibility led Hackforth, for instance, to doubt Socrates's sincerity. However, the story of Croesus shows that “questioning over and over again” (ἐπανερόμαι) is in fact the reaction that the oracle *demand*s. The key nuance is that the inquirer is bidden to question the apparent meaning of the particular responsum that he has received, not the integrity of the oracle itself. Far from being impious, this questioning reflects pious recognition of divine superiority; because the

gods' knowledge far surpasses that of humanity, their language is suppler, expressing truth with subtleties and depths that defy ordinary human understandings of speech.⁴⁸ Divine truth is therefore the very premise of questioning the oracle, as Socrates himself says: "Surely [the god] does not lie; it is not legitimate (θέμις) for him to do so" (*Ap.* 21b). His attempt to "refute" the oracle may therefore be understood in light of the oracularly sanctioned effort to question its apparent meaning—to probe the deeper significance of the god's esteem for his wisdom.⁴⁹

Sarah Iles Johnston has described divination in general as a "two-way conversation"⁵⁰ and called specific attention to the fact that "Delphi's reputation for delivering ambiguous replies depended on the fact that it was what we might call a 'conversational' oracle."⁵¹ The inquirer's continued questioning is the practical realization of this conversational character. The protagonists of typical oracle stories want concrete information delivered up as efficiently as possible; they mistakenly regard divination as a transactional and purely instrumental interchange. By depicting the oracle dispensing responsa meant to prompt pause, reflection, and further inquiry, these stories destabilize such misunderstandings. Instead, the goal of divination is to maneuver the inquirer into a true conversation with the god, prompting self-reflection in accordance with the Delphic maxim. Most oracle stories are about the breakdown of this

⁴⁸ Cf. Kindt, "Delphic Oracle Stories," 35–41.

⁴⁹ Cf. John Bussanich, "Socrates' Religious Experiences," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Socrates*, eds. John Bussanich and Nicholas D. Smith (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 284; McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 224; and idem, "Elenctic Interpretation," 129. Scholars troubled by the fact that the oracle never explicitly commands Socrates to philosophize, as he claims (see *Ap.* 28e, 30a, 33c, 38a), have missed the significance of the Delphic genre; see, e.g., McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 211; and Stokes, "Socrates' Mission," 30. The oracle commands him to philosophize to the extent that philosophy is the expression of the oracular injunction to question the responsum, which Socrates correctly understands.

⁵⁰ Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*, Blackwell Ancient Religions (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

conversation. Croesus talks *past* Delphi, not *with* it. He fails to learn from the gods because he does not understand that oracular learning happens binarily through exchange, not unilaterally through pronouncement. Socrates is an inverted Delphic protagonist because he *does* understand this, engaging the oracle in the genuine dialogue that it invites.

However, Socrates upends expectations in yet a subtler way: his dialogue with the god is realized in dialogue with other people. He does not continually question the Pythia alone, holed up in the sacred confines of the shrine, as the rebuke of Croesus might lead one to suppose. Indeed, since it was his friend who sought the consultation, he was never at Delphi in the first place! The oracle positions Socrates in relation to others in a puzzling manner (“no one is wiser”). He therefore follows its lead and structures his own investigation in relation to others, pursuing his pious questioning of the oracle in the form of questioning his fellow Athenians:

ὅμως δὲ ἀναγκαῖον ἐδόκει εἶναι τὸ τοῦ
θεοῦ περὶ πλείστου ποιεῖσθαι—ἰτέον
οὖν, σκοποῦντι τὸν χρησμὸν τί λέγει,
ἐπὶ ἅπαντας τοὺς τι δοκοῦντας εἰδέναι.

I must attach the greatest
importance to the god’s oracle, so I
must go to all those who had any
reputation for knowledge to
examine its meaning. (*Ap.* 21e)

Socrates does not question the oracle directly, discern the imperative to question others elenctically on this model, and then go and do so, as would be the case in a more straightforward narrative of legitimization. Rather, his dialogue with the oracle quite simply *is* his dialogue with other people; his elenchus of the oracular claim that he is wise is one and the same as his elenchus of others’ claims that *they* are wise.

This identity has important implications for efforts to characterize the elenchus along the lines discussed above. Socrates cannot honor the Delphic imperative of questioning the oracle as fully as possible unless he encounters someone wiser than he, since this would be the clearest, strongest way to refute its apparent meaning. This means that unless he has examined “all”

(ἄπαντας) the purportedly wise, any firm conclusions he were to reach would constitute the type of hubristic inference that normally spells the doom of a Delphic protagonist. Kindt spells out what this means for the elenchus:

Just like the examination of the truthfulness of the oracle, Socrates' philosophical mission is never final, never complete. There could be absolute certainty as to whether the oracle was indeed right to say that nobody was wiser than Socrates only if the philosopher had indeed investigated *all* human beings—an impossible task.⁵²

Because elenctic questioning is an extension of, not an analogue to, oracular questioning, we may go even further: Socrates's philosophical mission is never final because it *is* the examination of the oracle, which itself is never final. He therefore draws no essential distinction between his philosophizing before and after he realized that the “oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing[.] ... So even now I continue (ταῦτ' οὖν ἐγὼ μὲν ἔτι καὶ νῦν) this investigation as the god bade me” (*Ap.* 23a–b).

In this way, the divinatory identity of the elenchus gives vivid expression to a coextensive construal of Socratic philosophizing while strongly undercutting the telic construal. One cannot linearly advance from elenctic questions to concrete answers any more than one can speak with every purportedly wise person on earth. Virtue is not the neatly packaged epistemological product of self- and cross-examination through elenctic conversation. It is, to the limited extent that human beings may achieve it, a mode of living—and that mode *is* elenctic conversation itself, adopted as a perpetual practice; the virtuous life is the examined life. This coextensivity emerges by implication across the definitional and aporetic dialogues, which do not build upon one another as if contributing to a storehouse of knowledge but depict

⁵² Kindt, *Revisiting Delphi*, 102.

independent conversations pursued with distinct individuals.⁵³ For Socrates to verify the oracle means to pursue a lifetime of such conversations.

These conversations do a great deal of therapeutic good for Socrates's interlocutors, even if they do not always recognize it. The Delphic portrayal of the elenchus is therefore closely associated with the philanthropic reading. Elenctic conversation "is what the god orders (κελεύει) me to do, and I think there is no greater blessing for the city (οὐδέν πω ὑμῖν μείζον ἀγαθὸν γενέσθαι ἐν τῇ πόλει) than my service to the god (τῷ θεῷ ὑπηρεσίαν)" (*Ap.* 30a). However, this sublime commitment to a divine commission for the benefit of the city is an *inference* that Socrates reaches in light of the therapeutic effects of his philosophical activity. The fundamental *motivation* of this activity is in fact his effort to understand the oracle for himself. His interlocutors are involved in this effort primarily to the extent that they are implicated by comparison in the responsum. When he talks to them, they function essentially as "proxies" for the oracle, which remains the real object of his examination.⁵⁴

The Delphic literary genre therefore grants *conceptual* priority to the proprietary reading of the elenchus even as it offers a stirring expression of its emergent philanthropic dimension. Configuring elenctic questioning in terms of a divinatory "ur-elenchus" is so consequential because the god is the one interlocutor upon whom Socrates could not possibly hope to confer philanthropic benefit; if he is questioning the oracle, it could not be about anything other than his own learning. The essentially dialogical form of inquiry called forth by the oracle is transferred to the interlocutor, but the focus remains—as it would in an oracular consultation—on the

⁵³ So Wolfsdorf, *Trials of Reason*, 22; and Jacques A. Baily, "What You Say, What You Believe, and What You Mean," *Ancient Philosophy* 19 (1999): 75; contra Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 59–65.

⁵⁴ I thank Agnes Callard for drawing my attention to this idea of the interlocutor as an oracular "proxy."

inquirer himself. As Moore puts it, “Socratic self-knowledge comes about especially in conversation with other people,” for “knowing oneself is akin to, even continuous with, knowing someone else. ... [It] means working on oneself, with others, to become the sort of person who could know himself, and thus be responsible to the world, to others, and to oneself.”⁵⁵ By making Socrates’s oracular “ur-elenchus” the motor of elenctic inquiry in general, Plato dramatizes and epitomizes a vision of philosophy as the pursuit of one’s own learning through ongoing dialogue with others committed to that pursuit—with the result that all involved cultivate virtue.⁵⁶

Telling Socrates’s life as an oracle story finally conveys why this vision of philosophy was so subversive as to provoke a death sentence. Hugh Bowden has documented Athenian reliance on Delphi for navigating issues that could not be resolved by democratic debate.⁵⁷ He has also called attention to the opulence of Athenian sacrifice.⁵⁸ If Plato positioned Socrates so as to consecrate his humble inquiry as the proper comportment in the face of a seemingly favorable oracular responsum, then Athens might have come off uncomfortably reminiscent of his implicit literary foil—someone like Croesus, who made such desperate efforts “to please the god at Delphi with generous offerings” (*Hist.* 1.50). They would be guilty of the same underlying transgression against the god: “attach[ing] little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things” (*Ap.* 30a) and “avoid[ing] giving an account of [their] life”

⁵⁵ Moore, *Socrates and Self-Knowledge*, 6.

⁵⁶ On dialogue as “a specifically philosophical form of speech,” see Hannah Arendt, “Socrates,” in *The Promise of Politics*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2005), 12.

⁵⁷ Hugh Bowden, *Classical Athens and the Delphic Oracle: Divination and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

(*Ap.* 39c).⁵⁹ Inasmuch as the elenchus is the extension of Socrates's (correct) response to Delphi, it is not simply an irritating investigation of individual Athenian mores. It is a fundamental challenge to their entire understanding of what their gods seek from them.

2.2.3. The Divinatory Structure of Dialogical Philosophy

Bowden has pointed out that “oracle stories are generally more concerned with the behavior of the enquirer than with the methods of the oracular shrine itself.”⁶⁰ While Herodotus, for instance, does mention Croesus's lavish sacrifices, he is silent on the mechanics of the consultation, simply reporting the content of the god's answer to the king's question. Primarily at stake, as Bowden notes, are the characterological implications of what Croesus does with this answer. Plato's oracle story about Socrates certainly coheres with this characterological emphasis. The relentless theme of the narrative is that philosophy is synonymous with the proper disposition in response to oracular communication—which is to say, in response to the limits of human knowledge. By contrast, Chaerephon's divinatory consultation, which literarily enables this theme in the first place, is narrated, from start to finish, in a single breathless sentence.

At the same time, we have seen that Plato does employ sustained attention to one central element of divinatory procedure: its dialogical character. Oracular consultations reflect a binary understanding of learning. One does not gain insight into imperceptible reality through Cartesian solitude. Rather, one must repair to an oracular shrine and engage with another's voice—a divine one, in this case—questioning it so as to appreciate its perspective most fully and integrating that

⁵⁹ Cf. Kindt, *Revisiting Delphi*, 109.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 51; cf. Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 132; and Simon Price, “Delphi and Divination,” in *Greek Religion and Society*, eds. P. E. Easterling and J. V. Muir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 132.

perspective into one's own. In other words, learning is a practice of constructive confrontation with an external subject. It is no coincidence that this could well be mistaken for a description of the Socratic elenchus itself. By situating all elenctic questioning as a phenomenological extension of Socrates's questioning of the oracle, Plato relocates the dialogical structure of the oracular divine-human encounter onto the philosophical human-human encounter. This reflects more complex negotiation with, as Maurizio puts it, "the 'ritual logic' of divinatory consultation" than the oracular genre alone might suggest.⁶¹ Plato appropriates and reconfigures divination in order to structure the actual procedure of elenctic questions and answers, not only to give narrative expression to its epistemic and characterological preconditions.

The inquiries posed at Delphi and other Greek oracular sites did not seek transcendent, mystical access to the fullness of divine wisdom. They came for the rather more circumscribed implications that that wisdom may bear for a specific, concrete, and often imminent problem. This goal directly impacted the usual form of oracular inquiries. The majority of Delphic inquirers did not bring open-ended questions. Instead, they sought the god's preference between well-defined alternatives.⁶² According to Bowden, "the most common form of question was: 'would it be more profitable and better for us to...?'"⁶³ In this way, as Catherine Morgan observes, "divination help[ed] to define and focus experience by forcing concentration upon a single problem to the exclusion of all else."⁶⁴ The oracular dialogue between god and mortal, for

⁶¹ Maurizio, "Anthropology and Spirit Possession," 72.

⁶² Cf. Herbert B. Huffmon, "The Oracular Process: Delphi and the Near East," *VT* 57 (2007): 456; and Catherine Morgan, *Athletes and Oracles: The Transformation of Olympia and Delphi in the Eighth Century BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 155.

⁶³ Bowden, *Classical Athens*, 22.

⁶⁴ Morgan, *Athletes and Oracles*, 154.

all its gravity, was ultimately oriented rather concretely around the latter's attempt best to conduct his or her life.

Elenctic questioning proceeds in the exact same manner. To be sure, philosophy is popularly associated with lofty, sprawling questions—"What is being?" and the like—and Socrates seems at first to ask such things, striving after the definitions of various virtues. For instance, he opens his discussion of piety with Euthyphro by asking, "What kind of thing (ποῖόν τι) do you say that the pious and the impious are (εἶναι)?" (*Euthyph.* 5c–d). However, the questions that actually drive this discussion are quite different:

Is the religiously proper being loved by the gods because it is religiously proper, or is it religiously proper because it is being loved by the gods? (*Euthyph.* 10a)

It is being loved then because it is religiously proper, but it is not religiously proper because it is being loved? (*Euthyph.* 10d)

And yet it is something loved and god-loved because it is being loved by the gods? (*Euthyph.* 10d)

See whether you think all that is religiously proper is of necessity just. ... And is then all that is just religiously proper? Or is all that is religiously proper just, but not all that is just religiously proper, but some of it is and some is not? (*Euthyph.* 11e–12a)⁶⁵

This, not the framing question, is the elenchus. Vlastos famously emphasized Socrates's prohibition on answering philosophical questions with long speeches (μακρολογία).⁶⁶ The divinatory construction of the elenchus shows that this constraint operates on the questioning end as well. Recalling oracular inquiries, elenctic questions present a succinct choice between clearly specified alternatives. Their brevity keeps the interlocutors each actively involved in a genuine dialogue. Their precision keeps the interlocutors focused by provisionally circumscribing the

⁶⁵ For reasons that will become relevant in chapter 4, I have modified the translation of the *Euthyphro*. "Piety" corresponds to the Greek εὐσέβεια while "religiously proper" corresponds to the Greek ὅσιον.

⁶⁶ Vlastos, "Socratic Elenchus," 7; cf. *Gorg.* 449b.

scope of the inquiry, dividing a potentially overwhelmingly expansive question into manageable steps. Like divination, the elenchus “define[s] and focus[es] experience by forcing concentration upon a single problem to the exclusion of all else.”

If the analogy between divination and the elenchus is clear when it comes to the questions, it might appear more strained with regards to the answers. What, after all, could replies made from limited human insight have in common with oracular responsa that bear the weight of all-encompassing divine wisdom? However, the latter have other salient features. Most scholars now reject the popular image of the Pythia’s responsa as incoherent gibberish that required expert decipherment (perhaps by the Delphic priests). On the contrary, as Joseph Fontenrose noted, “All records of responses that mention the Pythia represent her speaking directly and clearly to the inquirer.”⁶⁷ To say that Delphic responsa were intelligible is not, of course, to say that they were transparent. As Maurizio observes,

At this threshold where intelligible human language becomes resistant to analysis, the diviner’s productions become random, that is, they appear to be demonstrably outside the control of the diviner, therefore to be under the power of spirit possession and credible. Perhaps more importantly, such linguistic gestures serve as a reminder that however close to the human world the spirits may come, they are not part of it. At the moment when the distance between the human world and divine seems obliterated, linguistic obfuscation, however it is achieved, indicates that that distance is not to be crossed.⁶⁸

Paradoxically, intelligibility is the precondition for enigma. Gibberish may puzzle, but because it has no semantic value whatsoever, it may not do so in a manner that prompts reflection and discussion. Oracular dialogue occurs at the intersection of the intelligible and the cryptic, in the gap between understanding words and understanding what they are meant to convey.

⁶⁷ Joseph Fontenrose, *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations with a Catalogue of Responses* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 213; cf. Bowden, *Classical Athens*, 21.

⁶⁸ Maurizio, “Anthropology and Spirit Possession,” 82.

It goes without saying that intelligibility is a cornerstone of elenctic dialogue. In keeping with the prohibition on speechmaking, elenctic interlocutors are bound to respond crisply and straightforwardly. Intentional ambiguity is out of the question. This is why, in the *Gorgias*, when Callicles complains that Socrates is always “saying the same things over and over again” (*Gorg.* 490e), Socrates retorts, “I find the opposite fault in you—I think you never say the same things about the same issues” (*Gorg.* 491b). Such obfuscation is the province of eristic or sophistic machinations to win an argument at any cost, not a genuine search for truth.

However, a measure of ambiguity does result from Vlastos’s second elenctic rule: the obligation to “say what you believe”—that is, to answer elenctic questions in keeping with one’s own sincere stance on the issue.⁶⁹ This constraint reflects the therapeutic aim of the elenchus. Questioning one’s assertions can prompt a reckoning with one’s life only if those assertions reflect how one lives. So bound, Socratic interlocutors expose their implicit beliefs—which is to say, convey them in language—often, it seems, for the first time.⁷⁰ This is why so many find themselves unable to explain a concept in which they had fancied themselves experts before Socrates asked them about it. Laches, for instance, exclaims in the dialogue that bears his name,

I am ready not to give up, Socrates, although I am not really accustomed to arguments of this kind. ... I am getting really annoyed at being unable to express what I think in this fashion (ἄ νοῶ μὴ οἶός τ’ εἰμὶ εἰπεῖν). I still think I know what courage is, but I can’t understand how it has escaped (διέφυγεν) me just now so that I can’t pin it down in words (συλλαβεῖν τῷ λόγῳ) and say what it is. (*Lach.* 194a–b)⁷¹

⁶⁹ Vlastos, “Socratic Elenchus,” 7–10.

⁷⁰ Cf. Michael N. Forster’s observation that “Socratic induction [is] not ... a method for *proving* to an interlocutor a *new* belief on the basis of his beliefs about analogous cases or types or case, but instead ... a method for making explicit to him a belief which *he already implicitly holds* by *illuminating* it in light of his beliefs about analogous cases or types of cases.” Idem, “Socratic Refutation,” *Rhizai: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 3 (2006): 20–21.

⁷¹ Cf. *Euthyph.* 11b–e; and *Meno* 80a–b. Notably, Meno says that the confusion that Socrates’s questions foment makes him liable to be “driven away for practicing sorcery (ἄν ὡς γόης ἀπαχθείης)” (*Meno* 80b)!

In an unexpected point of contact with divination, intelligibility and ambiguity are inseparable characteristics of elenctic answers. Bidden to express their sincere beliefs briefly and clearly—“confirming [their] own view by putting it into words” (*Lach.* 194c), as Socrates says—interlocutors inevitably find that those beliefs entail confusions and contradictions of which they were previously unaware. Rather than proving disruptive, however, these ambiguities drive the elenchus onward because they require further interpretation. This is why Socrates responds almost giddily to Laches’s frustration, urging, “Well, my friend, a good hunter ought to pursue the trail and not give up. . . . Let’s also summon Nicias here to the hunt” (*Lach.* 194c). As in a Delphic consultation, the latent ambiguity introduced by elenctic answers is the product of and the precondition for learning through dialogue. In both arenas, hearing and responding to the ambiguity reflects correct understanding of the pragmatics of the respective discourse.

Attention to the procedure of divinatory consultation shows that the rootedness of the elenchus in Socrates’s own elenctic inquiry of the Delphic oracle is not simply a narrative conceit. It reflects substantive, practical affinity between them: both are binary modes of knowing in which truth emerges within the interpersonal space of dialogue. In elenctic philosophy, the inquirer seeks out the insight of a human rather than a divine interlocutor. This human voice assumes the role of the fiat of divine pronouncement, confronting the inquirer with the external information constituted by another’s perspective. Beholden to another person, each interlocutor gives newfound verbal expression to the ambiguities inherent in their beliefs, prompting further, collaborative interpretation. The result is that as elenctic conversation cycles on, the distinction between oracular inquiry and responsum begins to blur. Even if it opened with one person (e.g., Socrates) clearly questioning and another (e.g., Laches) clearly answering, at a certain point, each is both questioning and answering the other; each is simultaneously filling the

oracular roles of human inquirer and divine answerer.⁷² The divinatory structure of the elenchus reflects the practical unity of its proprietary and philanthropic dimensions. One cannot learn from others' perspectives without implicitly inviting them also to learn from one's own.

So conceived, every elenctic conversation is a kind of oracular consultation guided by the Delphic ideal of self-knowledge and condemnation of hubris. We have already seen why this might have threatened Athens. In a subtler and yet more radical way, it also implicates the cultic establishment at Delphi itself. Although the reputation of the oracle has benefitted from its association with the quintessential philosophical hero, its operations were hardly always so lofty. Access to the oracle was closely guarded. As H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell showed in their classic study, the shrine was open for consultations only at certain times.⁷³ When it *was* open, “the Delphians claimed for themselves the right of first consultation.”⁷⁴ Thereafter, oracular sessions came at a steep price, inevitably privileging elite clients.⁷⁵ Among those who could pay up, the order was sometimes ultimately determined by lot.⁷⁶ It should scarcely be surprising that this state of affairs was ripe for corruption, as Leslie Kurke has documented.⁷⁷ Ironically, while Herodotus's report of Croesus's lavish attempts to bribe the oracle is clearly condemnatory, it realistically reflects the problematic politics of access to the fabled site.

⁷² This is vividly dramatized when Socrates coaches Laches in an elenchus of Nicias (*Lach.* 194d–200c).

⁷³ See H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, *The Delphic Oracle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 17.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷⁵ See *ibid.*, 31–32; and Leslie Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations: Popular Tradition, Cultural Dialogue, and the Invention of Greek Prose* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 55–59.

⁷⁶ See Parke and Wormell, *Delphic Oracle*, 31.

⁷⁷ Kurke, *Aesopic Conversations*, 56–57.

Plato's negotiation of divination in the *Apology* targets this politics of access. The material constraints placed upon technical initiation of oracular communication are unbefitting of the therapeutic force that this communication bears. Access to divinatory insight ought to depend on one's readiness to be challenged and transformed by it, not on one's ability to pay for it. The elenchus as Plato constructs it in the *Apology* therefore does nothing less than liberate the moral and epistemological power of divination from the confines of the Delphic sanctuary. Socrates mobilizes the dialogical dynamic of divinatory learning and confers it to all those committed to the self-examination that the oracle enjoins. Elenctic inquirers have an advantage over their oracular counterparts, for they need not repair to a specific site at a specific time with a specific payment; they need only find good conversation partners. In Promethean fashion, even Socrates's own demise cannot hinder the momentous consequences:

Now I want to prophesy (*χρησμοφῆσαι*) to those who convicted me, for I am at the point when men prophesy most, when they are about to die. I say gentlemen, to those who voted to kill me, that vengeance will come upon you immediately after my death, a vengeance much harder to bear than that which you took in killing me. You did this in the belief that you would avoid giving an account (*ἔλεγχον*) of your life, but I maintain that quite the opposite will happen to you. There will be more people to test (*ἐλέγχοντες*) you, whom I now held back, but you did not notice it. They will be more difficult to deal with as they will be younger and you will resent them more. You are wrong if you believe that by killing people you will prevent anyone from reproaching you for not living in the right way. To escape such tests is neither possible nor good, but it is best and easiest not to discredit others but to prepare oneself to be as good as possible. With this prophecy (*μαντευσάμενος*) to you who convicted me, I part from you. (*Ap.* 39c–d)

The oracular voice of Delphi, urging virtue and rebuking hubris, sounds whenever and wherever two or more people come together in elenctic inquiry, examining themselves along with (and through) each other. Apollo's oracle to Chaerephon teems with paradoxes, but there is perhaps none more fundamental than this: precisely by virtue of its own success in driving Socrates's elenchus, it is the last oracle that need ever be dispensed.

2.3. Balaam and Prophecy in Micah 6:1–8

Plato’s engagement with Delphi in the *Apology* reflects an attitude that cannot adequately be characterized either by pure typological continuity or outright ideological rejection. Instead, it represents a more complex stance that I have called “negotiation.” Plato draws with familiarity upon the deep structure of divination in order to construct dialogical philosophy both on its model and over against it. He discursively *asserts* a decided break with his cultural environs even as, like all human beings, he remains firmly rooted therein.

Having recognized the dynamics of this negotiation with divination in Plato, we may now explore how they play out in biblical depictions of Balaam. As a non-Israelite diviner who communicates with the God of Israel, Balaam quite obviously raises questions about the nature of prophetic communication and its relationship to divinatory practices. From the earliest stirrings of Jewish exegetical activity, the canonically primary Balaam narrative (Numbers 22–24) functioned as a literary site for theorizing prophecy, as John T. Greene has shown in detail.⁷⁸ For a long time, scholars did not usually characterize the narrative *itself* this way. Rather, they regarded it as the most developed resource for traditio-historical reconstruction of a primitive Balaam tradition.⁷⁹ Today, however, commentators are increasingly interested in reading this episode as one of the first examples of Balaam’s function as a cipher for the construction of

⁷⁸ See John T. Greene, “Balaam: Prophet, Diviner, and Priest in Selected Ancient Israelite and Hellenistic Jewish Sources,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1989 Seminar Papers*, ed. David J. Lull (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 57–106; idem, “Balaam as Figure and Type in Ancient Semitic Literature to the First Century B.C.E., With a Survey of Selected Post-Philo Applications of the Balaam Figure and Type,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1990 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 82–147; idem, “The Balaam Figure and Type Before, During, and After the Period of the Pseudepigrapha,” *JSP* 8 (1991): 67–110; and idem, *Balaam and His Interpreters: A Hermeneutical History of the Balaam Traditions*, BJS 244 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992).

⁷⁹ See, e.g., Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. Bernhard W. Anderson (1972; repr., Atlanta: Scholars, 1981), 74–79. A nuanced version of this tradition-historical approach may be found in Jonathan Miles Robker, *Balaam in Text and Tradition*, FAT 131 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019).

authentic prophecy. As we shall see, it appears to make tendentious use of the language characteristic of technical Mesopotamian divination. This suggests a constructive, creative effort to configure authentic Israelite prophecy in relation to broader divinatory culture—embodied here by an evidently well-known divinatory professional, if Deir ‘Alla is any indication.

The primary purpose of the following pages is to argue that there is at least one other highly developed biblical employment of Balaam in constructing authentic prophecy: the reference to him in Mic 6:5—the only such reference, in fact, in the Latter Prophets. This is part of a justly famous passage, culminating in the aforementioned example of subversive prophetic critique of pretenses to cultic piety:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>שְׁמַעוּ־נָא אֶת אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אָמַר
 קוּם רִיב אֶת־הַהָרִים
 וְתִשְׁמַעְנָה הַגְּבְעוֹת קוֹלְךָ:
 שְׁמַעוּ הָרִים אֶת־רִיב יְהוָה
 וְהָאֲתָנִים מִסְּדֵי אֲרָץ
 כִּי רִיב לִיהוָה עִם־עַמּוֹ
 וְעַם־יִשְׂרָאֵל יִתְוַכַּח:
 עַמִּי מִה־עָשִׂיתִי לָךְ?
 וּמָה הִלַּאתִיךָ עֲנֵה בִי:
 כִּי הִעֲלֵתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
 וּמִבֵּית עֲבָדִים פָּדִיתִיךָ
 וְאֶשְׁלַח לְפָנֶיךָ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה אֹהֶרֶן
 וּמִרְיָם:
 עַמִּי זְכַר־נָא מִה־יָעַץ בְּלֹק מְלֹךְ
 מוֹאָב
 וּמִה־עָנָה אֹתוֹ בְּלֶעָם בֶּן
 בְּעוֹר
 מִן־הַשְּׁטִיִּם עַד־הַגְּלִגָּל
 לְמַעַן דַּעַת צְדָקוֹת יְהוָה:
 בְּמָה אֶקְדָּם יְהוָה
 אֲכַפֵּף לְאֱלֹהֵי מְרוֹם
 הָאֶקְדָּמְנוּ בְּעוֹלוֹת
 בְּעִגְלִים בְּנֵי שָׁנָה:
 הֲיִרְצָה יְהוָה בְּאֵלְפֵי אֵילִים
 בְּרַבְבוֹת נְחֹלֵי־שָׁמֶן
 הֲאֵתֵן בְּכוֹרֵי פִשְׁעֵי</p> | <p>¹ Hear what YHWH is saying:
 “Up, plead the case before the mountains!
 Let the hills hear your voice.
 ² Hear, O mountains, YHWH’s case—
 you too, the very foundations of the earth.”
 For YHWH has a case against his people;
 he is contending with Israel.
 ³ “My people! What have I done to you?
 How have I burdened you? Answer me!
 ⁴ For I bore you up from the land of Egypt;
 I redeemed you from the house of bondage;
 I dispatched Moses, Aaron, and Miriam before
 you.
 ⁵ My people! Recall what counsel Balak, king of
 Moab, sought,
 and what Balaam son of Beor answered
 him—
 between Shittim and Gilgal—
 in order that you might recognize YHWH’s
 just actions:
 ⁶ ‘With what may I approach YHWH—
 supplicate before God on high?
 May I approach him with burnt offerings?
 With year-old calves?
 ⁷ Might YHWH accept thousands of rams?
 Tens of thousands of streams of oil?
 Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression—
 the fruit of my body for my own sin?’</p> |
|---|--|

פְּרִי בְטָנִי חֲטָאת נַפְשִׁי:
הִגִּיד לְךָ אָדָם מֵה־טוֹב⁸
וּמֵה־יְהוָה דֹּרֵשׁ מִמֶּךָ
כִּי אִם־עֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד
וְהִצַּנֵּעַ לְכַת עִם־אֱלֹהֶיךָ:

⁸ ‘He has told you, O mortal, what is good,
and what YHWH seeks from you:
only to do justice, and to love goodness,
and to walk modestly with your God.’”
(Mic 6:1–8)

This reference to Balaam was enough to motivate the ancient rabbis to select the passage as part of the prophetic selection (*haftarah*) for the lectionary unit (*parashah*) containing the pentateuchal Balaam story. Today, scholars continue to value the reference as another datum in Balaam’s tradition history.⁸⁰

However, these scholars overwhelmingly regard Micah’s reference to Balaam as an afterthought within the context of the passage itself. This assessment is part of the regnant form-critical identification of the passage as a ריב, or “covenant lawsuit,” in which YHWH brings Israel to trial for failing to uphold the covenant.⁸¹ As evidence of his own faithfulness, he recites a résumé of the *Heilsgeschichte*, including the Balaam story (cf. Josh 24:9–10). On this view, YHWH does not mean to recall Balaam specifically so much as the entire wilderness journey, for which Balaam is a synecdoche.⁸² Mic 6:6–7, then, is the imagined response, the “guilty plea,” of the individual Israelite—the אדם who is subsequently addressed in Mic 6:8. Recognizing his wrongdoing, he comes before YHWH with lavish conciliatory offerings. However, these efforts will do him no good, for “what is good” is constituted fundamentally by the ethical ideals

⁸⁰ See, recently, Ed Noort, “Balaam the Villain: The History of Reception of the Balaam Narrative in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets,” in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, eds. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 11–12; and Robker, *Balaam*, 243–46.

⁸¹ See, e.g., Herbert B. Huffmon, “The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets,” *JBL* 78 (1959): 286–87.

⁸² See, recently, Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *Micah: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 192.

pronounced in Mic 6:8. It is Israel's failure to uphold *these* standards, not the cultic ones of Mic 6:6–7, that has landed them in the cosmic courthouse.

Some, like Theodor Lescow and James L. Mays, have actually gone further: the final three verses are form-critically (and therefore, in all likelihood, composition-historically) separate from the ריב passage.⁸³ The question-and-answer structure of these verses reflects the Gattung of “priestly תורה,” wherein, not unlike the later rabbinic mode of שאלה and תשובה, an individual would pose a technical inquiry (of a legal or cultic nature) to the priests and receive a responsum (see, e.g., Deut 17:8–13).⁸⁴ On this reading, Mic 6:6–8 is a prophetic subversion of the priestly תורה—itsself reflected elsewhere in the Bible.⁸⁵ In response to his inquiry about cultic procedure, the worshiper is himself submitted to a counter-inquiry regarding his apparently shallow understanding of the God he seeks to serve. In Mays's fine summary, “While the answer completes the formal structure, it does not offer the expected information about the acceptable sacrifice” but rather “a rejection of the inquiry as misplaced.”⁸⁶ At some point, this originally independent “prophetic תורה” was redactionally situated as a continuation of the ריב passage.

Whether we see in Mic 6:1–8 one Gattung or two, the result is that the Balaam reference in Mic 6:5 has little substantive connection with the cultic question and prophetic responsum that

⁸³ Theodor Lescow, *Micha 6, 6–8: Studien zu Sprache, Form und Auslegung*, AzTh 25 (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1966), 46–47; and James Luther Mays, *Micah: A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM, 1976), 137–38.

⁸⁴ On the priestly תורה, see, e.g., Joachim Begrich, “Die priesterliche Thora,” in *Werden und Wesen des Alten Testaments: Vorträge gehalten auf der internationalen Tagung alttestamentlicher Forscher zu Göttingen vom 4.–10. September 1935*, eds. Paul Volz, Friedrich Stummer, and Johannes Hempel (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1936), 63–88.

⁸⁵ For perhaps the clearest example, see Hag 2:10–19. For discussion, see, e.g., Eric M. Meyers, “The Use of *tôrâ* in Haggai 2:11 and the Role of the Prophet in the Restoration Community,” in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday*, eds. Carol L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 69–76.

⁸⁶ Mays, *Micah*, 137.

follow. Yet while this might have been true at an earlier stage in the development of this passage, it would be a mistake to let the form-critical dissection of subunits permanently dictate their function in all subsequent compositional configurations. Why, for instance, must the Balaam reference only be a synecdoche for the wilderness tradition? Surely there are other episodes—such as the molten calf fiasco or Massah and Meribah—that could have served this function just as effectively, if not more so.⁸⁷ If, instead, we entertain the possibility that the redactor of this passage seized upon a reference to Balaam for a more specific reason, we begin to notice that the reference is not at all isolated from the adjacent content. Through sustained usage of technical divinatory terminology that is interwoven with a broader allusion to the pentateuchal Balaam narrative, the passage thematizes prophecy. My argument is that Mic 6:1–8 does not simply *reference* Balaam. Rather, it is *about* Balaam—and failure to notice this has obscured our understanding of the whole thing, including its famous closing lines. This passage is an exercise in native biblical theorizing of authentic prophecy as subversive speech, in relation to—and, specifically, in *contrast* to—divination.

2.3.1. Divinatory Language in the Mican and Pentateuchal Balaam Texts

We saw that Plato’s *Apology* reflects engagement with the mechanics and procedure of divination through, among other things, its explicit use of technical divinatory terminology. Verbs such as χρησμοφδέω and μαντεύομαι (*Ap.* 39c–d) unmistakably situate Socrates’s activity—embodied by the “secular” verb ἐλέγχω—within Greek divinatory praxis. By contrast, Mic 6:1–8

⁸⁷ Francis I. Andersen’s and David Noel Freedman’s hyperbolic declaration that “nothing serves so well to define the ancient relationship between YHWH and Israel as this one story” hardly seems justifiable. Idem, *Micah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 24E (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 522.

makes no such obvious appropriation of the divinatory lexicon. Apart, in fact, from the very reference to Balaam the diviner, divination seems to play no role in the passage as a whole.

However, this ostensible difference between Plato and Micah has less to do with their engagements with divination than with the lexical profiles of Greek and Hebrew. Detecting this kind of engagement in the Bible is more challenging because biblical Hebrew attests relatively few words, even as far as Semitic languages are concerned. Technical divinatory terminology in Hebrew is often “camouflaged” by virtue of its overlap with the general vocabulary. As such, uncovering biblical discourses of negotiating divination necessitates a twofold comparison: 1) innerbiblical comparison in light of the full range of semantic usage in the Bible; and 2) extrabiblical comparison in light of the more readily discernible divinatory lexica elsewhere in the ancient Near East. When Mic 6:1–8 is submitted to such a comparison, it displays a surprising degree of overlap with the technical divinatory and prophetic terminology attested in the pentateuchal Balaam narrative, a number of other biblical passages, the Deir ‘Alla Inscription, and Mesopotamian prophecy. Micah’s seemingly atomistic reference to Balaam is, in fact, thoroughly integrated within a passage that more generally reflects lexical negotiation with ancient Near Eastern divinatory praxis.

ענ"ה 2.3.1.1.

In Mic 6:5 and repeatedly throughout Numbers 22–24, Balaam is the subject of the verb ענ"ה, always with Balak as the indirect object. While the general meaning of the verb, “answer,” certainly fits these contexts, it can also have a more specific connotation: “to issue an oracular

responsum” (see, e.g., Exod 19:19; Ps 99:6).⁸⁸ This is also reflected in the Akkadian equivalent, *apālu*, which was one of the most developed technical divinatory terms in Mesopotamia. One type of prophet at Mari was known as the *āpilu*, ostensibly derived from *apālu*—although some have recently questioned this connection.⁸⁹ In any case, the *āpilu* was frequently associated with the verb *qabû*, “speak.”⁹⁰ Abraham Malamat has proposed *qabû* as the origin of קב”ב, the most idiosyncratic term for Balaam’s cursing in Numbers.⁹¹ Divinatory usage of *apālu* is on fine display in the formula with which the Neo-Assyrian king would consult the sun god for an oracle: “O Shamash, great lord, that which I ask you, answer me reliably (*ša ašālūka ana kâni apalānni*).”⁹² All of this suggests that when Balaam is described as “answering” Balak, his speech is being culturally situated within the realm of divination.⁹³

⁸⁸ It should be noted that ענ”ה also has a well-attested forensic meaning (see *HALOT*, 1:852). This is certainly how the verb is to be understood in Mic 6:3, part of the ריב.

⁸⁹ See, e.g., Daniel E. Fleming, “Prophets and Temple Personnel in the Mari Archives,” in *The Priests in the Prophets: The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets*, eds. Lester L. Grabbe and Alice Ogden Bellis, JSOTSup 408 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 51; and Stökl, *Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, 38–50.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50

⁹¹ Malamat, “Forerunner of Biblical Prophecy,” 38. Almost every biblical attestation of קב”ב is found in Numbers 22–24. If the verb is indeed to be connected with *qabû*, its characteristic association with Balaam in biblical Hebrew might reflect either a memory of Balaam’s Mesopotamian origins or an effort to ground him in Mesopotamian divinatory praxis (or both, as I would indeed suggest). For discussion, see Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 4A (2000 repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 169–73; and Robker, *Balaam*, 326–28.

⁹² See, e.g., the oracles collected in Ivan Starr, *Queries to the Sungod: Divination and Politics in Sargonid Assyria*, SAA 4 (Helsinki: The Helsinki University Press, 1990).

⁹³ In addition to ענ”ה, Numbers 22–24 also uses the synonym שר”ב (*hiphil*) in an explicitly oracular sense (Num 22:8).

2.3.1.2. של"ח

The verb של"ח (“send”) is widely attested in the technical sense of “dispatch a prophet”—as in Mic 6:4, where Moses, Aaron, and Miriam are the objects.⁹⁴ Several Mari documents reflect similar usage of an Akkadian equivalent, *šapāru*. In one letter, Kibri-Dagan writes that a prophet declared before him, “Dagan sent me (*išpurānni*)” (ARM 26/1 210, 11).⁹⁵ In some prophetic texts from both Mari and Nineveh, the object of *šapāru* is the oracle itself, while the subject is either the prophet (ARM 26 208, 5–8) or the deity (ARM 26 414, 29–33; SAA 9 1.9, v 29–30).

More frequently in both corpora, however, the object of *šapāru* is the very letter that contains report of the prophecy, often along with a lock of hair for validation.⁹⁶ This epistolary sense is reminiscent of how של"ח is used in Numbers 22–24, where the verb seems to denote Balak’s communication with Balaam through written documents in the hands of emissaries. For instance, we are told, “Balak once again dispatched (של"ח) dignitaries, this time more numerous and august than previously. They came to Balaam and said to him, ‘Thus says (כה אָמַר) Balak son of Zippor: Do not hold back from coming to me’” (Num 22:15–16). While no document is explicitly mentioned here, the unmistakable epistolary formula כה אָמַר (Akkadian *qibīma umma*) strongly implies that Balak’s emissaries are *reading* his written words in the manner in which prophetic communication was generally mediated in Mesopotamia. Ostensibly, Balaam’s repeated replies to Balak are also thus communicated. Therefore, even this more ostensibly

⁹⁴ See *HALOT*, 2:1513.

⁹⁵ For discussion, see Abraham Malamat, *Mari and the Bible*, SCHANE 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 94–96. For other examples of this usage of *šapāru* at Mari, see ARM 26 233, 32–33; ARM 26 240; and A.2052. I thank Julie B. Deluty for drawing my attention to the latter two documents.

⁹⁶ For an overview of epistolary prophecy in extrabiblical ancient Near Eastern sources, see Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 73–93.

“secular” usage of שׁל־ח is very much at home in the conceptual world of divination, where, indeed, the boundary between the initial communication through the prophet and the subsequent communication through the letter is often blurred.⁹⁷

2.3.1.3. קוֹיִם

The verb קוֹיִם, “arise,” appears in Numbers with Balaam as the subject (Num 22:13, 20–21; 24:25) and in Micah with the prophetic addressee himself as the subject (Mic 6:1). This verb is so common that ascribing a specifically divinatory connotation to it might seem implausible. However, it is repeatedly used in the Hebrew Bible in contexts relating to the authentication of prophecy, such as the deuteronomic provisions for “when a prophet arises (יְקוֹיִם) among you” (Deut 13:2aα; cf. the *hiphil* in Deut 18:14–22) or the Elohist notice that “never again did there arise (קָם) in Israel a prophet like Moses” (Deut 34:10a).⁹⁸ William Moran, Moshe Weinfeld, and Malamat have drawn attention to the formulaic, technical use of an Akkadian equivalent, *tebû*, to

⁹⁷ See, e.g., Karel van der Toorn, “From the Oral to the Written: The Case of Old Babylonian Prophecy,” in *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy*, eds. Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael H. Floyd, SymS 10 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 219–34. Note how ARM 26 414 positions both the scribe and the messenger as “sub-prophets” vis-à-vis the prophet himself, such that the prophecy moves through a deity–prophet–scribe–messenger–king chain of transmission: “Atamrum, prophet of Šamaš, came to me and spoke to me as follows: ‘Send me a discreet scribe! I will have him write down the message that Šamaš has sent me (*išpurānni*) for the king.’ This is what he said to me. So I sent Utu-kam, and he wrote this tablet. This man brought witnesses and said to [me a]s follows: ‘Send this tablet quic[kly] and let the king act according to its words.’ This is what he said to me. I have herewith sent this tablet to my lord” (ARM 26 14, 29–41). This is reminiscent of YHWH’s assurance to Moses, “[Aaron] shall speak for you to the people; such it shall be that he will be like a mouth for you and you will be like a god for him” (Exod 4:16).

⁹⁸ Jeffrey Stackert has argued that in the E source itself, this verse was probably intended to preclude the existence of subsequent prophets in a more categorical sense. On this reading, the proclitic ךְ is not a preposition (“like Moses”) but a conjunction (“as Moses did”); see idem, *A Prophet like Moses: Prophecy, Law, and Israelite Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 117–23. In this context, the technical meaning of קוֹיִם might have had a particularly consequential connotation: Moses was the last individual in Israel who would ever undertake this characteristically prophetic action, marking him as truly the last prophet.

describe the *āpilu*.⁹⁹ For instance, one letter from Mari reports, “Innibana, the propheticess (*āpiltum*), arose (*itbīma*) and spoke as follows” (ARM 26 204, 5–6).

In light of this biblical and extrabiblical evidence, a prophetic valence cannot be dismissed when Balaam is described as “arising” or, even more to the point, is commanded by the deity, “Arise!” This imperative use of קוּ in a prophetic sense should also militate against hastily reading its appearance in Mic 6:1 in a purely forensic sense. To be sure, a forensic connotation for קוּ is well attested.¹⁰⁰ However, the dense concentration of other divinatory terminology in relation to Balaam suggests that in the present form of Mic 6:1–8, the prophet is being commanded to “arise” specifically *as a prophet*. As we shall see below, Micah’s endowment in this manner with the prophetic office is specifically linked to his command to proclaim before Israel the words with which Balaam once answered Balak (Mic 6:8).

2.3.1.4. יע

The root יע, along with the biform יעו, relates to counsel, advice, or planning (nominal עצה). The verbal form, not especially common, appears in both the pentateuchal and Micah Balaam stories. In Numbers, Balaam introduces his fourth oracle by telling his client, “Come, let me counsel you (אֵינְעֶךָ) regarding what this nation will do to your nation in the distant future (בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים)” (Num 24:14b). In Micah, Israel is enjoined to remember “what counsel Balak, king of Moab, sought (מֵה־יַעַץ בְּלַק מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב)” (Mic 6:5). The difference in subject only

⁹⁹ Malamat, “Forerunner of Biblical Prophecy,” 44–45; William L. Moran, “New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy,” *Bib* 50 (1969): 25–26; and Weinfeld, “Ancient Near Eastern Patterns,” 181–82.

¹⁰⁰ See *HALOT*, 2:1086.

underscores that both passages see the verb *יָעַץ* as an appropriate characterization of some aspect of the interaction between Balak and Balaam.

When, as in these instances, *יָעַץ* takes a human subject, it typically describes counsel rooted in human knowledge of a sapiential character. This can be seen vividly in the story of Ahithophel, who is celebrated because “the counsel that [he] gave (*וַעֲצַת אַחִיתֹּפֶל אֲשֶׁר יָעַץ*) in those days was as if he were inquiring of the word of God (*כְּבִדְבַר הָאֱלֹהִים*). Such (*כֵּן*) was Ahithophel’s counsel regarded by both David and Absalom” (2 Sam 16:23). As, to a certain extent, with all comparisons, this twofold assertion of surface-level similarity (*כֵּן* and *כְּאִשֶׁר*) bespeaks fundamental *dissimilarity*: it is notable that Ahithophel’s counsel is like an oracular responsum only because it is decidedly *not* one. By contrast, Balaam’s “counsel” regarding the “distant future” is subsequently grounded in his status—echoing the third oracle (Num 24:3–4) and Deir ‘Alla (I.1–2)—as “one who hears God’s speech and knows what the Most High knows; he beholds visions of Shaddai—prostrate, but with eyes opened” (Num 24:16). This strongly suggests that for Balaam, the action of *יָעַץ* is not simply human advice but some sort of divinatory faculty through which divine knowledge of things neither “present (*עֵתָהּ*)” nor “near (*קְרוֹב*)” (Num 24:17) may be transmitted.

In light of this situation, Meindert Dijkstra has conceded that “in the biblical tradition about Balaam, *יָעַץ* has an almost unique meaning.”¹⁰¹ That being said, he stresses that the use of *יָעַץ* in a technical sense relating to divination or otherworldly knowledge is not entirely without biblical precedent. Isaiah, for instance, declares, “This is the plan that is planned (*הַעֲצָה הַיְעוּצָה*) against the whole earth; this is the hand that is outstretched against all the nations. When YHWH

¹⁰¹ Meindert Dijkstra, “Is Balaam also among the Prophets?” *JBL* 114 (1995): 58.

of Hosts plans (יָעַר), who may disrupt it? When his hand is outstretched, who may thrust it back?” (Isa 14:26–27).¹⁰² In this relief, Balaam’s act of יָעַר would be to shed light on the divine עצה for his client—even if, of course, it goes against what the latter had hoped to hear.

There is also extrabiblical evidence for this usage. Jacob Milgrom drew attention to “Arabic *wa ‘iṣ*, the ‘augurer,’ consulted by sheikhs before embarking on a military campaign”—precisely the same context in which Balaam “counsels” Balak.¹⁰³ On this comparative basis, Milgrom concludes, “Balaam’s ‘information’ was prophetic.”¹⁰⁴ The most tantalizing evidence for a divinatory sense of Balaam’s engagement in יָעַר comes from Deir ‘Alla Combination II, which reads, “Has he not sought counsel from you, or has he not sought the advice of one who sits (הלעצה·בד·ליתעץ·אולמלכה·ליתמלך·ישב)?” (DA II.9).¹⁰⁵ Given the fragmentary state of Combination II, it is impossible to say with any certainty whether Balaam is involved in this interaction in one way or another.¹⁰⁶ However, it at least raises the possibility that the word יָעַר was traditionally associated with Balaam’s oracular activity in the broader Levant.

¹⁰² Ibid.; cf. Balaam’s notably similar statement, “God is not human, that he should lie—not mortal, that he should change his mind. Would he declare and not act? Speak and not fulfill it?” (Num 23:19).

¹⁰³ Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 206.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ In light of this parallelism of יָעַר (or עוֹרֵךְ) and מְלִיץ, it is noteworthy that Targum Onqelos renders מַה־יַעַר בַּלַּק (Mic 6:5) as מַא מְלִיץ בַּלַּק.

¹⁰⁶ Dijkstra argues as much but does so on the *basis* of Numbers, meaning that on his reading, it would be circular to lean subsequently on Deir ‘Alla as evidence for the association of יָעַר with Balaam; see idem, “Balaam among the Prophets,” 58.

2.3.1.5. מה

Perhaps unexpectedly, it is worth drawing attention to the frequency and prominence of the interrogative מה (“what”), along with the prepositional compound למה (“why”), in both Numbers (22:19, 28, 32, 37; 23:3, 8, 11, 17, 23; 24:5)¹⁰⁷ and Micah (6:3, 5–6, 8). It should also be noted that the specific phrase “what has x done to y” (מָה עָשָׂה לְיָ) occurs in both passages, in the mouths of Balaam’s donkey (Num 22:28), Balak (Num 23:11), and God himself (Mic 6:3). It goes without saying that the word מה is extremely common throughout the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, it does seem to function as a kind of *Leitwort* in these two passages. I would suggest that the word infuses them with the questioning that characterizes technical divination, a practice that, as Barbara Tedlock has put it, is fundamentally “a way of exploring the unknown in order to elicit answers (that is, oracles) to questions beyond the range of ordinary human understanding.”¹⁰⁸ Ancient Mediterranean technical divination begins, by definition, with some kind of inquiry. The repetition of מה in Numbers 22–24 and Mic 6:1–8 calls attention to this basic posture of Balaam’s profession.

This reading of מה is bolstered by the use of the term in connection with Balaam in Deir ‘Alla Combination I. As the recipient of a nocturnal vision (DA I.1), this Balaam might look more like an intuitive than a technical diviner—although the matter is not so straightforward, as we shall see. Nevertheless, once his “kinsfolk (עמה)” (DA I.4) arrive on the scene, the basic questioning posture of divination is adopted. Confused by his eccentric behavior (DA I.3–4), they ask him, “Why do you fast [and w]hy do you weep (לִמָּה תִצְמַם [וּלְמָה תִּבְכֶּה])?” (DA I.4).

¹⁰⁷ Excluding Num 24:22, where מה is text-critically dubious; see, e.g., Robker, Balaam, 97, 117–18.

¹⁰⁸ Barbara Tedlock, “Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualisation, Narrative, and Interpretation,” *Folklore* 112 (2001): 189.

Dijkstra wonders whether prompting this question might in fact be Balaam’s goal in behaving this way.¹⁰⁹ Either way, it establishes Balaam as an oracular channel, not unlike the liver or the heavens, through which ordinary people might gain extraordinary insight into the workings of the divine realm. He answers, “Sit down and I shall tell you what the Shadda[yin have done]; come, see the acts of the gods (שבוֹ-אֲחֻכֶּם-מֵה-שֵׁד [יַן-פְּעֻלוֹ-וְלִכְוֹ-רֵאוּ-פְעֻלַת-אֱלֹהִים])” (DA I.5). This coordination of מה, פֵּעַל, and divine beings is strikingly reminiscent of the pentateuchal Balaam’s reference—in a crucial verse to which we will return—to Israel’s preternatural knowledge regarding “what God has done (מֵה-פְּעָלֵי אֱלֹהִים)” (Num 23:23).¹¹⁰ In this way, the Deir ‘Alla text brings into sharp relief how even the seemingly innocuous word מה serves to ground the biblical Balaam in the conceptual world of divination.

2.3.2. Numbers 22–24 and the Procedure of Prophecy

The seemingly isolated reference to Balaam in Mic 6:1–8 is in fact well integrated within the passage by means of the dense concentration of divinatory terminology known from elsewhere in the ancient Near East, including the description of Balaam himself at Deir ‘Alla. Because this terminology cuts across the entire passage, it stands to reason that—in its redacted setting, at least—the reference to Balaam is not simply an arbitrary way of recalling the wilderness tradition. It is rather a substantive invocation of the Balaam episode itself—specifically, the mode of divination that that episode represents. However, if we stop the analysis there, content with cultural parallels, we are actually not much closer to understanding Balaam’s *discursive*

¹⁰⁹ Dijkstra, “Is Balaam also among the Prophets?” 53.

¹¹⁰ As noted in Levine, *Numbers 21–36*, 186.

function in Micah’s prophecy. How does his divination relate to the construction of the subversive prophetic speech with which the passage so stirringly concludes? Sensitivity to the lexicon of divinatory praxis cannot, on its own, answer this question.

In the case of the *Apology*, we saw that Plato constructs the elenchus not only over against the mechanics of divinatory praxis but also as part of a highly developed *literary* tradition of Delphic oracle stories, which themselves theorize and configure divination. The discursive features of this Delphic literature shed essential light on the literary form through which the *Apology* negotiates divination, such that a full understanding of the divinatory roots of Socratic philosophy necessitated attention to both dimensions. Similarly, the language of Mic 6:1–8 not only grounds its reference to Balaam within the cultural realities of divination; it also ties this reference to the far more developed literary depiction of Balaam in Numbers 22–24, which thoroughgoingly employs divinatory terminology as part of a story about the triumph of intuitive divination (or “prophecy”) over technical divination. The strategies through which Numbers 22–24 employs Balaam as a site for negotiating divination are essential literary context for understanding how Mic 6:1–8 does so.

The significance of the concentration of divinatory terminology in Numbers 22–24 was first appreciated in 1909 by Samuel Daiches, who noted, “There are more magical elements in the Balaam story than appears on the surface.”¹¹¹ Daiches interpreted many obscure phrases in light of the Mesopotamian divinatory texts, which were only then beginning to receive their due scholarly attention. On this basis, he identified Balaam as a technical diviner of the *bārû* type, well known from the Mesopotamian texts for their expertise in a number of divinatory subfields

¹¹¹ Samuel Daiches, “Balaam—A Babylonian *bārû*,” in *Hilprecht Anniversary Volume: Studies in Assyriology and Archaeology Dedicated to Hermann V. Hilprecht upon the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of His Doctorate and His Fiftieth Birthday (July 28)*, ed. Richard Y. Cook (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1909), 60.

(especially extispicy).¹¹² While Daiches is certainly to be credited for opening this fruitful comparative avenue, the direct identification to which it led him, “Balaam = *bārû*,” is now generally criticized as simplistic. The intervening century has seen significant advances in Assyriology, to say nothing of the discovery of Deir ‘Alla. In light of this substantial new (or newly understood) evidence, Michael S. Moore has shown that some of the *bārû*’s activities do not fit well with the aggregate picture of Balaam.¹¹³ Although he commends analyses like Daiches’s as “penetrating and provocative,” he nevertheless concludes that “unfortunately they are not articulated within the parameters of a coherent theoretical frame of thought.”¹¹⁴ Moore attempts to provide just such a frame by comprehensively plotting the manifold relationships between various titles (e.g., *bārû*, *āpilu*, נביא) and roles (e.g., prophet, diviner, exorcist) as configured in the Bible, Deir ‘Alla, and the Mesopotamian corpora.

Moore’s critique and subsequent strategy are reasonable enough if Numbers 22–24 is classified along with the Mesopotamian divinatory texts, straightforwardly reflecting divinatory praxis in a quasi-historical manner. However, Daiches’s historically questionable association of various divinatory activities with Balaam actually fits quite well with the idea that Numbers 22–24 uses him as a site for contesting the phenomenology of divination. In such a case, a “coherent theoretical frame” might well obscure more than it illuminates, as the discursive uses to which divination might be put would hardly figure to correspond neatly to cultural realities; the goal, after all, would not be to *reflect* divination but to make a *claim* about it. A similar point may be

¹¹² For overviews of the *bārû*, see, e.g., Michael S. Moore, *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development*, SBLDS 113 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 41–46; and Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 93–98.

¹¹³ See, e.g., Michael S. Moore, “Another Look at Balaam,” *RB* 97 (1990): 373; and idem, *Balaam Traditions*, 5–6.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

made about Deir ‘Alla. The discrepancies between the pentateuchal Balaam and his counterpart in the plaster inscriptions certainly call into question the historicity of the former. Yet inasmuch as Deir ‘Alla attests to Balaam’s fame and confirms broad dimensions of his activity, it establishes why this figure would have been an attractive cipher for divination in the first place.¹¹⁵ Ruth Stelhorn Mackensen accurately captured the literary character of Numbers 22–24 when she wrote that it presents Balaam as “a type of the various diviners, magicians and workers in the supernatural[.] It is beside the point to question whether one man actually used various techniques in his uncanny operations. That does not concern our author.”¹¹⁶ He is, in other words, a carefully constructed caricature of a technical diviner.

Moreover, Balaam’s function as a caricature is realized to the extent that he is, first and foremost, a *character*—which is to say, a character within a fictive narrative. The construction of prophecy in this narrative is coextensive with its plot. Sociological-comparative scholarship on Balaam has often effaced this literariness. Although it has undeniably advanced our understanding of the pentateuchal Balaam’s relationship to, in Moore’s words, “the actual roles enacted by other ancient Near Eastern magico-religious specialists contemporary with him,” such a paradigm is limited when it deems “literary approaches . . . inadequate because they are profoundly unable to correlate all the facets of the biblical and Deir ‘Alla traditions into an

¹¹⁵ Cf., e.g., Greene, “Balaam Figure,” 95; K. L. Noll, “Was Balaam also among the Prophets? How Balaam Sheds Light on the Latter Prophets,” *SJOT* 31 (2017): 47; and Manfred Weippert, “The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Allā and the Study of the Old Testament,” in *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Alla Re-Evaluated: Proceedings of the International Symposium Held at Leiden 21–24 August 1989*, eds. J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 175.

¹¹⁶ Ruth Stelhorn Mackensen, “The Present Literary Form of the Balaam Story,” in *The Macdonald Presentation Volume*, eds. William G. Shellabear, Edwin E. Calverley, Elbert C. Lane, and Ruth S. Mackensen (Freeport: Books for Libraries, 1968), 284; cf., however, the perhaps comparable mixture of roles noted in Baruch A. Levine, “The Deir ‘Alla Plaster Inscriptions,” *JAOS* 101 (1981): 204.

understandable whole.”¹¹⁷ In the case of a patently fictive narrative like Numbers 22–24, there should be no presumption of correlation with “an understandable whole” in the first place. Rather, we ought to ask—in light of that “whole,” to be sure—what this narrative unfolds. I would draw a comparison to Levenson’s aforementioned observation that “Israel does not begin with the statement that YHWH is faithful” but rather “infers it from a *story*.” In this spirit, we may say that Numbers 22–24 does not issue theoretical propositions about prophecy and divination. Rather, it *encourages its audience* to infer them from a story about Balaam and Balak, who transition from a shared assumption of the efficacy of technical divination to divergent reactions to the apparent triumph of intuitive prophecy.

The opening of the story sets the stage for this consequential character development. Faced with Israel’s impending invasion, Balak requires someone who can curse them such that they may be “expelled” (גר״ש; Num 22:6). Because, as Moore astutely notes, this action could well be conceived as a kind of geopolitical exorcism, it matches the repertoire of certain technical diviners.¹¹⁸ Balak therefore sends his emissaries, “divination in their hands (וְקִסְמִים)” (Num 22:7),¹¹⁹ to fetch Balaam “in Pethor on the river, the land of his people (פְּתוֹרַה אֲשֶׁר)” (Num 22:5).¹²⁰ He apparently knows that Balaam is the best man for the

¹¹⁷ Moore, “Another Look,” 377–78.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 374.

¹¹⁹ Debate about whether this refers to divinatory paraphernalia, monetary compensation for divination, or something else extends all the way back to the ancient translations. What matters for our purposes is that regardless of the precise meaning, the notice establishes a connection between divination and the task for which Balak has sent his emissaries to retrieve Balaam.

¹²⁰ Few individual phrases in the prose of Numbers 22–24 have generated as much exegetical debate among historical-critical scholars as the geographic designation “in Pethor on the river, the land of his people.” For a long time, it was believed that Pethor was to be identified with Pitru, a Mesopotamian city referred to in Akkadian inscriptions, making the “river” in question the Euphrates; see, as an early example, George Buchanan Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Numbers*, ICC 4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1903), 325–26. This did not, however, explain the uninformative (indeed, downright tautological) phrase “the land of his people.” A

job: “Whomever you bless is blessed and whomever you execrate is execrated (אֲשֶׁר-תְּבָרַךְ מְבָרָךְ) (ואֲשֶׁר תִּאָר יוֹאָר) (Num 22:6). However, Balaam pointedly contests this assessment, denying any claim to innate ritual efficacy and crediting this squarely to the deity: “Even were Balak to pay me his entire worth in gold and silver, I would not be able to transgress the word of YHWH my God to do anything whatsoever” (Num 22:18). Balak prevails on him to come only because of God’s eventual approval (Num 22:20).

number of ancient witnesses reflect a variant of “the land of the Ammonites (אֶרֶץ בְּנֵי-עַמּוֹן),” which makes a good deal more sense. Yet this contradicts the identification of Pethor with Mesopotamian Pitrû, since the Ammonites resided in Transjordan. However, the Vulgate and perhaps also the Peshitta suggest a solution: פתור is not in fact a toponym but a professional designation of Balaam as a diviner (cf., e.g., Gen 40:8; 41:8, 15). The root פת/ר/פשׁׁר (“loosen,” “interpret”) is well attested in both Hebrew and cognate languages in a divinatory sense. Taking all of this text-critical evidence together, we might read, “So [Balak] sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor, [that is,] to the diviner, who was near the [Jordan] River in the land of the Ammonites.” This construal of the prose geographical notice coheres better with Balaam’s poetic statement, “From Aram did Balak lead me, the king of Moab from the eastern mountains” (Num 23:7). Moreover, it corresponds almost uncannily well to the location of Deir ‘Alla. Scott C. Layton has therefore argued that Num 22:5 has nothing to do with Mesopotamia and does not equivocate about Balaam’s national identity. Rather, it situates him in precisely the location at which we have found the only extrabiblical confirmation of his existence; see idem, “Whence Comes Balaam? Num 22,5 Revisited,” *Bib* 73 (1992): 32–61.

While Layton’s argument is historically compelling, it is worth questioning whether history is in fact the primary orientation of this geographical notice in the form in which we know it. The reading preserved in MT has discursive possibilities within the negotiation of divination; cf. Robker, *Balaam*, 309–11. Positivistic readings like Layton’s efface these. For instance, locating Balaam in Mesopotamia would serve implicitly to ground him in the technical divination that was so richly associated with that region. We would have here the well-known literary trope of the regional stereotype: as the diviner par excellence, Balaam *had* to come from Mesopotamia. Regardless of whether an identification with the specific city of Pitrû was intended, the similarity of the toponym with the root פת/ר/פשׁׁר would have allusively underscored this connection with divination—as if Balaam hailed from a place literally called “Divinerville.”

Meanwhile, the tautological notice “in the land of his people” need not be as meaningless as so many have claimed. Declining to give Balaam a specific nationality might well be a way of emphasizing his foreignness and his independence from the kind of international struggle into which Balak draws him. In this way, he is not only the quintessential diviner but also the quintessential outsider and loner, configuring a fundamental link between those identities: technical divination is by definition antisocial, the art of uncommitted and un beholden mercenaries who are available to the highest bidder. The nationless Balaam is tellingly reminiscent of Emile Durkheim’s antisocial magician: “Magic beliefs . . . do not bind men who believe in them to one another and unite them into the same group, living the same life. *There is no Church of magic.* Between the magician and the individuals who consult him, there are no durable ties that make them members of a single moral body, comparative to the ties that join the faithful to the same god or the adherents of the same cult. The magician has a clientele, not a Church.” Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (1912; New York: The Free Press, 1995), 42. In this relief, the rabbinic etymologization of Balaam’s name as בלא עם (“without a people”; b. Sanh. 105a) is poignant, however fanciful.

Since antiquity itself, commentators have not quite known what to do with this juxtaposition of Balaam’s humble obedience to the God of Israel and his association with Balak’s occult machinations. Of late, it has caused confusion among interpreters who strive to categorize Balaam neatly as “positive” or “negative”—“saint” or “sinner,” in George W. Coats’s influential framing.¹²¹ Many, such as Jonathan Miles Robker in a recent monograph, have tried to make sense of it by tracing the compositional history of the pericope along a “positive-to-negative” tradition-historical trajectory. On this view, a laudatory core narrative was gradually overlaid with increasingly derogatory redactional recontextualization.¹²² However, this seems rather like a diachronic mischaracterization of what is really a synchronic narrative feature. Jacob Milgrom is probably nearer the mark when he calls this “the major tension in the story. Balak hires Balaam as a sorcerer, but Balaam denies he has such a power[.] He can act only as a diviner.”¹²³ In other words, Balak mistakenly believes that because Balaam can access information from the divine realm (divination), he can therefore manipulate it for human ends (sorcery). Intuiting a similar dynamic, R. W. L. Moberly has argued that *Balak*, not Balaam, is in fact the focal point of story. Numbers 22–24 is fundamentally concerned with the Moabite aggressor’s recognition of YHWH’s power; Balaam is merely the vehicle.¹²⁴

While Milgrom and Moberly commendably avoid a common oversimplification of Balaam’s character, they nevertheless miss one crucial nuance. Although Balaam clearly contests

¹²¹ George W. Coats, “Balaam, Sinner or Saint?” *BR* 18 (1973): 21–29; cf. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 469–71.

¹²² Robker, *Balaam*, 128–206.

¹²³ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 473; cf. Moore, *Balaam Traditions*, 115; and John Van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus–Numbers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 416–17.

¹²⁴ R. W. L. Moberly, “On Learning to Be a True Prophet: The Story of Balaam and His Ass,” in *New Heaven and New Earth: Prophecy and the Millennium; Essays in Honour of Anthony Gelston*, eds. P.J. Harland and C.T.R. Hayward, VTSup 77 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 2.

Balak's misunderstanding of the *purpose* of his divinatory expertise, he nevertheless agrees with his client regarding its *praxis*: Balaam identifies as a technical diviner, undertaking concrete procedures in order proactively to prompt communication with the deity. Indeed, with the exception of the likely interpolated donkey episode (Num 22:22–35), these kinds of procedures precede *all* of Balaam's communication with God prior to the climactic third oracle (to be discussed below).¹²⁵ For instance, before God speaks with Balaam regarding Balak's offer, Balaam's request that the dignitaries "lodge here for the night, in order that I may bring back word to you when YHWH should speak with me" (Num 22:8a; cf. Num 22:19). While the subsequent nocturnal visions resemble the face-to-face conversations that we might associate with intuitive prophecy, it is phenomenologically crucial that they do not simply assail Balaam without notice. Rather, he purposefully solicits them by undertaking the concrete action of retiring for the evening. In this respect, Balaam's first divinatory experience may justly be

¹²⁵ The donkey episode has been arguably *the* central composition-historical crux in Numbers 22–24 because of its alleged divergence in tone from the remainder of the narrative. Despite attempts to situate it within a documentary source elsewhere attested in the broader story, Alexander Rofé's approach remains most compelling: it is an independent, wholesale interpolation, neatly marked by the *Wiederaufnahme* in Num 22:35b; see idem, "The Book of Balaam" (Numbers 22:2–24:25): A Study in Methods of Criticism and the History of Biblical Literature and Religion, Jerusalem Biblical Studies 1, Heb. (Jerusalem: Simor, 1979), 54–57. According to Rofé, the story is a "burlesque," parodying Balaam in a manner that reflects the negative attitude toward him in later biblical traditions and conflicts with the positive disposition elsewhere in Numbers 22–24. The episode is therefore best interpreted as a relatively late compositional attempt to bring Numbers 22–24 into line with the ascending anti-Balaam attitude; see *ibid.*, 49–52.

While I agree with this composition-historical schema, I nevertheless think that the satire of Balaam in the donkey episode is more nuanced—and therefore more consistent with the rest of the story—than has often been appreciated. As we will discuss below, in neither Numbers 22–24 as a whole nor the donkey episode specifically is Balaam's moral character really at issue. Rather, the focus is on the mechanics of his divinatory profession. The unfortunate spectacle of Balaam beating his poor donkey shows less that he is a "bad person" than that his pretense to preternatural insight via technical divination is delusional. It is God who grants preternatural insight, at his own initiative alone, and he may do so to anyone—even a donkey; cf. Michael L. Barré, "The Portrait of Balaam in Numbers 22–24," *Int* 51 (1997): 261, 264; Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel*, 96; and Moore, *Balaam Traditions*, 101–103. Balaam's beast may be a dumb ass, but when God grants her speech, it is the diviner himself who is revealed to be the dumbass. We therefore ought not conclude with Van Seters that "it is the talking ass story [alone] within the present narrative that has given Balaam a bad name." Idem, "From Faithful Prophet to Villain: Observations on the Tradition History of the Balaam Story," in *A Biblical Itinerary: In Search of Method, Form and Content; Essays in Honor of George W. Coats*, ed. Eugene E. Carpenter, JSOTSup 240 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 127. In fact, the critique of technical divination that this "burlesque" so outrageously communicates is already the central theological claim of the larger narrative into which it has been interpolated.

situated within the praxis of oneiromancy, well attested throughout the ancient Mediterranean as part of the repertoire of technical diviners.¹²⁶

Balaam’s technical solicitation of a nocturnal dream vision allows the entire story to happen. However, he steps most deeply into his function as a cipher for technical divination when he meets with Balak. Before each of Balaam’s three attempts at fulfilling Balak’s request, he directs his client in the execution of elaborate, carefully orchestrated sacrificial rituals. Balak himself seems to expect this, assuring Balaam from the start, “I will do whatever you tell me (וְכָל אֲשֶׁר-תֹּאמַר אֵלַי אֶעֱשֶׂה) (Num 22:17)—ostensibly a promise to defer to the diviner’s ritual expertise. The narration of the first sacrifice reads,

¹ וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלַעַם אֶל-בָּלַק בְּנֵה-לִי
 בָזָה שִׁבְעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וְהִכֵּן לִי בָזָה
 שִׁבְעָה פָּרִים וְשִׁבְעָה אֵילִים:²
 וַיַּעַשׂ בָּלַק כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בְּלַעַם
 וַיַּעַל בָּלַק וּבְלַעַם פָּר וְאֵיל
 בְּמִזְבְּחֹת:³ וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלַעַם לְבָלַק
 הֲתֵיצֵב עַל-עֹלֹתַי וְאַלְכָּה אוֹלֵי
 יִקְרָה יְהוָה לְקִרְאתִי וְדִבַּר מֵה-
 יֵרְאֵנִי וְהִגַּדְתִּי לְךָ וְיָלֵךְ שָׁפִי:⁴
 וַיִּקְרַ אֱלֹהִים אֶל-בְּלַעַם וַיֹּאמֶר

¹ Balaam said to Balak, “Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here.”² When Balak had done as Balaam instructed, Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.³ Then Balaam said to Balak, “Take your place here beside your offering and let me go along; perhaps YHWH will manifest to me, and whatever thing he might show me I will tell you”—and he went along in a divinatory fashion.⁴ Then God manifest to Balaam, who

¹²⁶ On Balaam’s initial interactions with the deity as oneiromancy, see Moore, *Balaam Traditions*, 98–100. Moore even wonders whether Balaam’s nocturnal vision at Deir ‘Alla, with which Combination I begins *in medias res*, might have been oneiromantically solicited by technical means that are not reported in the narrative; see *ibid.*, 74. Such solicitation of oracular communication through dreams is reflected when “Saul inquired (וַיִּשְׁאַל) of YHWH but YHWH did not answer him (עָנָה)—neither by dreams (בְּחֻלְמוֹת) nor by *‘urim* nor by prophets” (1 Sam 28:6). Both Numbers and Deir ‘Alla reflect how oneiromancy occupies a more ambiguous place along the technical-intuitive divide than, say, extispicy or astrology. On the one hand, nocturnal visions are phenomenologically closer to verbal prophetic revelation than the ominous significance of sacrificial exta or celestial bodies; as such, the Bible sometimes places the divinatory dreamer (חֹלֵם חִלּוֹם) alongside the נְבִיא (see, e.g., Deut 13:2–6). On the other hand, the *ex post facto* decipherment of dreams is clearly a technical skill, even if one ultimately granted by God, as the Joseph story shows: “Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I had a dream (חִלּוֹם חֻלְמָתִי) but there is no one to interpret it (וַיִּפְתַּר אֵין) (אֲתוֹ). However, then I heard about you—that you need but hear a dream in order to interpret (לְפָתֹר) it.’ Joseph answered (וַיַּעַן) Pharaoh, ‘Not I alone, but God—he will answer (יַעֲנֶה) Pharaoh regarding his well-being’” (Gen 41:15–16; cf. Daniel 2, which moves more explicitly in the direction of oneiromancy as a divine grant unrelated to human skill). Pharaoh turns to Joseph because of his reputation for having a technical skill. If, as discussed above, the toponym Pethor bears some relation to divinatory interpretation (פֶּתֹר/פֶּשֶׁר—the same term used for dream divination in Genesis and Daniel), this could further imply that Balaam’s nocturnal communication with God in Numbers was oneiromantically prompted.

אֱלֹהֵי אֶת־שִׁבְעַת הַמִּזְבְּחֹת
עָרְכָתִי וְאָעַל פָּר וְאֵיל בְּמִזְבְּחָהּ:

said to him, “I have arranged these altars and offered up a bull and ram on each one.” (Num 23:1–4)

Balaam explicitly characterizes these sacrifices as propitiatory rituals designed to elicit an encounter with the deity. Having performed them, he is subsequently able to undertake the activity denoted by the phrase וילך שפי, which, obscure as it may be, seems likely to constitute some kind of divinatory technique.¹²⁷ All of this will grant him the preternatural insight that, like a *bārû* or other technical diviners, he will relay faithfully to his client.

Jo Ann Hackett and Moore have detected a possible reference to similar cultic activity at Deir ‘Alla: the word מדר (DA II:5), perhaps related to biblical Hebrew מדורה (“fire pit”; cf., e.g., Isa 30:33).¹²⁸ Moore also argues that Balaam’s sacrifices in Numbers resemble known preparatory rituals for exorcism, which, as noted, is not a bad description of the task for which Balak has hired him.¹²⁹ However, the cultural link between Balaam’s sacrifices and his divination runs much deeper. In 1977, Leonhard Rost adduced a parallel in Xenophon’s *Anabasis* as evidence that this link was rooted in ancient Mediterranean divinatory praxis.¹³⁰ Subsequent comparative scholarship has confirmed Rost’s intuition. The Mesopotamian corpora

¹²⁷ Daiches connected it with the Akkadian divinatory phrase *ki šēpu parsat* (“by hindered step”); see idem, “Balaam,” 66–67. Levine takes it to denote silence, perhaps in connection with the anticipation of divine encounter; see idem, *Numbers 21–36*, 167. Moore mentions that some suggest emendation to וילך לבשפים (“he proceeded according to divination”) but does not specify who does so; see idem, *Balaam Traditions*, 107 n. 47. Finally, it is worth noting that LXX reads, “And Balaam went to inquire of the deity and went immediately (καὶ Βαλααμ ἐπορεύθη ἐπερωτῆσαι τὸν θεὸν καὶ ἐπορεύθη εὐθεΐαν).”

¹²⁸ See Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Allā*, HSM 32 (Chico: Scholars, 1980), 57–58, 82–83; and Moore, *Balaam*, 89–90.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 105–106.

¹³⁰ Leonhard Rost, “Fragen um Bileam,” in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walther Zimmerli zum 70. Geburtstag*, eds. Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart, and Rudolf Smend (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 377–87.

Offering #1 (Num 23:1–2)	Offering #2 (Num 23:14b)	Offering #3 (Num 23:29–30)
<p>¹ Balaam said to Balak, “Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here.” ² When Balak had done as Balaam instructed, Balak and Balaam offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.</p> <p>¹ וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלַעַם אֶל-בָּלָק בְּנֵה-לִי בָּזָה שִׁבְעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וְהִכֵּן לִי בָזָה שִׁבְעָה פָּרִים וְשִׁבְעָה אֵילִים:² וַיַּעַשׂ בָּלָק כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר בְּלַעַם וַיַּעַל בָּלָק וּבְלַעַם פָּר וְאֵיל בְּמִזְבֵּחַ:</p>	<p>He built seven altars and offered up a bull and a ram on each one.</p> <p>וַיִּבֶן שִׁבְעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וַיַּעַל פָּר וְאֵיל בְּמִזְבֵּחַ:</p>	<p>²⁹ Balaam said to Balak, “Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here.” ³⁰ When Balak had done as Balaam said, he offered up a bull and a ram on each altar.</p> <p>²⁹ וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלַעַם אֶל-בָּלָק בְּנֵה-לִי בָּזָה שִׁבְעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וְהִכֵּן לִי בָזָה שִׁבְעָה פָּרִים וְשִׁבְעָה אֵילִים:³⁰ וַיַּעַשׂ בָּלָק כְּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר בְּלַעַם וַיַּעַל פָּר וְאֵיל בְּמִזְבֵּחַ:</p>

Figure 2.1. Comparison of cultic preparations in Numbers 22–24

furnish especially ample evidence for the close association (if not outright overlap) between technical divination and cult. As Nissinen notes, “Properly performed sacrifice was considered a prerequisite of successful divination.”¹³¹ Even the Pentateuch itself reflects this association, authorizing the Aaronide priests, stewards of the *’ûrîm* and *tummîm*, as Israel’s preeminent technical diviners. There can be little doubt that this is the cultural background for the pentateuchal Balaam’s repeated ritual activity. As a technical diviner, propitiatory sacrifices would naturally have been at the core of his divinatory repertoire.

Yet for all the believability of Balaam’s offerings, they are also highly stylized. The narrator depicts them with a flurry of stereotypical cultic language: the whole burnt offering (עֹלָה) and its attendant verb (עָלָה); sacrificial slaughter (זָבַח); altars (מִזְבֵּחַ); and bulls (פָּר) and rams (אֵיל), both typical victims. The organized, deliberate coordination of these terms is repetitive both internally, in each offering, and externally, across all three (see Figure 2.1). In

¹³¹ Nissinen, *Ancient Prophecy*, 204. It should be noted, however, that Rost himself rejected a Mesopotamian background for Balaam’s ritual activities; see idem, “Fragen um Bileam,” 380.

both substance and style, Balaam’s offerings are *so* typical of cultic procedure as to border on exaggeration. I would suggest that this is precisely the case. These episodes are best read as parodies of elaborate divinatory ritual—value-laden narrative encapsulations of the extent to which technical divination is fundamentally beholden to propitiatory offerings. One can almost hear the audience laughing as Balaam and Balak move from site to site, scrupulously arranging these outrageously extravagant sacrifices. Scholars who bemoan the lack of realism in these descriptions, or the absence of neat analogues, have missed their literary character.¹³² The lack of realism is, in a sense, the *point*; these are fictive constructions, not objective reports.¹³³

The theological significance of this parodical stylization becomes clear in light of what follows. As noted above, Balaam’s statement to his client following the first offering—“perhaps YHWH will manifest to me, and whatever thing he might show me I will tell you”—establishes an expectation for a technical divinatory consultation. The visuality is key: God will “show” (הִרְאָה, *hiphil*) Balaam information—perhaps through ominous natural phenomena—that will only become verbal (and thereby intelligible to his lay client) when *he* “tells” (דַּבֵּר, *hiphil*) it.¹³⁴ However, this expectation is upended: “YHWH placed a *word* in Balaam’s *mouth* (וַיִּשֶׂם יְהוָה) (דַּבְּרָה בְּפִי בְלָעָם) and said, ‘Return to Balak and *say* as follows (וְנֹכַח תְּדַבֵּר)’” (Num 23:5). With these two expressions for verbal communication, well known from both prophetic and epistolary

¹³² See, e.g., Moore, *Balaam Traditions*, 106; and Robker, *Balaam*, 329. Moore, drawing on others’ work, has argued that the number seven bears apotropaic significance in both biblical and extrabiblical texts; see idem, *Balaam Traditions*, 105 n. 37. However, while this is admittedly intriguing, it should be noted that the number seven also bears widely attested symbolism of completeness and abundance. As such, this number could itself play a parodic function in Balaam’s offerings, communicating their elaborateness.

¹³³ This may be fruitfully compared with the mesmerizing descriptions of Persian-imperial opulence in the book of Esther, the vividness of which wavers between the realistic and the outrageous in order to convey a sense of descriptive accurateness while also encoding a valuative assessment; cf. Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 12–27.

¹³⁴ Cf. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 195.

contexts, YHWH bypasses the step of skilled interpretation and grants Balaam immediate access to the verbal fruits of that interpretation. Balaam’s poems are thus situated as the speech of the deity, not of the diviner, who has effectively lost control of his body.¹³⁵ In other words, Balaam leaves his client’s company as a technical diviner but returns to him as an intuitive prophet.

This prophetic subversion of divinatory cultic procedure happens once more (Num 23:13–18), much to Balak’s frustration and—one must imagine—much to the ancient audience’s delight. The Moabite king begins to wonder what he has gotten himself into, pleading, “Fine, don’t curse them—just please don’t bless them!” (Num 23:25). Nevertheless, he resolves to let Balaam make yet a third attempt. This time, the stylized recitation of the diviner’s cultic preparations gives way to a different surprise:

וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלָעָם אֶל־בָּלַק בְּנֵה־לִי
 בָזָה שִׁבְעָה מִזְבְּחֹת וְהִכֵּן לִי בָזָה
 שִׁבְעָה פָרִים וְשִׁבְעָה אֵילִים: ³⁰ וַיַּעַשׂ
 בָּלַק כְּאֲשֶׁר אָמַר בְּלָעָם וַיַּעַל פָּר
 וְאֵיל בְּמִזְבֵּחַ: ^{24:1} וַיֵּרָא בְלָעָם כִּי טוֹב
 בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה לְבָרֵךְ אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא־
 הִלְךְ כְּפַעַם־בְּפַעַם לְקִרְאֹת נְחָשִׁים
 וַיִּשֶׂת אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר פָּנָיו: ² וַיִּשָּׂא בְלָעָם
 אֶת־עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂכֵן
 לְשִׁבְטֵי וְתַהֲי עָלָיו רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים:

^{23:29} Balaam said to Balak, “Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here.” ³⁰ When Balak had done as Balaam said, he offered up a bull and a ram on each altar. ^{24:1} Now Balaam, seeing that it was good in YHWH’s eyes to bless Israel, did not go, as before, according to the divinatory practices. Instead, he set his face to the desert. ² When Balaam looked up and saw Israel dwelling tribe by tribe, the spirit of God came upon him. (Num 23:29–24:2)

This, as several commentators note, is the climax of the story.¹³⁶ Balaam, the renowned diviner, finally recognizes that technical divinatory access to the deity is an illusion. He forsakes his craft and, surrendering himself to the spirit of God, embraces the role of intuitive prophet—the only

¹³⁵ However, Vayntrub has argued that this is only a result of the prose framing. On their own, the speeches, as instantiations of *משל*, are instead characterized as Balaam’s own conclusions from his personal experience; see idem, *Beyond Orality*, 111. The prophetic relevance of *משל* will be addressed in the following chapter of this study.

¹³⁶ See, e.g., Barré, “Portrait of Balaam,” 263; and Levine, *Numbers 21–36*, 191, 235.

genuine channel of communication with the divine.¹³⁷ In this way, Numbers 22–24 targets the same technical divinatory practice as does Plato’s *Apology* but to the opposite end. The elenchus bypasses propitiatory sacrifice in order to empower human beings to initiate “oracular” communication (in the form of philosophical dialogue). By contrast, authentic prophecy bypasses it in order to emphasize that this prerogative lies solely with the deity.

Attempts to chart Balaam’s character development along a moralized spectrum of “positive versus negative” or “good versus evil” misconstrue what is really at issue, often due to a misguided need to harmonize Numbers 22–24 with the predominantly antagonistic orientation of the complex of Balaam traditions. The truth, however, is that with the possible exception of the donkey episode, Numbers 22–24 does not thematize Balaam’s personal integrity—for better or worse.¹³⁸ The story *does* impugn Balaam, but with respect to his *profession*, not his character—and with the ultimate goal of depicting his positive transformation away from this essentially negative practice. This is underscored by the pointed contrast with Balak, who remains unmoved even after Balaam’s pneumatic transformation: “It was for the purpose of cursing my enemies that I summoned you,” he complains, “but look—you have consummately

¹³⁷ The phrase “a spirit coming upon (הי”ה על ... רוח)” is an unmistakable marker of intuitive prophetic experience; cf. Carlson, “Possession and Other Spirit Phenomena,” 217–19.

¹³⁸ I am not convinced by Moberly’s argument that Balaam is driven by greed to accept Balak’s offer, such that when he agrees to see “what else (מה יסרף) YHWH may say to me” (Num 22:19), he is simply straining to hear what he wants to hear: “On the one hand, Balaam preserves the language of divine vocation and obedience as used in his initial response to Balak, where it is possible that what was said was meant; only now the language is becoming a tool of self-interested financial negotiation.” R. W. L. Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine 14 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 142–43; cf. idem, “True Prophet,” 16; and Meshullam Margaliot, “The Connection of the Balaam Narrative with the Pentateuch,” in *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1973), 281–82. This reading is undeniably ingenious—and that is precisely why I am unable to accept it. It is almost too subtle against the backdrop of Balaam’s repeated, frank emphasis that he could not transgress YHWH’s word even were Balak to promise him the world. It seems to me that Moberly’s reading reflects an understanding of the donkey episode in light of the more straightforwardly negative Balaam traditions attested elsewhere. As I have discussed, I think that the satire of Balaam in the donkey episode is more nuanced than these other traditions.

blessed them these three times!” (Num 24:10bβ). Far from reaching the correct conclusion regarding the *procedure* of divination, he is still stuck on his mistaken understanding of its *purpose*—to which Balaam has been (correctly) objecting since the very beginning. Despite the wishes of some critics, therefore, the Balaam of Numbers 22–24 cannot be neatly categorized as “negative” or “positive.” The very plot of the story is that his changing understanding of divination takes him from the one to the other, with consequential theological implications.

In the deuteronomic Balaam tradition—one of those more squarely negative ones—the episode is remembered as the triumph of divine blessing over human curse (Deut 23:5–6). In Numbers, however, the triumph is actually broader and more fundamental: intuitive prophecy, in which God initiates revelatory encounters, triumphs over technical divination, in which the diviner attempts to do so. This is the “thesis” of the story. In fact, Balaam himself explicitly utters this thesis in his second oracle:

<p>כִּי לֹא־נִחַשׁ בְּיַעֲקֹב וְלֹא־קִסָּם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כַּעֲתָ יֵאמָר לְיַעֲקֹב וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל מִה־פָּעַל אֵל:</p>	<p>There is no augury in Jacob, no divination in Israel; immediately it is told to Jacob, to Israel, what God has done.” (Num 23:23)¹³⁹</p>
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¹³⁹ Exegesis of this verse has been more fraught than is necessary. The debate has centered around whether the prepositional *כִּי* in the first colon should be read in a locative sense, as I have here, or in an adversative sense, yielding, “There is no augury *against* Jacob, no divination *against* Israel.” The latter certainly fits the larger literary context: having hired Balaam to work efficacious charms against Israel, Balak learns—from the mouth of his employee, no less—that this is impossible. Moreover, many have pointed out that a descriptive statement denying the presence of divinatory activity in Israel is belied by the numerous biblical concessions to the contrary—a favorite target of prophetic wrath. However, while the adversative reading coheres with the narrative as a whole, it is locally undermined by the verse itself. The second colon focuses on Israel’s uniquely intimate access to God’s actions, which clearly provides the rationale for a claim as to the absence of divination in Israel; by contrast, it has little obvious connection with the inefficacy of divination against Israel. It is therefore best to read the preposition as a locative and to read the whole verse as a statement about the unusual obsolescence of prophecy in Israel by virtue of their direct line of communication with the deity. The first colon is to be read in the subjunctive, so to speak, rather than the indicative. It is not a descriptive denial of the presence of technical divination but a normative denial of its rationale; cf. Vayntrub, *Beyond Orality*, 143 n. 73. To translate somewhat more freely: “There *need be* no augury in Jacob, no divination in Israel, for immediately it is told to Jacob, to Israel, what God has done.”

For a people privy to God's actions through the direct communication granted to his prophets, professional diviners are irrelevant. Balaam becomes the dramatic embodiment of this fundamental contrast each time he speaks forth God's own sublime poetry in the face of the extravagant propitiatory rituals that he himself so carefully orchestrated. John Wharton put it vividly: "Standing beside the reeking altar in a tableau of hushed expectancy, [Balak and his associates] represent all of the urgent claims of the enemies of God upon Balaam's magic arts[.] But the word of God prevails."¹⁴⁰ Whether this is a fair characterization of technical divination is beside the point, for it *is* a fair characterization of what Numbers 22–24 *itself* claims about technical divination in relation to authentic prophecy. The drama and delight of the story is watching Balaam the diviner come to this realization himself as he hears it leave his own lips.

2.3.3. Micah 6:1–8 and the Substance of Prophecy

Scholars have long noted that Mic 6:5 has a particular affinity with Numbers 22–24 within the overall constellation of biblical Balaam texts. The former appears to contain the latter in extreme miniature: Balak takes aggressive action against Israel by seeking the counsel (צ"ע) of Balaam, but Balaam's prophetic activity (ה"ע) ultimately frustrates his client's hopes—though, as Robker notes, the verse "implies more than states" this.¹⁴¹ This affinity has generally been shoehorned into the aforementioned "positive-to-negative" tradition-historical reconstruction of the Balaam complex, with Mic 6:5 representing the kernel of an ancient tradition—reflected both

¹⁴⁰ James A. Wharton, "The Command to Bless: An Exposition of Numbers 22:41–23:25," *Int* 13 (1959): 43.

¹⁴¹ Robker, *Balaam*, 245.

at Deir ‘Alla and in the earliest redactional stratum of the pentateuchal account—in which Balaam had not yet been maligned as a slimy, sinister magician.¹⁴²

Proponents of this commonplace reading have not usually acknowledged the extent to which they presuppose the form-critical isolation of Mic 6:5 as a synecdoche for the wilderness period. If Balaam is indeed an ultimately arbitrary historiographical index, unrelated in specific substance to the rest of the passage, then it makes sense to reconstruct a minimalist tradition based on an atomistic reading of the verse. However, a few have been willing to question this form-critical orthodoxy, instead approaching Mic 6:5 as an integral part of the whole passage. Tellingly, they have found that Mic 6:1–8 may soundly be read as a more thoroughgoing engagement with the robustly developed Balaam tradition in Numbers.

Looking backward in the passage, Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman drew attention to how Balaam is counterposed with Moses, Aaron, and Miriam (Mic 6:4). They argued that this is not simply a summary of wilderness and exodus, respectively, but a juxtaposition of opposed models of prophecy.¹⁴³ This would activate the allusive comparisons to Moses in Numbers 22–24, detected already in antiquity.¹⁴⁴ Looking ahead in the passage, J. M. P. Smith argued that Micah recalls Numbers 22–24 in order to contrast divination with his concluding declaration of genuine service: Balaam’s “magical, superstitious conception of religion is sadly out of harmony with the magnificent ideal set forth in the immediately following verses.”¹⁴⁵ In

¹⁴² See, e.g., *ibid.*, 243–46.

¹⁴³ Andersen and Freedman, *Micah*, 519.

¹⁴⁴ See, e.g., Margaliot, “Connection of the Balaam Narrative,” 285–90; and Vayntrub, *Beyond Orality*, 106–10. Intuition of a connection between Balaam and Moses is reflected in 4Q*Testimonia*, where an excerpt from Balaam’s parting poem (= Num 24:15–17) is juxtaposed with one from Moses’s parting poem (= Deut 33:8–11).

¹⁴⁵ John Merlin Powis Smith, William Hayes Ward, and Julius A. Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah, and Joel*, ICC (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1911), 122.

this way, Balaam is also associated with the worshiper who so grossly misunderstands the role of the cult (Mic 6:6–7). If Andersen’s and Freedman’s reading is accepted alongside Smith’s—and there is no reason why they should not be compatible, if not outright complementary—then Balaam is nothing less than the conceptual hinge on which Mic 6:1–8 turns.

Yet where Andersen, Freedman, and Smith identify a *conceptual* connection between Mic 6:1–8 and Numbers 22–24, I would push further and suggest a more specifically *narratological* connection. Like Numbers 22–24, Mic 6:1–8 is a complete (if succinct) dramatic movement—in a word, a story—with plot, characters, and dialogue.¹⁴⁶ The passage does not simply report indirectly *that* Balak “sought counsel” and Balaam “answered.” Rather, it directly depicts them speaking for themselves.¹⁴⁷ This consists of the closing verses:

⁵ My people! Recall what counsel Balak, king of Moab, sought, and what Balaam son of Beor answered him—between Shittim and Gilgal—in order that YHWH’s just actions might be known:

[Balak:] ⁶ “With what may I approach YHWH—supplicate before God on high? May I approach him with burnt offerings? With year-old calves? ⁷ Might YHWH accept thousands of rams? Tens of thousands of streams of oil? Perhaps if I give my firstborn for my transgression—the fruit of my body for my own sin?”

[Balaam:] ⁸ “He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what YHWH seeks from you: only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God.” (Mic 6:5–8)¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ Jan Joosten has taken a similar approach, advancing an intriguing argument that Mic 6:1–8 is an allusive recasting of YHWH into the role of Samuel in the prophet’s confrontation with Israel at Gilgal (1 Samuel 12); see idem, “YHWH’s Farewell to Northern Israel (Micah 6,1–8),” *ZAW* 125 (2013): 448–62. Although I do not share Joosten’s intuition of the specific story in which Mic 6:1–8 is grounded, I agree with him more generally that the narrative character of the passage endows it with “a balanced structure and a coherent line of thought.” *Ibid.*, 451.

¹⁴⁷ Joyce Rillett Wood has pointed to embodied dialogue as a characteristic literary feature of the book of Micah as a whole, going so far as to argue that the book was meant to be performed like a Greek drama; see idem, “Speech and Action in Micah’s Prophecy,” *CBQ* 62 (2000): 645–62. It should be noted, however, that she ascribes to the conventional view of Mic 6:1–8 as a forensic dialogue between Israel and YHWH; see *ibid.*, 658–69.

¹⁴⁸ I thank Prof. Levenson for his helpful suggestions regarding my construal of this dialogue when I presented an earlier version of this material at the Harvard Hebrew Bible Workshop in December 2018.

Guided by the plot of Numbers 22–24, the redactor of Mic 6:1–8 relocated an originally independent priestly-prophetic inquiry and responsum into the mouths of Balak and Balaam, respectively. The deity is invoked in the third person because, as in the original Gattung, he is only the topic of the dialogue, not an interlocutor himself.¹⁴⁹ Balaam is the joint through which the initially distinct legal (Mic 6:1–5) and priestly (Mic 6:6–8) Gattungen were redactionally integrated: the latter is recalled as part of the story mobilized in the former.

The discursive negotiation with divination in Numbers 22–24, coextensive with its plot, undergirds the compositional logic of the redactional redeployment of the priestly תורה in Mic 6:1–8. As we have seen, sacrifice is *the* central divinatory component of the task for which Balak hires Balaam in Numbers. While Robker is therefore correct that Balaam “takes on an almost priestly capacity in [Numbers 22–24], at least in terms of his advisory role,” the qualifier “almost” is misleading.¹⁵⁰ This capacity is perfectly native to Balaam’s status as a technical diviner, no more “priestly” than “divinatory” in any essential sense. In fact, the very term תורה refers not only to priestly responsa in the realm of cult but also more generally to oracular communication in both the Bible (see, e.g., Isa 2:3 = Mic 4:2) and, as its Akkadian cognate (*têrtu*), in the Mesopotamian divinatory corpora (see, e.g., A. 1968, 12–17).¹⁵¹

Because of this ancient cultural affinity between cult and divination, the redactor of Mic 6:1–8 was able coherently and believably to place the inquiry of the priestly תורה Gattung in Balak’s mouth and the corresponding responsum (the תורה itself) in Balaam’s mouth. The former

¹⁴⁹ Contra Andersen and Freedman, who argue, “The use of third-person pronouns (‘he’) rather than direct address (‘thou’) suggests a certain distance between the speaker and YHWH.” Idem, *Micah*, 524.

¹⁵⁰ Robker, *Balaam*, 328.

¹⁵¹ On *têrtu*, see *CAD* 18:364–67.

“seeks counsel” (יָעָץ) from the latter, a trained expert, regarding what types of sacrifice will give his divinatory task the best chance of success—including, as in Numbers 22–24, reference to “burnt offerings” (עֹלוֹת) and rams (אֵילִים).¹⁵² In the original generic context, the vivid and stereotypical descriptions of these offerings “masterfully presented,” as Hans Walter Wolff noted, “ad absurdum the possibility of cultic sacrifices and indirectly indicate[d] to the individual that YHWH does not make these kinds of demands upon his people.”¹⁵³ Coming from Balak, they serve to train this same underlying criticism on a new but related target: the propitiatory offerings upon which technical divination depends.

Even in a divinatory context, it might be difficult to imagine Balak, a Moabite king bent on destroying Israel, so eager to offer elaborate sacrifices to Israel’s God. However, this actually coheres with Balak’s general orientation toward YHWH in Numbers 22–24. He dreads Israel’s impending invasion but does not trace their meteoric rise to their deity, for better or for worse. The only thing about YHWH that matters to him is that he is the deity to whom Balaam is loyal and by whom he divines. Each of the three times Balak invokes the deity (by the names YHWH and God; see Num 23:17, 27; 24:11), it is always in a rather transactional relation to his goal. Indeed, a crucial (if humorous) element of the story is that whereas Balaam understands right

¹⁵² I concede that this reflexive reading of יָעָץ goes against the usual *qal* sense of the verb (“plot,” “scheme”; see, e.g., Isa 7:5), which is more unidirectional. Indeed, it is often used in this manner to describe other nations’ aggressive actions against Israel, which is precisely the context in Mic 6:5 (so Vg., NJPS, and NRSV, which render *cogitaverit*, “plotted,” and “devised,” respectively). By contrast, it is the *niphal* that more generally means “take counsel” (see, e.g., 1 Kgs 12:6—but note that it appears there twice, apparently meaning *both* “take counsel” and “give counsel”). Because Balaam’s action of “answering” implies dialogue (in a specifically divinatory mode), I believe that the context justifies taking יָעָץ in Mic 6:5 in a manner somewhat closer to the usual *niphal* sense (so KJV). LXX, which renders ἐβουλεύσατο, is itself ambiguous, as the middle voice of βουλεύω could well be taken either way—although the addition of κατὰ σοῦ (“against you”) perhaps recommends the usual *qal* sense. Indeed, while the older Brenton translation of LXX renders “what counsel Balac king of Moab took,” NETS renders “planned.” In any case, I would argue that in this particular narrative context, Balak’s own “plotting” is inseparable from the “counsel” that he seeks from Balaam; the former is realized in the latter.

¹⁵³ Hans Walter Wolff, *Micah: A Commentary*, trans. Gary Stansell, CC (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), 179.

from the beginning that YHWH's power is implicated in his divination, Balak never understands this even after it is repeatedly demonstrated to his face. The king of Moab comes off looking rather like the king of Lydia whom we encountered in the Delphic literature. It is therefore very much in character for him to ask Balaam, "With what may I approach YHWH?" Like Croesus, he *is* deeply interested in this kind of question—but only to the extent that it bears on the efficacy of the divinatory practice that he has solicited.

Once again, we see here how a cultic inquiry that can be form-critically traced to an Israelite worshiper has been coherently reassigned to Balak. What the former mistakenly believes about absolution, the latter mistakenly believes about divination: that it is simply a matter of, as Mays puts it, "with what"—the "external objects at the disposal of the questioner."¹⁵⁴ In drawing this structural connection, Mic 6:1–8 gives narrative expression to a theological criticism that technical divination is a crudely transactional construal of humanity's relationship with the divine—as if prophetic insight were something that could be bought with sacrifices, just as it seems to have been at Delphi.

When Mic 6:6–7 is read as Balak's inquiry regarding proper divinatory procedure, several elements in the passage begin to cohere within the conceptual world of technical divination. Scholars have long wondered about the twofold use of קד"ם for the action of approaching the deity. While this sense is not unprecedented, it is hardly common either.¹⁵⁵ Conspicuously, the verb appears in the deuteronomic Balaam tradition, where it describes the basic decency that the Ammonites and Moabites failed to show to Israel (Deut 23:5).¹⁵⁶ Because

¹⁵⁴ Mays, *Micah*, 137.

¹⁵⁵ See *HALOT*, 2:1068.

¹⁵⁶ It also appears in Neh 13:2, part of an account likely based on that of D.

many commentators have noted deuteronomic affinities in Mic 6:1–8, it is conceivable that the passage has imported a word that D associates with Balak.¹⁵⁷ However, a more intriguing possibility emerges from Daiches’s argument that the timing of Balaam’s ritual activity in the morning (Num 22:41) reflects a broader ancient Near Eastern practice of divination at or before sunrise.¹⁵⁸ It is tempting, therefore, to detect a trace of solar language in קד"ם because of its connection to “east” (קֶדְמִים). So understood, the somewhat unusual diction would be another attempt to situate Balak’s question in Mic 6:6–7 within the realm of divinatory praxis.

Tremendous attention has also been devoted to the apparent proposal of child sacrifice with which Mic 6:7 concludes: “Perhaps if I give my firstborn (בְּכוֹרִי) for my transgression—the fruit of my body (פְּרִי בִטְנִי) for my own sin?” There is widespread agreement that this is intended as the absurd crescendo of an increasingly desperate series of cultic bids.¹⁵⁹ What has not been noticed, however, is that a proposal of child sacrifice makes good sense in the context of Balaam’s ritual preparations for technical divination. Jo Ann Hackett has argued compellingly (if controversially) that the word נקר (“sprout”; DA II:5) at Deir ‘Alla refers to the victim of child sacrifice.¹⁶⁰ This, perhaps, is the reason for the fire pit (מִדְרֵךְ). On this reading, the offering of the

¹⁵⁷ See, e.g., Joosten, “YHWH’s Farewell,” 451–52; and Wolff, *Micah*, 170–71. If Mic 6:1–8 does know the deuteronomic Balaam tradition, then its discursive similarity to the “positive” portrayal in Numbers 22–24 cannot simply be a diachronic matter of its relative position in the history of the Balaam complex. This would complicate the linear “positive-to-negative” reconstruction of the traditionary development of this complex.

¹⁵⁸ Daiches, “Balaam,” 61–62.

¹⁵⁹ See, e.g., Joosten, “YHWH’s Farewell,” 450 n. 8; and Wolff, *Micah*, 168, 179. By contrast, Levenson wonders whether the culmination of child sacrifice is not a logical progression from least to most valuable offering, pointing out that it would be odd to compare YHWH’s true demands to an abominable practice (even favorably); see idem, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 11–12.

¹⁶⁰ See Hackett, *Balaam Text*, 80–85. As external evidence for this claim, she points to several Punic inscriptions that also refer to the victim of child sacrifice as a “sprout” (צמח). Her chief challenger on this point has been Levine, who argues that נקר means “corpse” and has no relation to child sacrifice; see, e.g., idem, “The Plaster Inscriptions From Deir ‘Alla: General Interpretation,” in *The Balaam Text From Deir ‘Alla Re-Evaluated: Proceedings of the*

child in Combination II is meant to appease the gods and thereby to avert the severe decree that Balaam has proclaimed in Combination I. This apotropaic function coheres with the exorcistic features that Moore has detected in Balaam’s activity in the inscription.

Given the vigorous debate around the meaning of נִקָּר, to say nothing of the ambiguous relationship between the ritual in Combination II and the reference to Balaam in Combination I, it is difficult (however tempting) to hang too much on this reading. Nevertheless, even the apotropaic dimension of child sacrifice in general—that is, beyond what may or may not be reflected at Deir ‘Alla—furnishes evidence for a connection between the gruesome practice and Balaam’s technical divination. Hackett stresses that there is an abundance of ancient evidence that “child sacrifice was performed in a crisis situation as a means of averting the crisis.”¹⁶¹ This is an apt description of the circumstances under which Balak hired Balaam—from the former’s perspective, at least. Balak does not, of course, engage in child sacrifice in Numbers; as we have seen, the text is quite specific in its description of the (animal) victims. However, it is rather conspicuous that the most famous biblical example of an apotropaic child sacrifice involves another Moabite king facing an Israelite onslaught:

²⁶ When [Mesha] the king of Moab saw that the war was overcoming him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the king of Edom—but they were unable to do so. ²⁷ So he took his firstborn son (אֶת־בְּנוֹ הַבְּכוֹר) —whom he would have made king after him—and offered him up as a burnt offering (וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ עֹלָה) upon the wall. A great wrath assailed Israel and they withdrew from him, returning to the land. (2 Kgs 3:26–27)

Passages such as this show that child sacrifice would have been understood as a contextually appropriate course of action for Balak to propose to a diviner like Balaam. For this reason, the

International Symposium Held At Leiden 21–24 August 1989, eds. J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 68–70.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 80; cf. Levine, “Deir ‘Alla Plaster Inscriptions,” 204.

redactor of Mic 6:1–8 was coherently able to place Mic 6:7 in Balak’s mouth even though child sacrifice does not in fact appear in the Balaam tradition to which he refers.¹⁶² In so doing, he gave narrative expression to a severe condemnation of technical divination: the underlying theology of using propitiatory rituals to prompt God’s oracular response is as grotesquely absurd and misguided as that of using child sacrifice to prompt God’s absolution.¹⁶³

The propitiatory rituals attendant to technical divination are, in effect, a matter of posing the client’s question in such a way that the deity will be moved to answer (favorably, if possible). In Numbers, Balaam gives voice to this dynamic, standing beside the altars and musing, “Perhaps YHWH will manifest to me”—which is to say, “Perhaps he will manifest to me *now that I have arranged the proper offerings.*” In Mic 6:1–8, Balak expresses the same concern, wondering whether YHWH will “accept” (הֲרָצָה) any of the abundant contributions that he is prepared to make. In both versions of the story, YHWH does indeed answer—but in a way that destabilizes the very premise of the question. As in Numbers, the rejection of propitiatory ritual praxis in Micah is a rejection of technical divination in favor of intuitive prophecy. The alternative to the proposed offerings is what has been oracularly communicated (דִּבְרֵי הַיְיָ, *hiphil*; cf. Num 23:3) via the prophet at the initiative of the deity himself: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what YHWH seeks from you.” We might say that Mic 6:8 is Micah’s equivalent to Num 23:23—a “thesis statement” about authentic prophecy.

¹⁶² Another possible connection between Balaam and child sacrifice is the pronounced thematic and lexical affinities between Numbers 22–24 and the Aqedah; see especially Jonathan D. Safren, “Balaam and Abraham,” *VT* 38 (1988): 105–13. It should be noted that if these affinities are exegetically operative in Mic 6:1–8, it would necessitate the prophetic redactor’s knowledge of a pentateuchal Balaam story that already included the comedic donkey episode, where most of the resonances with the Aqedah are to be found.

¹⁶³ Of course, this reading depends on accepting the aforementioned predominant view that the proposal of child sacrifice has a negative connotation.

In Numbers 22–24, the arrival of God’s “spirit”—a term rich in divinatory associations—conclusively subverts technical divinatory conventions. In Mic 6:1–8, the term דר״ש (“seek,” “inquire”) accomplishes this more subtly. The verb has a well attested technical usage within the conceptual world of divination: consulting an oracle or, put more generally, initiating communication with a divine being, who is the direct object.¹⁶⁴ For instance, when Rebekah is unsure of what to do about her painful pregnancy, she goes “to inquire of YHWH (לְדַרְשׁ אֶת־יְהוָה)” (Gen 25:22). A tantalizing notice in the story of Saul’s ascent to the kingship reads, “Formerly in Israel, when someone went to inquire of God (לְדַרְשׁ אֱלֹהִים), he would say, ‘Come, let us go to the seer,’ for the prophet of today was formerly called a seer” (1 Sam 9:9). Isaiah castigates those who say, “Inquire (דַּרְשׁוּ) of the ghosts and the familiar spirits that chirp and moan ... for instruction (לְתוֹרָה) and testimony” (Isa 8:19–20). These and numerous other examples establish that דר״ש is a native Hebrew term for technical divination.

Once Mic 6:8 is recognized as Balaam’s oracular responsum, the discursive significance of the divinatory valence of דר״ש comes into focus. By employing the term with YHWH as the subject and a person as the (indirect) object, Mic 6:1–8 accomplishes an ingenious reversal of the typical dynamic of technical divinatory consultation. The technical activity of דר״ש is no longer a means for human beings proactively to bridge the natural realm with the supernatural, establishing communication with deities who are otherwise elusive on account of their very divinity. Rather, it is now YHWH’s only recourse for bridging the far greater chasm that runs the other way, separating him from his own human creations, who are otherwise elusive on account

¹⁶⁴ See *HALOT*, 1:233; cf. Johan Lust, “On Wizards and Prophets,” in *Studies on Prophecy: A Collection of Twelve Papers*, VTSup 26 (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 139–40.

of their obstinance and misguidedness. In authentic prophecy, YHWH is the diviner, the prophet the tool of his craft, and humanity the object of inquiry. The God whose speech Balaam speaks forth in Mic 6:1–8 is literally, as Heschel put it, a God in search (שׂוֹרֵךְ) of man.

Through parallel discursive negotiations, Mic 6:1–8 and Numbers 22–24 make the same claim regarding divinatory procedure: authentic prophecy is intuitive rather than technical communication between humanity and deity, proceeding from the latter to the former. However, the two Balaam stories differ as to the *content* of that intuitive communication. In other words, they share an understanding of the “how” of authentic prophecy but emphasize different aspects of the “what” and the “why.” In Numbers 22–24, as we have seen, prophecy is a state of preternatural comprehension of the sphere of divine action—“what God has done”—and one’s place therein. Balaam transitions from diviner to prophet when his oracular experiences grant him insight into what is “good (טוֹב) in God’s eyes” as a matter of descriptive reality. In this way, the argument of Numbers 22–24 is consistent with Balaam’s understanding of the purpose of divination even as it upends his understanding of its mechanics.

In Mic 6:1–8, too, Balaam’s prophecy is presented as insight into the divine realm, tellingly articulated with the same word: “He hereby tells you, O mortal, what is *good* (טוֹב).” However, in this case, the “good” is not simply, as for Numbers 22–24, what God *does* through *his* own actions. Rather, it is what God *demand*s of people through *their* own actions: “what YHWH *seeks from you*.” This upends the very purpose of divination in addition to its procedure. Stepping metaphorically into the role of diviner, YHWH “seeks” humanity not in order to access them in an informational sense, which would hardly be necessary for a deity. Rather, he seeks to influence them in an ethical sense. The affinities with Vlastos’s characterization of Socrates’s revision of divination are remarkable and telling:

From religion as Socrates understands it magic is purged[.] ... In the practice of Socratic piety man would not pray to god, “My will be done by thee,” but “Thy will be done by me.” In this new form of piety man is not a self-seeking beggar beseeching self-centered, honor-hungry gods, cajoling them by gifts of sacrifice to do good which without that gift their own will for good would not have prompted them to do so. Man addresses gods who are of their very nature relentlessly beneficent: they want for men nothing but what men would want for themselves if their will were undividedly will for good.¹⁶⁵

Like elenctic philosophy, intuitive prophecy offers insight that is meant to promote a transformed life—in this case, one animated by justice, kindness, and humility.¹⁶⁶ These, not the sacrifices that Balak proposes, are the “practical” components attendant to prophetic communication. In keeping with intuitive prophecy, they do not *prompt* this communication but are prompted *by* it. Moberly concedes that “it may be appropriate to call Balaam a ‘prophet,’ as long as the complexities of such a generic category in this context are recognized.”¹⁶⁷ Yet it is precisely these “complexities” that are stake in these two stories. In Numbers 22–24, Balaam becomes a prophet when he confronts Balak with the *spirit* of God. In Mic 6:1–8, he becomes a prophet when he confronts Balak with the *genuine service* of God.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, Cornell Studies in Classical Philology 50 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 176; cf. McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 8.

¹⁶⁶ The vast majority of scholarly interest in Mic 6:8 has centered on exegesis of the precise meanings of these three activities. However, to the extent that, as Wolff notes, this regimen is “one of the greatest attempts to formulate, briefly and to the point, the *summa* of what is good,” it seems to me that such preoccupation with terminological specificity rather misses the spirit of the verse. Idem, *Micah*, 184.

¹⁶⁷ Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment*, 139 n. 24.

¹⁶⁸ The addressee of Mic 6:8 is identified simply as “mortal” (אָדָם). It would not be an exaggeration to say that the verse owes much of its grandeur to this cryptic two-syllable vocative. Most have sought to explain its vagueness in light of the priestly תורה Gattung. Some have argued that it emphasizes the individuality of the cultic inquirer over against his community. God demands integrity from every person *as an individual*; see, e.g., Andersen and Freedman, *Micah*, 523; and Mays, *Micah*, 141. For others, the term emphasizes the humanity of the inquirer over against his national identity. Justice, kindness, and humility are the obligations of all human beings; see, e.g., Smith et al., *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 127; and Wolff, *Micah*, 183. These readings are hardly mutually exclusive. While the precise intentions behind this term are of course impossible to determine, it is worth noting that either reading is compatible with a redactional reassignment of the role to Balak. As a non-Israelite of royal status, he is naturally addressed in such a way as to emphasize both his humanity and his individuality.

Read conventionally as priestly-prophetic תורה, Mic 6:1–8 is a parade example of subversive prophetic speech. Israel is called to account for misunderstanding cultic worship as an acceptable substitute for fidelity to the sublime ethical ideal to which their covenantal relationship obligates them. I have argued that because of the cultural overlap between cult and divination, the scribe behind Mic 6:1–8 was able, through a mere flick of the redactional wrist, to slide Balak and Balaam into the respective roles of cultic inquirer and respondent. He mapped the anonymous worshiper’s misguided sacrificial petitions onto Balak’s propitiatory offerings, transforming a critique of crude cultic efforts to sway the deity into a critique of crude divinatory efforts to do so. However, it might reasonably be objected that even if this reading compellingly accounts for Balaam’s surprising appearance in the passage, it does so at the unacceptably high price of theologically defanging it. After all, if the passage directs its criticism not at Israel’s own ritual (mal)practice but at that of other nations, is it not a smug self-affirmation of Israel’s religious preeminence? Is it not, in a word, no longer subversive?

While such a possibility would indeed be theologically deflationary, the compositional logic of the passage militates against it. The dialogue between Balak and Balaam, a redactionally repurposed priestly תורה, is itself situated within a different Gattung: the covenant lawsuit, in which Israel is arraigned for breach of contract. In such a context, there is no cogent way to read Balaam’s responsum as an affirmation. Instead, the passage coordinates Israel and Balak as exponents of the same tendency to fail in spite of intuitive prophetic intercession (see Figure 2.2). YHWH sent Moses and his siblings to the former, Balaam to the latter—but to no avail. This compositional arrangement makes explicit the implicit admonition that Wharton identified in the pentateuchal Balaam story:

The victory of God’s word accomplished through the pagan sorcerer [*sic*] implicitly calls in question Israel’s own response to that word. We cannot escape the searching judgment

	Israel	Balak
Failure	<p>^{2b} For YHWH has a case against his people; he is contending with Israel. ³ “My people! What have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me!” (Mic 6:2b–3)</p>	<p>⁵ “My people! Recall what counsel Balak, king of Moab, sought, and what Balaam son of Beor answered him— between Shittim and Gilgal— in order that you might recognize YHWH’s just actions: ⁶ ‘With what may I approach YHWH—supplicate before God on high? May I approach him with burnt offerings? With year-old calves? ⁷ Might YHWH accept thousands of rams? Tens of thousands of streams of oil? Perhaps if I give my firstborn for my transgression—the fruit of my body for my own sin?’ (Mic 6:5–7)</p>
Prophetic Intercession	<p>“For I bore you up from the land of Egypt; I redeemed you from the house of bondage; I dispatched Moses, Aaron, and Miriam before you.” (Mic 6:4)</p>	<p>“He hereby tells you, O mortal, what is good, and what YHWH seeks from you: only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God.” (Mic 6:8)</p>

Figure 2.2. Parallel structure of Micah 6:1–8

of the prophets: God has brought forth from curse a blessing, but Israel has exchanged her very blessing for a curse.¹⁶⁹

YHWH confronts Israel with the bitter surprise that they are implicated in Balaam’s rebuke of their Moabite nemesis. We know how the latter responded: “and Balak, too, went on his way” (Num 24:25b). The silence following Balaam’s pronouncement in Mic 6:8 is therefore pregnant with urgency: Will Israel, like Balak, take the easy way out, spurning the prophetic

¹⁶⁹ Wharton, “Command to Bless,” 47.

communication that constitutes their unprecedented access to the divine—or will they answer its searching and demanding call?

In this way, the divinatory construction of subversive prophetic speech in Mic 6:1–8 proves to be a two-way theological street. The passage certainly mobilizes the vapid misunderstanding of cultic worship in Mic 6:6–7 toward a trenchant critique of the pretenses of technical divination. However, it does so precisely in order to rebound back upon itself, drawing out the unsettling ramification that runs in the opposite direction: when Israel misconstrues sacrificial worship as a transactional process of propitiating YHWH, they are, in effect, engaging in divination, not worship. The irony can scarcely be overstated: in the hoary antiquity of Numbers 22–24, YHWH effortlessly disarmed Balak’s divinatory designs against his people—but in the present hour of Mic 6:1–8, he faces rebellion from countless little “Balaks” *among* that very people. It is only appropriate, then, that Balaam son of Beor should reappear to confront them. He is the dramatic embodiment of authentic prophecy, subverting Israel’s every pretense to technical divination by means of YHWH’s *own* “divinatory” attempt to reach them in return—in order that they might build a just, upright society in genuine service to him.

2.4. Conclusion

Reading Mic 6:1–8 in light of Plato’s negotiation with Delphic divination shows that the relationship between subversive prophetic speech and ancient Near Eastern divination is more complex than either the Mican redactor or many contemporary comparative scholars would have one think. On the one hand, the biblical writer complicates his *own* claim of radical phenomenological opposition by the deftness and consistency with which he employs Balaam’s divinatory activities. He is deeply rooted in the very conceptual world that he is rejecting;

indeed, he is able so powerfully to reject it only *because* of that rootedness. Paradoxically, then, the construction of subversive prophecy as anti-divination in Mic 6:1–8 actually begs to be situated within the comparative study of divination.

It is here, however, that the comparative study of prophecy has a tendency to overplay its hand. The divinatory character of Micah's anti-divinatory claim does not change the fact that the *substance of the claim* remains opposed to technical divination. It goes without saying that we err as historians of antiquity if we uncritically accept and reinscribe this claim. What I have tried to show in this chapter, however, is that we also err as historians of antiquity if we do not take seriously the very historicity of the claim itself. The notion that there is “no augury in Jacob, no divination in Israel” *is* a datum in the history of augury and divination, important precisely because it is relatively anomalous. It is hardly sound to erase exceptional elements in biblical literature simply because they complicate our scholarly categories and assumptions of typological continuity. If Balaam and Delphi are models of anything, it is how one's perspective can be positively transformed by encountering unexpected phenomena. The biblical authors and Plato apparently thought that their ancient audiences stood to benefit from openness to this sort of transformation. I would suggest that their modern scholarly audience can as well.

CHAPTER THREE
SUBVERSIVE SPEAKERS AND THEIR AUDIENCES:
THE POLITICS OF POETRY IN EZEKIEL AND IN THE *REPUBLIC*

3.1. Introduction

Subversive prophetic speech has drawn such sustained attention from commentators, both critical and confessional, certainly in no small part because it is conceptually compelling. The prophets' critique of corrupt institutions stirs a natural human attraction to moral integrity and fascination with social iconoclasm. This is why scholarship on subversive prophecy is often oriented around categories like "ideas" or "theology." Baruch Levine's opening to his essay on the topic is typical: "The ethical message of the biblical prophets may be formulated simply: in the eyes of the God of Israel, it is more important that Israelites follow the dictates of morality and justice, commanded by him, than that they offer sacrifices to him and celebrate sacred festivals."¹ While many scholars might contest Levine's particular formulation, most would accept the premise that subversive prophecy does admit of this type of abstract formulation in the first place. On this view, the prophets are basically theological ethicists.² To study them means to analyze their theologies, investigating how their criticisms of cult, king, and nation reflect their understandings of these institutions in relationship to their prophecy and the God who commissions it.

Yet however closely Levine's characterization of subversive prophecy conceptually looks like what the prophets say—again, this may be debated—it is absolutely clear that it in no way rhetorically *sounds* like *how* the prophets say it. Amos, for instance, does not solemnly declare to

¹ Levine, "Prophetic Attitudes," 202.

² As Ziony Zevit puts it in a colorful characterization of this view, "They are imagined or thought to be pre-philosophic philosophers. Had they lived today, they would teach ethics and theology in the best seminaries, deliver inspired lectures addressing pressing issues of the moment in the highest moral tones, and they would publish with Fortress Press." Idem, "Prophet versus Priest," 191.

Israel on YHWH’s behalf, “It is more important that you follow my dictates of morality and justice than that you offer sacrifices to me and celebrate sacred festivals.” Instead, as we have seen, he screams in YHWH’s own voice, “I hate, I abhor (שָׂנְאָתִי מְאֹדָה) your festivals!” He does not employ reasoned argument as to why cultic piety without societal justice is bankrupt. Instead, he sounds YHWH’s insistence that “justice roll on like water, righteousness like a mighty stream (וַיִּגַּל כַּמַּיִם מִשֶּׁפֶט וַיִּצְדֶּקֶה כְּנַחַל אֵיתָן)” (Am 5:24). Subversive prophetic speech is richly poetic, seen here in Amos’s use of synonymous repetition and simile. Such poetry tends to be abstracted out of purely conceptual treatments like Levine’s. However, I would argue that it is an inseparable component of what makes subversive prophecy so powerful. As Walzer puts it, “What is subversive in the prophetic books is not most immediately the message but the speaking of the message—and the person of the messenger.”³ The prophetic critique of authority inheres in the strength of its poetry, not only the strength of its ideas.⁴

The prophets characteristically insist that this poetry originates with the deity. “YHWH has spoken” (יהוה דבר); “oracle of YHWH” (נאם יהוה); “thus says YHWH” (כה אמר יהוה); “the word of YHWH came to me, saying” (ויהי דבר יהוה אלי לאמר)—such qualifications routinely punctuate prophetic pronouncements. This distinguishes them from the false prophets, whom the Bible presents as being themselves the sources of the words they proclaim. In the book of Ezekiel, where the phrase, “the word of YHWH came to me, saying,” recurs with a rhythm unmatched in any other prophetic book, the contrast is depicted as follows:

³ Walzer, *In God’s Shadow*, 82.

⁴ Throughout this chapter, I use the term “poetry” to refer generally to imaginative literary depiction rather than a specific formal arrangement (verse, meter, parallelism, etc.). As James O. Urmson wrote of Plato’s critique of poetry, “Plato mentions only poets, but it is not meter that is the target of his criticism.” James O. Urmson, “Plato and the Poets,” in *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts*, eds. Julius Moravcsik and Philip Temko, APQ Library of Philosophy (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 133.

¹ וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר:
² בְּן־אָדָם הַנְּבִיא אֶל־נְבִיאֵי
 יִשְׂרָאֵל הַנְּבִיאִים וְאָמַרְתָּ לְנְבִיאֵי
 מַלְבָּם שִׁמְעוּ דְבַר־יְהוָה: ³ כֹּה
 אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה הוּא עַל־הַנְּבִיאִים
 הַנְּבִלִים אֲשֶׁר הֵלְכִים אַחַר רוּחָם
 וּלְבַלְתֵּי רְאוֹ: ... ⁶ חֲזוּ שְׂוֹא
 וְקִסְם כְּזָב הָאֹמְרִים נְאֻם־יְהוָה
 וַיְהִי לֹא שְׁלָחָם וַיַּחֲלוּ לְקִים
 דְּבָרָם: ⁷ הֲלוֹא מִחֲזֵה־שְׂוֹא חֲזִיתֶם
 וּמִקְסָם כְּזָב אָמַרְתֶּם וְאֹמְרִים
 נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְאֲנִי לֹא דִבַּרְתִּי: ... ¹⁰
 יַעַן וּבִיַעַן הִטְעוּ אֶת־עַמִּי לֵאמֹר
 שְׁלוֹם וְאִין שְׁלוֹם וְהוּא בְּנֵה חֵיץ
 וְהֵנָּם טָחִים אֹתוֹ תִּפֹּל: ¹¹ אָמַר
 אֶל־טָחִי תִּפֹּל וַיִּפֹּל הָיָה גֶשֶׁם
 שׁוֹטֵף וְאֹתָנָה אֲבִי אֶלְגָּבִישׁ
 תִּפְלְנָה וְרוּחַ סַעֲרוֹת תִּבְקַע:

¹ The word of YHWH came to me, saying: ² O mortal, prophesy to those prophets of Israel who prophesy. Say to those who prophesy of their own accord: Hear the word of YHWH! ³ Thus says Lord YHWH: Woe upon those foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and do not see. ... ⁶ They prophesy nonsense and deceitful divination, they who say, “oracle of YHWH”—but YHWH did not commission them—and wait for him to effect it. ⁷ Truly they prophesy prophecies of nonsense and say things based on deceitful divination, saying, “oracle of YHWH”—but I never spoke. ... Because they have misled my people, saying, “Everything is fine”—but everything is not fine—and whitewashing the wall that [the people] build, say to the whitewashers that it shall fall. Torrential rain is coming; I shall make hailstones descend; storm gusts shall rend it open. (Ezek 13:1–3, 6–7, 10–11)⁵

The larger passage excerpted here effects a consequential coordination of prophetic agency, content, and legitimacy. False prophets speak words of their own initiative, like technical diviners, offering reassurance. By contrast, the true prophet is assailed by YHWH’s own word, vividly and violently subverting that reassurance. Ezekiel’s prophecy may well be appreciated for its poetic artistry, such as the play on נביאים and נבלים (v. 3) or the metaphor of the wall (v. 10ff.). However, on the terms set forth here, he may take no credit for it. To do so would be to testify against himself. Authentic prophecy does not admit of such human creativity.⁶

⁵ Following the LXX in reading δῶσω (= וְאֹתָנָה) in place of וְאֹתָנָה (Ezek 13:11).

⁶ Cf. the tandem rejection of poetry and divination in the Qur’an: “So I swear by what you see and by what you see not, truly it is the speech of a noble messenger, and not the speech of a poet. Little do you believe! Nor is it the speech of a soothsayer. Little do you reflect! It is a revelation from the Lord of the worlds” (Q 69:38–43).

Robert Lowth, who more than anyone is to be credited with ushering in the modern, humanistic study of biblical poetry, was apparently unfazed by this sort of demurrer.⁷ “Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, as far as relates to style,” he declared, “may be said to hold the same rank among the Hebrews, as Homer, Simonides, and Æschylus among the Greeks.”⁸ Others, however, have detected a befuddling paradox. The basic sense of the Greek *ποίησις*, whence “poetry,” means literally “making” or “fabrication.”⁹ So understood, poetry is a craft-product whose raw material is language, expertly fashioned from words, just as Second Isaiah’s idol-maker chisels his vain icon from wood (Isa 44:9–20). Stephen A. Geller has summed up the problem as follows: “A prophet is a ‘(forth) speaker,’ the mouthpiece of a god. A poet is a ‘maker,’ a craftsman in words. The former is a medium, the latter an artist. A prophet who consciously molded his prophecy would be false”—as Ezekiel himself suggests—while “a poet whose verse did not reflect his personality would be no true artist.”¹⁰ On this view, because prophecy is not made at all (as Ezekiel says), it cannot properly be poetry. The paradox is that his claim that his poetry is not made but received is *itself* advanced poetically, i.e., through *the* quintessential “made” thing. His poetic prophecy is a craft-product with no crafter—at least, no human crafter.

Ezekiel’s presentation of divinely transmitted poetry also raises a problem concerning representation. In the *Republic*, Plato offers perhaps the foundational Western treatment of poetry, condemning it as the enemy of philosophy because it is mere imitation (“mimesis”) of

⁷ For a concise overview of Lowth’s contribution, see Michael Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 105–28.

⁸ Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. G. Gregory (Boston: Buckingham, 1815), 294.

⁹ For an example of *ποίησις* in the general sense of “making” as opposed to the specific sense of “poetry,” see, e.g., *Eth. nic.* 1140a2.

¹⁰ Stephen A. Geller, “Were the Prophets Poets?” *Proof* 3 (1983): 211.

that it does not map neatly onto any native Hebrew counterpart.¹⁴ Meanwhile, in the sixth century BCE, any declarations of YHWH's incommensurability were almost certainly relative to other putative divine forces, as the broader context of Isa 46:5 makes perfectly clear. Even so abstract a thinker as Second Isaiah probably cannot reasonably be credited with the philosophical metaphysics necessary to place YHWH beyond the possibility of representation itself.

However, it remains important to review these alleged tensions because, historically legitimate or not, they have dictated the context in which prophetic poetry has most often been discussed: the mechanics of divine communication. Empowered by rabbinic traditions that questioned the semantic objectivity of revelation, Heschel, for instance, tried to cut the Gordian knot by proposing what might be called a mimetic phenomenology of prophecy.¹⁵ The prophets employed poetic creativity in order to render a wordless encounter with divinity comprehensible. "The prophet is a person, not a microphone," he wrote. "The word of God reverberated in the voice of man. ... He speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his own situation."¹⁶ We may detect here a theologized version of the Romantic conception of poetry as a portal to remarkable minds, which Barton has helpfully summarized as follows:

The value of literature [in this view] lies very largely in the insight it affords into the minds and rich emotional life of certain geniuses: people who have the capacity both to achieve a heightening of consciousness themselves and to convey it to others through the

¹⁴ Vayntrub, *Beyond Orality*, 23–27.

¹⁵ See, most famously, the Amoraic comment, "I saw my Lord (Isa 6:1)—as it is taught, while all the [later] prophets looked [upon God] through an unclear glass, Moses our Teacher looked [upon God] through a clear glass (כל הנביאים נסתכלו באספקלריא שאינה מאירה משה רבינו נסתכל באספקלריא המאירה)" (b. Yev. 49b).

¹⁶ Heschel, *Prophets*, xxii; cf., ironically, Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, 1670, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (2007; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 27–42. More recently, Benjamin D. Sommer has argued that a historical-critical approach supports Heschel's view in a limited number of cases; see idem "Prophecy as Translation: Ancient Israelite Conceptions of the Human Factor in Prophecy," in *Bringing the Hidden to Light: The Process of Interpretation; Studies in Honor of Stephen A. Geller*, eds. Kathryn F. Kravitz and Diane M. Sharon (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 271–90; and idem, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

medium of words. The works of such men are a window onto reality, through which ordinary people can experience life in ways that would otherwise be denied to them. The poet's vocation is to distil his experience and make it available to others, so that they too may catch a glimpse of what he has seen in a moment of vision.¹⁷

Provided that this “moment of vision” is specifically divine in origin, this is an excellent encapsulation of Heschel's prophet. In terms of Geller's typology, he is both medium and maker—the former by means of the latter, the latter because of the former.

The book of Ezekiel has been especially amenable to this conception of poetic prophecy even as the stylistic quality of its poetry has often been scorned.¹⁸ The architectonic redactional structure of the book gives the impression of the intentional product of a single mind.¹⁹ The repeated first-person framing of the oracles and minimal third-person narrative endows the book with a sense of personal subjectivity. Most importantly, the consistent Priestly theology of the

¹⁷ Barton, *Reading the Old Testament*, 143.

¹⁸ Lowth, for instance, wrote, “Ezekiel is much inferior to Jeremiah in elegance; in sublimity he is not even excelled by Isaiah: but his sublimity is of a totally different kind. He is deep, vehement, tragical; the only sensation he affects to excite is the terrible: his sentiments are elevated, fervid, full of fire, indignant; his imagery is crowded, magnificent, terrific, sometimes almost to disgust; his language is pompous, solemn, austere, rough, and at times unpolished: he employs frequent repetitions, not for the sake of grace or elegance, but from the vehemence of passion and indignation.” Idem, *Sacred Poetry*, 291–94. A classic depreciation of the literary quality of the book of Ezekiel may be found in Gustav Hölscher, *Hesekiel: Der Dichter und das Buch; Eine literarkritische Untersuchung*, BZAW 39 (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1924). The contrast implied between the “poet” and the “book” in the title tells the whole story. Adopting the typical form-critical equation of versified poetry with high antiquity and authorial authenticity, Hölscher determined that only around ten percent of the book is properly poetic and therefore authentic to Ezekiel himself. This was taken to an even further extreme in C. C. Torrey, *Pseudo-Ezekiel and the Original Prophecy*, YOSR (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), where the book is essentially dismissed as a pseudepigraph. Robert Alter has registered the most recent criticism of Ezekiel's style: “He is by no means a master of literary craft, like Isaiah, and most of his prophecies are composed in prose that exhibits a weakness for repetition.” Idem, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2019), 1049.

¹⁹ For a brief history of scholarship on the question of the overall structure of the book, see Ellen F. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll: Textuality and Dynamics of Discourse in Ezekiel*, JSOTSup 78 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 11–24. More recent scholarship on Ezekiel 34–39 as the product of relatively late innerbiblical exegesis only bolsters this sense of emergent compositional coherence; see, e.g., Penelope Barter, “The Reuse of Ezekiel 20 in the Composition of Ezekiel 36.16–32,” in *Ezekiel: Current Debates and Future Directions*, eds. William A. Tooman and Penelope Barter, FAT 112 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 120–37; Klein, *Schriftauslegung im Ezechielbuch*; idem, “Prophecy Continued”; and Tooman, *Gog of Magog*. For a cautionary note on the impulse to connect structural coherence with a sense of authorial intention, see Jon D. Levenson, “Ezekiel in the Perspective of Two Commentators,” review of *Ezekiel*, vol. 2, by Walther Zimmerli and *Ezekiel 1–20*, by Moshe Greenberg, *Int* 38 (1984): 216.

book coheres with the biographical notice that Ezekiel was himself a priest (Ezek 1:3). In light of the former two features, the latter has been taken to imply that Ezekiel interpreted an ineffable divine manifestation in light of his own Priestly idiom. Lowth, for instance, urged his readers not to be scandalized by Ezekiel's grotesque cultic imagery, for "the prophet, who was also a priest, took the allusion from his own sacred rites."²⁰ More recently, Menahem Haran has claimed, "Ezekiel was a priest and a priestly scribe, with the result that when he became a prophet he wrote his prophecies in the language to which he was accustomed."²¹ While many would contest Haran's account of the diachronic relationship between P and Ezekiel, to say nothing of his apparent assumption that Ezekiel was a historical individual, few would object to the notion that the book portrays YHWH in Priestly terms because its Priestly author(s) saw the world in those terms.²² With this, we have arrived at what is basically a historical-critical construal of Heschel's mimetic phenomenology of prophetic poetry.

One scene that especially invites this sort of mimetic approach is Ezekiel's rapturous vision of the divine chariot (Ezek 1:1–3:14), with which the book opens. The prophet seems to see what he sees clearly but can convey it in words only indirectly. YHWH's כבוד is certainly not beyond manifestation—such manifestation is a staple of Priestly thought, after all—yet the precise appearance of that manifestation is in turn beyond straightforward verbal description.²³ Accordingly, poetic similitude and semantic indeterminacy dominate. The imagery is vivid, even

²⁰ Lowth, *Sacred Poetry*, 141.

²¹ Menahem Haran, "Ezekiel, P, and the Priestly School," *VT* 58 (2008): 214; cf. the rest of the article as well as idem, *The Biblical Collection: Its Consolidation to the End of the Second Temple Times and Changes of Form to the End of the Middle Ages*, vol. 2, Heb. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2008), 367–75.

²² Cf. Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy*, 170–71; and Michael A. Lyons, *An Introduction to the Study of Ezekiel*, T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 17–20.

²³ Cf. Robert R. Wilson, "Prophecy in Crisis: The Call of Ezekiel," *Int* 38 (1984): 124.

overwhelming, but also pointedly qualified with a dense concentration of the preposition of approximation (בְּ). As Susan Niditch has observed, Ezekiel’s commissioning narrative “revels in metaphor and simile. . . . All is indefinite: something like, something having the appearance of, something looked like.”²⁴ On the implicit terms of the book itself, then, YHWH’s visual manifestation seems to prompt a mimetic mode of prophecy. As a matter of phenomenological necessity, the vision report is both poetry and prophecy—Ezekiel’s own *ποίησις*, to wit, skillfully crafted from his native Priestly language in a mimetic response to a genuine if enigmatic encounter with the deity.²⁵

However, the moment the revelation shifts from a visual mode to an aural one, the atmosphere changes markedly: “When I saw [YHWH] I fell on my face. Then I heard a voice speaking (קוֹל מְדַבֵּר). It said to me, ‘O mortal, stand up on your feet that I may speak with you (וַאֲדַבֵּר אֵתְךָ).’ Then a spirit-wind came into me and stood me up on my feet, and I heard someone speaking continuously to me (מְדַבֵּר אֵלַי)” (Ezek 1:28b–2:2).²⁶ This is not the incomprehensible “great sound of crashing (קוֹל רַעַשׁ גָּדוֹל)” that accompanies the movement of the chariot (Ezek 3:12–13). This is a sound of *words*; it is YHWH’s clear, intelligible voice.²⁷ When he finally

²⁴ Susan Niditch, *The Responsive Self: Personal Religion in Biblical Literature of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 114.

²⁵ For a brief overview of the Priestly characteristics of this vision in particular and Ezekiel’s כבוד theology in general, see Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy*, 168–70.

²⁶ Cf. Wilson, “Prophecy in Crisis,” 126.

²⁷ It should be noted that Sommer’s intriguing reading of the unusual *hithpael* form of דַּבֵּר when YHWH first speaks to the prophet (Ezek 2:2) contradicts my understanding of straightforward, intelligible speech. The sole pentateuchal attestation of this form is in the Priestly description of Moses’s oracular consultation of YHWH: “When Moses entered the Tent of Meeting to speak with [YHWH], he heard the voice speaking continuously to him (וַיִּשְׁמַע אֶת־הַקוֹל מְדַבֵּר אֵלָיו) from upon the cover that was on the Ark of the Testimony, between the two cherubim. So he spoke to him” (Num 7:89). The affinities with Ezekiel’s experience are clear. Sommer notes, “The *hitpa’el* construction can denote simulation—that is, it can be used when the subject of the verb acts *as if* he were doing something[.] . . . If this sense of the verbal construction is intended, then the Priestly narrator is intimating that ‘speaking’ is not something that the deity really does, and when the narrative attaches the verb *speak* to the subject

speaks, Ezekiel abandons the qualifications of similitude that saturated the visual revelation. There is no indication that the vocal component is semantically indeterminate—and therefore no room for the prophet’s personal poetic agency and creativity. He hears YHWH’s own words—his own poetry—loud and clear, which he is in turn to relay: “Say to [the people], ‘Thus says Lord YHWH (וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה)’” (Ezek 2:4b).

The wholesale transfer of poetic agency to YHWH is symbolically underscored in two vivid incidents that immediately follow this initial verbal address. The first is the revelatory scroll that he commands Ezekiel to ingest (Ezek 2:9–3:3), inscribed front and back with one of the poetic forms (קִינָה) that the prophet will go on to recite (Ezek 19:1, 14; 27:2; 28:12; 32:2). As Ellen F. Davis has noted, “There is no longer any ambiguity about the form in which the prophet receives the edible revelation. It comes to Ezekiel already as a *text*.”²⁸ YHWH himself becomes the literal author of the poetry that Ezekiel is simply to proclaim in his name.²⁹ The second incident is YHWH’s restriction of Ezekiel’s capacity to speak of his own accord in the first place: “I am causing your tongue to cleave to your palate such that you will be mute and unable to serve as an arbitrator for [the exiles], for they are a rebellious house. But when I speak with

God, it intends something different from that verb’s usual meaning. God’s ‘speaking’ is something that only a prophet has experienced, and therefore something for which there is no word among us nonprophets who make up the narrative’s audience. My use of quotation marks in the previous sentence, in fact, may be exactly what the Priestly authors (and Ezekiel) intend when they use the strange *hitpa’el* form of this verb: it reminds us that God’s ‘speaking’ is not really speaking at all.” Idem, *Revelation and Authority*, 60. While this reading is ingenious, it is not ultimately convincing. If Sommer were correct, it would introduce a new question as to why both P and Ezekiel use the common *piel* form of דַּבַּר in such proximity and with no obvious difference from the *hithpael*. Additionally, nothing resembling Sommer’s reading is borne out in the ancient textual witnesses. I therefore follow most contemporary commentators and translations in taking the *hithpael* to connote that the divine speech has a durative dimension. It is normal speech that goes beyond a discrete utterance. Indeed, this fits with Sommer’s own emphasis on the durative character of revelation in the Priestly document: “For P, lawgiving was frequentative: it took place over many years, always at the Tent of Meeting but in various locations in the wilderness and Moab.” Ibid., 56.

²⁸ Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 51.

²⁹ On the passivity of Ezekiel’s ingestion of the scroll, see Rhiannon Graybill, *Are We Not Men?: Unstable Masculinity in the Hebrew Prophets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 102–103.

you I will open your mouth (וּבִדְבַרְי אֲפָתֶח אֶת־פִּיךָ), and you will say to them, ‘Thus says Lord YHWH’” (Ezek 3:26–27). That Ezekiel may only speak *when* YHWH tells him guarantees that he may only speak *what* YHWH tells him.³⁰ Such verbal fixedness is reinforced every time the prophet says quite simply that “the word (דְּבַר) of YHWH came” to him and goes on to report what that word would “say” (לֵאמַר). There is no text-internal basis for inserting an elliptical process of interpretation between the two.

It is clear that however much Ezekiel’s Priestly idiom might recommend a mimetic construal of his prophetic poetry, his own account of the origins of that poetry pointedly resists it. He presents himself less as the imitating poet of Plato’s *Republic* than as the inspired poet of Plato’s *Ion*. In this earlier, much shorter dialogue, named for the dimwitted but well-meaning Homeric rhapsode whom Socrates interrogates, Plato explores whether poets speak from their own technical knowledge (τέχνη) of the subject matter or from an external divine power (θεία δύναμις). Socrates comes down hard on the latter option:

For a poet (ποιητής) is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry (ποιεῖν) until he becomes inspired (ἔνθεός) and goes out of his mind (ἔκφρων) and his intellect is no longer in him (ὁ νοῦς μηκέτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐνῆ). As long as a human being has his intellect in his possession he will always lack the power to make poetry (ἀδύνατος πᾶς ποιεῖν) or sing prophecy (χρησμοδεῖν). ... You see, it’s not mastery (τέχνη) that enables them to speak those verses, but a divine power (θεία δύναμις), since if they knew how to speak beautifully on one type of poetry by mastering the subject, they could do so for all the others also (εἰ περὶ ἑνὸς τέχνη καλῶς ἠπίσταντο λέγειν, καὶ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπάντων). That’s why the god takes their intellect away from them (ἐξαιρούμενος τούτων τὸν νοῦν) when he uses them as his servants (ὑπηρέταις), as he does prophets and godly diviners (καὶ τοῖς χρησμοδοῖς καὶ τοῖς μάντεσι τοῖς θείοις), so that we who hear should know that they are not the ones who speak those verses that are of such high value, for their intellect is not in them (νοῦς μὴ πάρεστιν); the god himself (ὁ θεὸς αὐτός) is the one who speaks, he gives voice (φθέγγεται) through them to us. (*Ion* 534b–d)

³⁰ Cf. Moshe Greenberg, “On Ezekiel’s Dumbness,” *JBL* 77 (1958): 103.

Here, there is no trace of either fabrication or mimesis. Poetry is instead the verbal expression of intuitive prophecy—the god’s own speech, beautiful as befits divinity, channeled through the mouth of the poet.³¹ Ezekiel’s relentless disavowal of agency, also couched in the language of spirit possession, situates his own poetic speech in much the same modality.³² Yet whereas for Plato, this construal of poetry is a conceptual maneuver to theorize τέχνη in its contrast, in Ezekiel it involves no such second-order reflection.³³ That the deity communicates in gripping poetry is “just the way it works,” so to speak. The metaphysical question simply does not arise. Ezekiel’s pneumatic language brings the direct divine origins of prophetic poetry especially to the forefront, but the underlying phenomenology is characteristic of biblical prophecy in general. The prophet *is* a person, as Heschel noted—but he is also indeed a microphone.³⁴

If poetry was natively understood as an uncomplicated, even obvious formal feature of prophecy, one might reasonably assume that it was not a means for the biblical authors to theorize subversive prophetic speech. This speech is poetic because the prophets spoke in poetry—simple as that. Yet the matter is not in fact so simple. Subversive prophetic speech *does* engage questions about the relationship between prophecy and poetry. These questions, however, move in a different direction from the predominant metaphysical ones: not backward, toward the

³¹ Contra Catherine Collobert, “Poetry as Flawed Reproduction: Possession and Mimesis,” in *Plato and the Poets*, eds. Pierre Destrée and Fritz-Gregor Herrmann, Mnemosyne Supplements 328 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 41–61.

³² Cf. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 285. One especially vivid depiction of Ezekiel’s lack of agency, bearing notable affinities with the language of spirit possession, is his report that “YHWH’s hand was strong upon me (”וַיְהִי כַּיּוֹם וַיָּבֵר יְהוָה עָלַי חֲזָקָה” (Ezek 3:14bβ).

³³ On Plato’s ultimate concern with τέχνη rather than with poetry per se in the *Ion*, see Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 101–104.

³⁴ As Wilson puts it, “If Ezekiel is completely dominated by God, then there can be no suspicion that the prophet’s reason or emotions have in any way interfered with the divine word . . . The prophet is simply the conduit through which the unaltered divine word comes, and it is impossible to accuse him of speaking falsely. Whoever hears Ezekiel hears God’s word directly.” Idem, “Prophecy in Crisis,” 126; cf. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 82.

origin and essence of poetry, but forward, toward its destination and purpose. The poetry of subversive prophecy bespeaks a *political* character. I do not mean that it is political in a narrow, materialist sense, which reduces literature (and especially religious literature) to an inscription of power dynamics serving the interests of the authors.³⁵ Instead, it is political in Arendt's more straightforward and yet also more ennobling sense: "Wherever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being."³⁶ Prophetic speech both creates and depends upon a space of public appearance.³⁷ "Stand in the court of YHWH's temple," YHWH tells Jeremiah, "and against all the cities of Judah who come to worship in YHWH's temple, speak all the words I command you to speak to them; withhold not a single one" (Jer 26:2). A prophet who is not seen or heard is no prophet at all.³⁸

Form criticism has well appreciated that the prophet cannot be understood apart from his audience. In one programmatic essay, Gunkel wrote,

The prophets were not originally writers but speakers. Anyone who thinks of ink and paper while reading their writings is in error from the outset. "Hear!" is the way they begin their works, not "Read!" Above all, however, if contemporary readers wish to understand the prophets, they must entirely forget that the writings were collected in a sacred book centuries after the prophets' work. The contemporary reader must not read their words as portions of the Bible but must attempt to place them in the context of the life of the people of Israel in which they were first spoken.³⁹

³⁵ For a critique of this mode of "political" reading, see Levenson, *Historical Criticism*, 111–14.

³⁶ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 3. It should be noted, however, that Arendt might well have contested this application of her understanding of the "political" to the biblical prophets. On her view, speech is essentially the self-disclosure of the speaker; see *ibid.*, 175–81. If, as argued above, biblical prophecy is generally the deity's own speech, not the prophet's, then the prophet's speech cannot be self-disclosive—and therefore properly political in an Arendtian sense.

³⁷ Cf. Walzer, *In God's Shadow*, 80–82.

³⁸ It is interesting to consider whether the category of publicness might be useful for scholarly efforts to distinguish prophecy from apocalyptic. Note, for instance, the emphasis on privacy and secrecy in Daniel 8–12.

³⁹ Gunkel, "Prophets as Writers and Poets," 24.

Yet while Gunkel correctly intuits the importance of the relationship between prophet and audience, he is limited by the classic form-critical preoccupation with locating this importance solely in the original, historical moment of prophetic utterance. Vayntrub's reorientation away from the social conditions of the *historical* oral performance and toward the literary conditions of the *constructed* oral performance should also be applied to the audience of that performance. Whatever audience might lie *behind* the text, we may also look for one *in* the text. The poetic language of prophecy implicitly constructs this audience. Prophecy must be poetically powerful if it is to secure people's attention—all the more so if it is subversive, as it must secure the attention of the very people whose self-understanding it assails. If the divinatory structure of subversive prophecy, as we saw, phenomenologically configures the prophet in relation to the deity, its poetry politically configures him in relation to his audience.

With the political stakes of prophetic poetry, the Platonic concept of mimesis reenters the picture. Plato's discussion of poetry in the *Republic* is not an aesthetics; it is not, to wit, his version of Aristotle's *Poetics*.⁴⁰ Moreover, it is only secondarily metaphysical. First and foremost, it is an integral part of his orienting effort to construct the ideal, just city. As Allan Bloom noted, the *Republic* is motivated by the fact that

the philosophers are alienated from the human things, which only poetry can adequately reproduce. The poet, in a more profound way, joins the city in its condemnation of philosophy as an enemy of political man. Socrates must show, then, that the philosopher is just and that it is he, not the poet, who is the one able to treat of political things responsibly.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Cf., e.g., G. R. F. Ferrari, "Plato and Poetry," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 98; Andrew Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 209; Jessica Moss, "What Is Imitative Poetry and Why Is It Bad?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 426–27; and Urmson, "Plato and the Poets," 132.

⁴¹ Allan Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," in *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 308; cf. Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 12–13.

To be sure, “the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry (παλαιὰ ... διαφορὰ φιλοσοφία τε καὶ ποιητικῆ)” (*Resp.* 607b) is metaphysical inasmuch as philosophy seeks truth while poetry mimetically obscures it. Yet this metaphysical quarrel derives its meaning and its urgency from the fact that it plays out politically, within the public realm of the polis and over the public category of justice. The *Republic* contends with the perilous reality that in this arena, poetry has the advantage because, like rhetoric, it is publicly oriented speech. Indeed, Elizabeth Asmis has observed that in the *Gorgias*, which in some ways reads like a “dress-rehearsal” for the *Republic*, “poetry is a kind of popular oratory (δημηγορία ἄρα τίς ἐστὶν ἡ ποιητικὴ)” (*Gorg.* 502c), as Socrates gets Callicles to concede.⁴² The political character of poetry makes a claim upon the philosopher because of the political imperative of his own activity. The philosopher who would be king, as Plato’s city necessitates, must also be a poet.

This chapter draws upon Plato’s explicit politics of poetry in the *Republic* in order better to understand the implicit one in the prophetic book with which we began. Although the book of Ezekiel takes great pains to present prophetic poetry as the straightforward expression of divine speech, it problematizes the political dynamics of this poetry by coordinating it with different kinds of human speech performances. We have already noted Ezekiel’s prophetic deployment of קִינָה (“dirge,” “lament”), delivered into his mouth upon the scrumptious scroll. In this chapter, I focus on his use of מִשַׁל, which, for reasons addressed below, I leave untranslated. We encountered it above as one of Second Isaiah’s terms for the sort of similitude of which YHWH does not admit. In Ezekiel, YHWH uses מִשַׁל as a pejorative designation for Israel’s misguided

⁴² Elizabeth Asmis, “Plato on Poetic Creativity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 343. On the affinities between the *Gorgias* and the *Republic*, see Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 127–28.

folk sayings. The fact that he also commands Ezekiel to prophesy in מִשַׁל encodes recognition that although prophecy is divine language, it must engage the dynamics of human language. Despite the important differences between the prophet's and the philosopher's respective tasks, neither can accomplish them without immersing himself in a public realm that he has, to a certain extent, transcended—a move that, as we shall see, is not without risk. In this way, the book of Ezekiel expresses the political paradox of subversive prophetic speech: the prophet must appeal to his audience's poetic sensibilities in order to challenge their theological ones.

3.2. Poetry and the Philosopher-King in the *Republic*

If the *Apology* is the zenith of Plato's subversive Socrates, explicitly presenting him as a "gadfly" by vocation, then the *Republic* might appear to be the opposite. Philosophers do not agitate the polis that this Socrates and his interlocutors imagine. They *rule* it: "Unless ... the philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize, and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place, ... there is no rest from ills for the cities" (*Resp.* 473d). One can scarcely recognize in this stately philosopher the itinerant troublemaker whom the Athenian authorities executed for impiety and corruption of youth. As Kahn has shown, the *Republic* is part of a small group of transitional dialogues that mark Plato's farewell to the Σωκρατικοὶ λόγοι as traditionally understood and his shift to the full-blown idealism with which his name would become synonymous.⁴³ Substantial distance between the philosopher-gadfly of the *Apology* and the philosopher-king of the *Republic* might therefore well be expected. While the former does mention in passing that he has elenctically interrogated

⁴³ Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, esp. 47–48.

those who specialize in poetry (*Ap.* 22a–c), he does not theorize poetry himself. On what basis, then, may we connect the conception of poetry in the *Republic* with subversive Socratic speech?

Bloom's intuition that the conflict between philosophy and poetry is political provides this basis. The city in which philosophers are kings exists only in the minds of the interlocutors. By contrast, the city in which philosophers are gadflies exists as the actual political condition out of which those interlocutors—led by Socrates, the gadfly par excellence—imagine their alternative. Put differently, this conversation about the ideal city is dramatically situated in what we might call the unideal city.⁴⁴ Socrates portrays the former so vividly that the latter all too easily fades from view. However, the tension between them is the dramatic key to the dialogue. The *Republic* “may well have reformed philosophy so that it was no longer indifferent to politics, but it was certainly no less subversive of all existing regimes than was the older [‘Socratic’] philosophy,” Bloom notes. “If philosophers are the natural rulers, they are the rivals of all the actual rulers; philosophy, rather than being simply useless, seems to be conspiratorial.”⁴⁵ Read abstractly as a political-theoretical treatise *by* Plato as author, the account of the philosopher-king in the *Republic* might well seem conservative. Read dramatically as a story *about* Socrates as character, however, this account is quite possibly the single most subversive thing he ever utters—as he himself intuits (*Resp.* 473c). Arendt famously wrote, “The most radical revolutionary will become a conservative on the day after the revolution.”⁴⁶ The *Republic* portrays its revolutionary engaged in imagining the day *after* the revolution on the day *before* it.

⁴⁴ Specifically, it takes place in the Piraeus, the bustling Athenian port (*Resp.* 327a). On the significance of the Piraeus as the dramatic setting of the dialogue, see Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” 440–41 n. 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Civil Disobedience,” in *Crises of the Republic* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1972), 78.

If poetry is centrally implicated in this revolution—as it most definitely is—then it must play an important role Plato’s construction of subversive Socratic speech.

In the following pages, I argue that in order fully to appreciate this role, we must better articulate the political stakes of Plato’s ostensibly metaphysical attack on poetry. As Hans Georg-Gadamer put it, “The critique of the poets can be understood only within the setting of this total refounding of a new state in words of philosophy, only understood as a radical turning away from the existing state.”⁴⁷ The keys for doing so are two episodes earlier in the *Republic*. In the “allegory of the cave” (*Resp.* 514a–21a), imprisonment among the shadows of falsehood is both metaphysical and political; the prisoners’ bonds are those of the unideal polis. By likening mimetic poetry to the creation of “phantoms” and “shadows,” Plato makes it the discursive condition of the rule of falsehood. The philosopher’s challenge to poetry is therefore at the heart of his subversion of the unideal city in favor of his ideal one, in which he may rule. Yet because his would-be subjects are not (and will never be) constituted so as to be philosophers themselves, the philosopher-king’s coup is not a straightforward matter of replacing poetry with philosophy. In politicizing his “love of wisdom,” Plato has paradoxically yoked it to the political discourse of poetry that he has banished. The “noble lie” (*Resp.* 414b–15c) demonstrates that mimesis is both the object of Socrates’s attack and the means by which he launches it. Such attention to the political dynamics of his subversive poetic philosophy will better situate us to investigate how these dynamics play out in Ezekiel’s subversive poetic prophecy.

⁴⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Plato and the Poets,” in *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 48.

3.2.1. The Metaphysics of Mimesis

In Books 2–3 of the *Republic*, Socrates addresses poetry in the context of how the “guardians” of the ideal polis are to be educated. Here, mimesis is limited to the mode of poetic performance that facilitates the poet’s and the audience’s psychological identification with the portrayed protagonist (*Resp.* 393b–94c). This is pedagogically effective because “imitations (μιμήσεις), if they are practiced continually from youth onwards, become established as habits and nature, in body and sounds and in thought” (*Resp.* 395d). In a classic (if now somewhat dated) study of the cultural context of Plato’s treatment of poetry, Eric A. Havelock showed that this pedagogical construal of mimesis faithfully reflects the status of the poetic tradition as the embodied, performative curriculum of ancient Greece. “You were not asked to grasp ... principles through rational analysis,” he explained. “Instead you submitted to the paideutic spell. You allowed yourself to become ‘musical’ in the functional sense of that Greek term.”⁴⁸ Plato’s focus on this “theatricality,” as G. R. F. Ferrari terms it, reflects his ultimate conception of poetry as “through and through an ethical, not an aesthetic affair.”⁴⁹

Yet if Plato accurately conveys this reality, he does so only in order to lament it. Because the protagonists of Greek tradition are deeply flawed, mimetic transference cannot inculcate virtue: “they are harmful to those who hear them. Everyone will be sympathetic with himself when he is bad, persuaded that after all similar things are done” (*Resp.* 391e). One might assume that the audience could inoculate themselves by, in Elizabeth Belfiore’s words, treating “the

⁴⁸ Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 159. For more recent treatments of the role of poetry in ancient Greek education, see, e.g., Ford, *Origins of Criticism*, 188–208; and Gregory Nagy, “Early Greek Views of Poets and Poetry,” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 1., ed. George Alexander Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 47–51, 69–77.

⁴⁹ Ferrari, “Plato and Poetry,” 98.

theater [as] a special circumstance in which the rules do not apply.”⁵⁰ The problem, however, as Belfiore explains, is that Plato denies that such a “special circumstance” is psychologically possible. The theatrical power of the poetic performance bursts across any such pretended boundaries, activating mimesis even in those who tell themselves that it is “just theater.” In this way, Plato concedes the discursive power of the *form* of poetry while questioning the moral value of its *content*. Indeed, it is this combination that makes poetry so politically dangerous: “It’s not that they are not poetic (ποιητικά) and sweet for the many (τοῖς πολλοῖς) to hear, but the more poetic (ποιητικώτερα) they are, the less should they be heard” (*Resp.* 387b). The just city, Socrates concludes, will have to monitor its poets closely, expelling any whose art does not conform to the founders’ moral ideal (*Resp.* 377b–c).

In Book 10, after a winding consideration of the constitutions of both cities and souls, the conversation returns to the perils of poetry. Socrates confidently affirms their earlier assessment of the dangers of mimesis. Yet by this point, his understanding of that concept appears to have shifted away from the psychological condition of poetic *performance*. Mimesis is now the metaphysical condition of poetic *creation*. Penelope Murray has observed that in Greek more generally, “*mimesis* and its cognates indicate a relation between something which is and something made to resemble it.”⁵¹ This relational aspect is precisely what is at stake in Socrates’s second discussion of poetry. What kind of “is” does poetry take as the object of its mimetic resemblance? Does poetry resemble the ideal Form of an entity, its full truth, which subsists in the intelligible world that is properly the object of philosophy? Or does poetry resemble only a

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Belfiore, “Plato’s Greatest Accusation against Poetry,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* Supplementary Volume 9 (1983): 60.

⁵¹ Penelope Murray, “Introduction,” in *On Poetry*, ed. Penelope Murray, Cambridge Greek and Latin Classics (1996; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 3.

particular instance of that entity, a limited instantiation of that truth, which furnishes the merely visible world in which philosophy is undertaken?⁵²

The language of “furnishing” turns out to be rather on the nose, for to illustrate the issue, Socrates offers the disarmingly quotidian example of a couch. The Form of a couch is the full truth of what a couch is. To whatever extent philosophers are interested in couches, their aim is to “look” at this Form in a figurative sense—i.e., to cognize the Form in its wholeness. For them, this cognition is an end in itself: “their souls are always eager to spend their time above” (*Resp.* 417c–d). However, there are others who “look” to this Form as a *model* for a subsequent act of replication. These are craftspeople—couch-makers, in this case (*Resp.* 596a–c).⁵³ On the basis of the Form, they produce a particular couch, a limited concretization of its ideal essence.

The situation is different for those who do not apprehend the Form. If *they* want to make a couch, they have recourse only to the craftspeople’s limited particularization. They look at this particular in a literal sense—i.e., visually perceive its appearance, with all the perspectival constraints attending to space and physicality:

“Does a couch, if you observe it from the side, or from the front, or from anywhere else, differ at all from itself? Or does it not differ at all but only look different, and similarly with the rest?”

“The latter is so,” [Glaucón] said. “It looks different, but isn’t.”

“Now consider this very point. Toward which is painting directed in each case—toward imitation of the being as it is or toward its looking as it looks (πότερα πρὸς τὸ ὄν, ὡς ἔχει, μιμήσασθαι, ἢ πρὸς τὸ φαινόμενον, ὡς φαίνεται)? Is it imitation of looks or of truth (φαντάσματος ἢ ἀληθείας οὔσα μίμησις)?

“Of looks,” he said. (*Resp.* 598a–b)

⁵² Plato’s classic treatment of the distinction between intelligible and visible is the “analogy of the sun” (*Resp.* 507b–509c). For a helpful overview, see C. D. C. Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings: The Argument of Plato’s Republic* (1988; repr., Indianapolis: Hackett, 2006), 81–95.

⁵³ Strictly speaking, craftspeople encounter the Form as mediated by philosophers, who alone have direct access to it (*Resp.* 601d–e). For discussion, see Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings*, 85–86.

A painting of a couch looks like that couch. This is what makes it a painting *of* that couch. Yet it is *not* that couch. No one would try to sit on it. Painting yields an image of an instantiation—and this is mimesis, which is “at the third generation from truth” (*Resp.* 597e). In what might be called a process of “replicatory entropy,” the two principal stages of replication—reproduction of the Form and imitation of the particular—yield products at divergent and compounded metaphysical distances from their respective models (see Figure 3.1).

These two kinds of replication correspond to two kinds of goodness: true goodness, the standard of reproduction; and apparent goodness, the standard of mimesis. Grasping the Form, the craftspeople strive to produce a replica conforming as completely as possible to the goodness of a couch as such. For Socrates, this means first and foremost that it will be good to *use* (*Resp.* 601d). A good couch will, for example, be comfortable. Because the painters, by contrast, do not grasp the Form, their understanding of a good couch is limited to the goodness they can see in the particularization; it is governed by appearance. Accordingly, a good painting of a couch will be beautiful—i.e., good to *view*. Comfort, being unapparent, is irrelevant; a painting does not admit of it. As Jessica Moss has discussed, those qualities that make a couch (or any implement) good for viewing are different from, and perhaps in direct conflict with, those that make it good for use. In fact, an attractive couch might be attractive only because of the very things that make it dysfunctional.⁵⁴ People who look to a painting of a couch in order to learn about couches as such—the Form of *the* couch—are therefore in trouble. By relying on an imitation of appearances only, they risk developing a false idea of what a couch is and what makes it good. This is why imitations “maim the thought of those who hear them and do not [themselves] as a remedy (φάρμακον) have the knowledge of how they really are” (*Resp.* 595b).

⁵⁴ Moss, “Imitative Poetry,” 424.

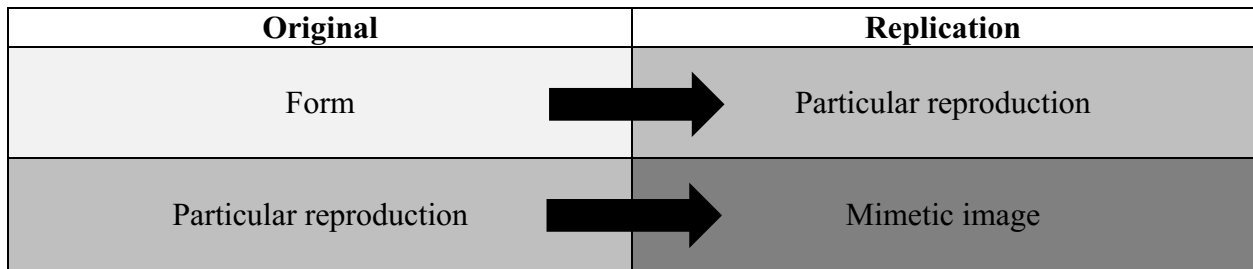


Figure 3.1. Degrees of replicatory removal from truth

Now, the stakes of this risk might seem laughably low. Who, after all, is looking at paintings to learn the deepest truth of couches—and who cares? However, painting is only an illustrative analogy for the kind of mimesis in which Plato is really interested. *Poetry* turns out to be the verbal equivalent of painting with regard to its distance from truth. It too imitates appearances—not of couches, of course, but of something far more important and fundamental: virtue.⁵⁵ To replicate the very Form of virtue would be simply to *be* virtuous—to make *oneself* a particularization of virtue (*Resp.* 599a–b). By contrast, “all those skilled in making (πάντας τοὺς ποιητικούς), beginning with Homer,” Socrates explains, “[are] imitators of phantoms of virtue (μιμητὰς εἰδώλων ἀρετῆς)” (*Resp.* 600e).

It might seem strained to claim that poets’ depictions of virtue are based in appearances in the same manner as painters’ depiction of objects. However, the former share the latter’s perspectival constraints. Virtue does not appear as such in the world: “the prudent and quiet character ... is neither easily imitated nor, when imitated, easily understood (τὸ δὲ φρόνιμόν τε καὶ ἡσύχιον ἦθος ... οὔτε ῥάδιον μιμήσασθαι οὔτε μιμουμένου εὐπετὲς καταμαθεῖν)” (*Resp.* 604e). Poets are beholden to the particular instantiations of virtue constituted by the individuals they imitate, who, even if virtuous, may hardly be equated with the Form of virtue itself. Moreover,

⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 430.

they may apprehend these individuals' virtue only as refracted through particular circumstances.

Poets depict virtue as it appears to them at the intersection of these limitations. The result, as

Moss shows, is surprisingly familiar from our everyday experience with literature:

Imitative poetry offers us compelling portraits of human affairs and human excellence—compelling because they are realistic, that is, they capture these things as they appear. ... What we call “great literature” is rarely simple: it is complex and varied, rich in detail, in subtlety and even in contradictions. It presents characters who undergo change (think of the charge that a book lacks “character development”), who hold our interest by feeling deep conflict and struggling over what to do, whose human weaknesses allow us to learn from them and whose passions let us sympathize with them. ... with reason, and enduring calmly in the face of trials. Imagine an *Iliad* cast only with Nestors, or a sane, dispassionate Hamlet with no taste for revenge. Or imagine a protagonist who accepts imminent death calmly, and spends his last hours engaged in quiet, rational persuasion. This last makes for excellent Platonic dialogue—but does it give even the most highbrow among us what we want from art?⁵⁶

If the most functional, most comfortable couch in the world were also of necessity plain and uniform, it would make for a bad painting. Likewise, the ideal of virtue is no “virtue” in literature. A truly good person does not make for a “good” protagonist.

We noted that it would be preposterous for Socrates to fear that turning to paintings in order to learn about couches might “maim the thought” of those who do so. Yet once we identify the referent of his analogy, we can appreciate the urgency of his actual concern. The Greek poetic tradition, as we have seen, presented itself as a pedagogical repository of virtue. However, as mimesis beholden to appearances, it was not only metaphysically incapable of providing what it promised—it was metaphysically doomed to provide the very opposite.⁵⁷ “The imitative poet

⁵⁶ Ibid., 441–42.

⁵⁷ Some have characterized the metaphysical treatment of poetry in Book 10, long after its initial, pedagogical treatment in Books 2–3, as an awkward appendix that reflects either confusion or a change of mind on Plato's part; see, e.g., Julia Annas, “Plato on the Triviality of Literature,” in *Plato on Beauty, Wisdom, and the Arts*, eds. Julius Moravcsik and Philip Temko, APQ Library of Philosophy (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 1–28. However, the bifurcation is better understood as an effort to clarify the perils of poetry discussed at the beginning in light of the intervening metaphysics; cf., e.g., Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” 427; and Charles L. Griswold, “The Ideas and the Criticism of Poetry in Plato's *Republic*, Book 10,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 141.

(τὴν μιμητικὸν ποιητὴν),” Socrates warns, “produces a bad regime (κακὴν πολιτείαν ... ἐμποιεῖν) in the soul of each private man by making phantoms that are very far removed from the truth (εἶδωλα εἰδωλοποιοῦντα, τοῦ δὲ ἀληθοῦς πόρρω πάνυ ἀφεστῶτα)” (*Resp.* 605b–c). Mimetic learning through theatricality—which itself etymologically suggests sight and appearance—is ultimately rooted in an initial act of mimetic replication whose abysmal distance from the truth it can never overcome. Philosophers contend that knowledge of virtue is to be sought in contemplation of the Form of virtue. Poets contend that knowledge of virtue is to be sought in imitation of the appearance of virtue. The “ancient quarrel” between them is thus also an intractable one. At stake is nothing less than that with which a city is most fundamentally concerned and upon which it depends (*Resp.* 599d).

3.2.2. Poetry and Politics in the Shadows of the Cave

Plato reports, and contemporary scholars have elaborated upon, the extent to which poetry enjoyed cultural hegemony in Greece. If it indeed had an “ancient quarrel” with philosophy, it would therefore figure squarely to have had the upper hand. Accordingly, one might think that what we have in the *Republic* is a straightforward political power tussle. Poetry happens to be in power now, but this is ultimately incidental. Political winds shift. In enjoining that philosophers be kings, Socrates is simply calling for regime change. However, the reality is far more radical. Bloom observed that the *Republic*, and arguably all of Plato’s work, takes the execution of Socrates by Athens to be “a condemnation of the philosophic activity itself ... on behalf of the political community as such.”⁵⁸ Socrates’s metaphysical account of mimesis positions poetry as

⁵⁸ Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” 307.

the language of that “political community as such”; it is *the* essentially political discourse. In order to understand how this is so, as well as why it matters for Plato’s construction of subversive Socratic speech, we must turn to perhaps the most famous notion that Socrates offers in between his two accounts of poetry: the allegory of the cave.

“Make an image (*ἀπεικασον*) of our nature in its education and want of education, likening it to a condition of the following kind” (*Resp.* 514a), Socrates tells Glaucon.⁵⁹ He proceeds to describe a group of people shackled in a dark cave, unable even to rotate their necks. There is a wall in front of them and a fire burning behind them. Puppeteers use this fire to cast shadows (*σκιᾶί*) of various objects upon the wall. Because the prisoners have lived like this for their entire lives, they are unaware that they are imprisoned and perfectly content to observe the shadows.⁶⁰ These being the only things they have ever seen, they “hold that the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things” (*Resp.* 515c). If one were somehow to get free and glimpse the objects themselves, he would, Socrates reasons, deem them stranger and less true than the shadows to which he was accustomed. Were he to try looking directly at the fire, he would surely wince in pain and turn back around, taking refuge in the comforting darkness.

“It’s a strange image (*εἰκόνα*),” Glaucon muses, “and strange prisoners you’re telling of.” Socrates’s response is crisp and jarring: “They’re like us” (*Resp.* 515a). This gloomy cave is a depiction of the basic, prevailing epistemological condition of humanity, restricted to illusions that we are all too happy to accept without question. Yet it would be wrong to limit the issue at

⁵⁹ In the Greek, there is only a single verb, *ἀπεικάζω*, which encompasses the ideas both of imaging and of comparison; cf. Franco Montanari, *The Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, trans. Rachel Barrit-Costa et al. (2015; repr., Leiden: Brill, 2018), 230. Bloom’s translation expresses it as two separate verbs.

⁶⁰ Cf. Roslyn Weiss, *Philosophers in the Republic: Plato’s Two Paradigms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 56.

stake to epistemology, as if this were the condition of *the* human being in isolated abstraction. Socrates does not place his allegorical prisoners in solitary confinement. Their captivity is communal. To be sure, because they cannot turn their heads, they cannot see each other (*Resp.* 515a). However, Socrates *does* provide for their ability “to discuss things with one another” (*Resp.* 515b). In this way, the cave reflects what Arendt called “the human condition of plurality, ... the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”⁶¹ In other words, it connects an epistemological condition with a political condition.

One might have assumed that the prisoners’ plurality would be their key to freedom. After all, as we saw in the previous chapter, Socrates locates the pursuit of truth in dialogue. By discussing the shadows, the prisoners could collectively advance toward recognition—and, subsequently, rejection—of the illusion. It turns out, however, that exactly the opposite is the case. As they discuss the shadows, they “hold that they are naming (*ὀνομάζειν*) these things going by before them that they see” (*Resp.* 515b).⁶² In fact, they are so confident in their assessments that they “compete (*διαμιλλᾶσθαι*) ... in forming judgments about those shadows” (*Resp.* 516e). Working together does not help them to unmask the illusion. It facilitates their reification of the illusion as reality. Once we recognize this, we see that Socrates’s connection between the political and epistemological is not incidental. It is not simply that the city is located alongside isolated individuals within the cave of the overall epistemological condition of humankind. Rather, the city *is* that epistemological condition. As Bloom put it, “The cave is the city and ...

⁶¹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 7.

⁶² There are several text-critical difficulties in this line that should be mentioned. First, some manuscripts read *νομίζειν* (“think”) rather than *ὀνομάζειν* (“name”). Second, whereas Bloom’s translation “going by” reflects a reading of *παρίοντα* (from *εἶμι*, “go”), other manuscripts read either *πάροντα* or simply *ὄντα*, both from the homonymous *εἶμι* (“be”). While these differences impact how we understand the precise activity in which the prisoners are engaged, they do not change the fact that it is communal and fosters misunderstanding.

our attachment to the city binds us to certain authoritative opinions about things.”⁶³ The shadows of the cave characterize the political as such.⁶⁴

The allegory does not, of course, remain inside the cave. Socrates then asks Glaucon to imagine if, instead of retreating to the darkness, their unshackled prisoner were dragged still further, past the fire and all the way outside—into the sun. At first, of course, he would be even more blinded than when he saw the fire. Yet as his eyes eventually adjusted, he would come to see the things themselves, the things of which previously he saw only shadows, and he would realize his former delusion. “When he recalled his first home and the wisdom there, and his fellow prisoners in that time,” Socrates reasons, “don’t you suppose he would consider himself happy for the change and pity the others?” (*Resp.* 517c). He presumably believes that having literally “seen the light,” he will be able to see better than his former companions. However, were he actually to return to the cave in order to show them as much, he would find—like anyone moving from outdoors to indoors on a sunny day—that his adjustment to the light has in fact *worsened* his ability to see in the dark. The consequences, Socrates explains, are grim:

If he once more had to compete with those perpetual prisoners in forming judgments about those shadows while his vision was still dim, before his eyes had recovered, and if the time needed for getting accustomed were not at all short, wouldn’t he be the source of laughter, and wouldn’t it be said of him that he went up and came back with his eyes corrupted, and that it’s not even worth trying to go up? And if they were somehow able to get their hands on and kill the man who attempts to release and lead up, wouldn’t they kill him? (*Resp.* 516e–17a)

⁶³ Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” 404.

⁶⁴ By contrast, Stanley Rosen argues that the cave represents a psychological rather than a political condition: “the cave is the soul, it is not the city.” Idem, *Plato’s Republic: A Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 273. Rosen dismisses the political reading by arguing that “prior to the philosophical liberation, there is no vestige of communal existence and so no politics. . . . There is no intercourse at all among the residents of the cave.” Ibid., 270. However, this claim is misleading. For one, if Socrates had meant to represent the individual soul in isolation, it is not clear why he would ask Glaucon to imagine multiple cave-dwellers imprisoned together. Moreover, the cave-dwellers *do* interact with each other through their collaboration in naming the shadows and their competition in identifying them. While this hardly invalidates all of Rosen’s insights, it shows that his claim that “the political dimension drops out entirely” is unsustainable. Ibid., 275.

The escapee has apprehended what actually is—but only at the price of apprehending what only appears to be in the shared world of most people. From their perspective, in which the apparent *is* the real, his ascent has left him maimed; *he* is the delusional one who cannot grasp the truth. The prospect of his conscripting others to make the journey upward therefore insidiously threatens to unravel their shared sense of reality. They will deal with this threat accordingly.

This escapee, unsurprisingly, turns out to be the philosopher; viewing the sunlit entities is cognition of the Forms. “The going up and the seeing of what’s above,” Socrates explains, is “the soul’s journey up to the intelligible place” (*Resp.* 517b). If, as we have seen, the cave is the political realm—in a word, the city—then in analogizing the outside environs to the intelligible world, Socrates has contrived a startling implication: philosophy is essentially antipolitical. The philosopher may philosophize only by cultivating a fundamental epistemological break with the appearance-bound space of human plurality, to which the political realm is beholden. His subsequent questioning of appearances is legible to the political realm only as an uncanny and insidious subversion of the shared appraisal of reality upon which joint human activity depends. As Arendt explains, “The returning philosopher is in danger”—and, I would add, is perceived as a danger—“because he has lost the common sense needed to orient himself in a world common to all.”⁶⁵ It is therefore no wonder that Socrates enjoins Glaucon, “Don’t be surprised that the men who get to that point aren’t willing to mind the business of human beings, but rather that their souls are always eager to spend their time above” (*Resp.* 517c–d). Socrates himself, as we know, does so by pursuing elenctic conversation with others who share his interest (at first, at

⁶⁵ Arendt, “Socrates,” 30; cf. *idem*, *Human Condition*, 12–16.

least).⁶⁶ Since even this minimally public activity puts him in precisely the danger of which the cave allegory warns, it follows that properly political activity—the actual task of statecraft, fully rooted in the public world—is out of the question. As a matter of definition, the philosophical push past appearances renders the philosopher unfit for political existence.

To the extent that shadows are the epistemological condition of political existence, poetry is its corresponding discursive condition. There is widespread scholarly agreement that the cave allegory lays the conceptual groundwork for Socrates’s metaphysical account of mimesis. What I am suggesting, however, is that the allegory expressly *anticipates* this account, proleptically framing it in terms of the political realm in which it actually obtains. Poetry is limited in precisely the same ways as the prisoners of the cave, beholden to the contingencies of appearance and perspective. It is a mode of speech that facilitates the prisoners’ error of “assum[ing],” as Susan B. Levin puts it, “that everything that presents itself to them is, not only real, but unqualifiedly so.”⁶⁷ Moreover, poetry was closely associated with organized competitions and lavish prizes, recalling the prisoners’ contests.⁶⁸ There is therefore every reason to suspect that for Plato, the “shadows” (σκιαῖ) around which human plurality crystalizes are none other than the “phantoms” (εἰδῶλα) that mimesis produces and in which it indulges.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Of course, the elenchus always takes place in the presence of others on account of being essentially conversational. However, this alone does not make it properly political, as Socrates and his interlocutors pursue these conversations in relative privacy.

⁶⁷ Susan B. Levin, *The Ancient Quarrel between Philosophy and Poetry Revisited: Plato and the Greek Literary Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 156.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Ion* 530a–b.

⁶⁹ In fact, Socrates mentions the “shadows” alongside “phantoms” (*Resp.* 516a) and elsewhere appears to equate them (*Resp.* 520c).

If the shadows cast upon the wall symbolize poetry, the poets would figure to be the puppeteers, taking up their role as phantom-makers in a most literal sense.⁷⁰ Such, indeed, is how Bloom would have it: “the poets ... are the men who carry the statues and the other things the reflections of which the prisoners see. These objects ... are adapted to serve the special interests of the artists.”⁷¹ Yet while Bloom correctly identified the referents of the analogy, he makes them conspiratorial in a manner that the dialogue does not support. According to him, the poets are cynical demagogues who spout things they know full well to be nonsense solely that they may surreptitiously usurp political power. For all his harshness toward poets, Socrates never says *that*. In fact, the problem is that the poets are much the same as those they mislead:

The poetic man (τὸν ποιητικόν) also uses names and phrases to color each of the arts. He himself doesn't understand; but he imitates in such a way as to seem, to men whose condition is like his own and who observe only speeches, to speak very well (οὐκ ἐπαΐοντα ἀλλ' ἢ μιμεῖσθαι, ὥστε ἑτέροις τοιούτοις ἐκ τῶν λόγων θεωροῦσι ... πάνυ εὖ δοκεῖν λέγεσθαι). He seems to do so when he speaks using meter, rhythm, and harmony, no matter whether the subject is shoemaking, generalship, or anything else. So great is the charm (κῆλησιν) that these things by nature possess. For when the things of the poets are stripped of the colors of the music and are said alone, by themselves, I suppose you know how they look. (*Resp.* 601a–b)

The poets' imitations prevent others from understanding first and foremost because the poets themselves do not understand. Moreover, they cannot be fully in control of the cave-dwellers because, in a crucial way, poets are beholden to their audience, as Ion concedes (*Ion* 535e).⁷²

Gadamer stressed the intersection of these two limitations: “The poet, who wants to impress the

⁷⁰ In Book 10, mimesis is indeed compared to “puppeteering” because of how it takes advantage of the limitations of perspective (*Resp.* 602d).

⁷¹ Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” 404.

⁷² In fact, Bloom himself observes that the poet “is much less powerful than he thinks he is. Precisely because he must make his audience join in the world he wishes to present to them, he must appeal to its dominant passions. He cannot force the spectators to listen to him or like and enter into the lives of men who are repulsive to them. He must appeal to and flatter the dominant passions of the spectators. Those passions are fear, pity, and contempt. The spectators want to cry or to laugh. If the poet is to please, he must satisfy that demand.” *Ibid.*, 359.

crowd, is led by both the taste of his audience as well as his own nature to whatever is opulent and vivid and can be portrayed as such, that is, to the shifting storms of human feelings.”⁷³ In short, the poets are themselves prisoners in the cave, both seeing and making shadows. If they be puppeteers, they are certainly are no puppet masters.

Who, then, *are* the shadow-making puppeteers? I would argue that while they indeed represent the poets, they do so in a more depersonalized sense than Bloom suggests—with important consequences. In telling contrast to the prisoners, Socrates devotes no attention to the puppeteers *as* people; they might as well have been robots or computers, had those options been available to Plato. They are simply “there.” This givenness is precisely the point: poetry and politics are coextensive in an almost primordial way.⁷⁴ The poets never *seized* power, and their poetry is not a calculating means to maintain it. As Havelock explained, “The Homeric poet controlled the culture in which he lived for the simple reason that his poetry became and remained the only authorised version of important utterance. ... [This] was a fact of life accepted by his community and by himself without reflection or analysis.”⁷⁵ The only conspiracy afoot is the “unconscious conspiracy [that society made] with itself to keep the tradition alive, to reinforce it in the collective memory.”⁷⁶ The allegory gives vivid expression to the unconsciousness and collectivity of this “conspiracy.” The more the people *themselves* discuss the shadows, the thicker they grow, for mimetic production engenders mimetic performance.

⁷³ Gadamer, “Plato and the Poets,” 63.

⁷⁴ Within his psychological construal of the cave allegory, Rosen actually arrives at a similar conclusion: “They, together with their imprisoned audience, represent the affection of the soul that treats images as originals. On my reading, the two, masters and slaves, are not separate classes of persons but two aspects of each of us.” Idem, *Plato’s Republic*, 272–73.

⁷⁵ Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, 145.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 44.

By mischaracterizing *how* the puppeteers represent the poets, Bloom obscured the most radical accomplishment of the allegory: its naturalization of poetry as political discourse. As Moss explains, mimesis “manages to be compelling and realistic by copying the way things appear at the cost of misrepresenting the way things are.”⁷⁷ Philosophy is the diametric opposite: it apprehends the way things are at the cost of misrepresenting the way they appear. Because philosophy is a rejection of appearance, it is necessarily a rejection of the appearance-governed condition of human plurality, in which “meter, rhythm, and harmony” rule and there can be no merit to ideas “stripped of the colors of the music.” By implicitly mapping the conflict between philosophy and poetry onto that between philosophy and the city, the allegory of the cave reveals why the former occupies such a prominent place in a dialogue ostensibly devoted to the latter. In a deep way, at the intersection of metaphysics and politics, public speech *is* poetic speech. The philosopher is alienated from the city because the way he talks is alien to the way the city talks.

3.2.3. The Poetic Truth of Noble Lies

At the point in the allegory at which we left off, Socrates has offered an eerie premonition of the fate with which he would eventually meet: by challenging the citizens’ shared understanding of apparent reality, the philosopher provokes their deadly wrath.⁷⁸ Philosophy is essentially alienated from politics. However, even a first-time reader of the *Republic* must suspect that this cannot be the end of the story, for Socrates has already dropped his bombshell thesis that the city cannot be just unless it is ruled by philosophers. As Bloom noted, Plato’s orienting goal in the

⁷⁷ Moss, “Imitative Poetry,” 422.

⁷⁸ Cf. Callicles’s similar premonition (*Gorg.* 496a–b).

Republic is to show that, against all odds—indeed, against the very nature of philosophy itself—the philosopher must make himself compatible with political existence.

Accordingly, the alienation of the philosopher from the political realm is not the culmination of the cave allegory. Socrates goes on to explain that while the founders of the city must drag the “best natures” out of the cave in order that they may philosophize, they nevertheless must “not ... permit them what is now permitted[:] ... to remain there ... and not be willing to go down again among those prisoners” (*Resp.* 519c–d). Glaucon objects that it would be monstrously unjust to condemn these people to an illusory life of groping in the shadows when they are capable of living philosophically in the light of what truly is. Moreover, while he does not say so explicitly, we might reasonably add that if the returnees are indeed doomed to be attacked by their companions, forcing them to return means signing their death warrants.

It is here, however, that Socrates makes his crucial pivot. He reminds Glaucon, “It’s not the concern of the law that any one class in the city fare exceptionally well, but it contrives (μηχανᾶται) to bring this about in the city as a whole” (*Resp.* 519e). Understood from the perspective of justice, philosophy is oriented not simply toward the private good of the philosopher’s own soul but rather toward the public good of the “soul” of the city.⁷⁹ Socrates therefore enjoins his hypothetical philosophers,

You must go down ... into the common dwelling of the others (τὴν τῶν ἄλλων συνοίκησιν) and get habituated along with them to seeing the dark things (συνεθιστέον τὰ σκοτεινὰ θεάσασθαι). And, in getting habituated to it (συνεθιζόμενοι), you will see ten thousand times better than the men there, and you’ll know what each of the phantoms (τὰ εἰδῶλα) is, and of what it is a phantom, because you have seen the truth about fair, just, and good things. And thus, the city will be governed by us and by you in a state of waking, not in a dream as the many cities nowadays are governed by men who fight over

⁷⁹ For an overview of Plato’s analogization of the city to the individual’s soul, see Norbert Blössner, “The City-Soul Analogy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato’s Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 345–85.

shadows (σκιαμαχούντων) with one another and form factions for the sake of ruling, as though it were some great good. (*Resp.* 520c–d)

Injustice is the result of the cave-dwellers' quarreling over the shadows. Because they view these shadows as reality, mastery over them is well worth the struggle. The philosopher, having seen the intelligible realm outside the cave, naturally has no interest in their delusional games. Yet it is precisely because no "other life that despises political offices [more] than that of true philosophy" (*Resp.* 521b) that the philosopher is the only hope for the improvement of the city. Only he can govern with the knowledge of the truth as opposed to the merely apparent.

However, the philosopher cannot improve the political realm if he cannot survive in it. He must therefore "make like a local," so to speak, adjusting his eyes to life in the darkness and learning to see the shadows as the cave-dwellers do—even as he knows that they are only shadows. Having done so, he may communicate with them *on their terms*, steering them toward "the truth about fair, just, and good things" without directly challenging their insistence that "the truth is nothing other than the shadows of artificial things." The things he says to them in this manner will not, of course, technically be true. However, neither will they be what Socrates had earlier called "real lies," which foster ignorance about the most important philosophical principles. Instead, they will be "lies in speeches," which are proximately true to the extent that they effect results in accordance with truth (*Resp.* 382a–d).⁸⁰ Danielle S. Allen has helpfully characterized this in terms of a distinction between metaphysical accuracy and pragmatic efficacy.⁸¹ The philosopher may, from his superior vantage, mobilize the false shadows—"salvage" them, in Allen's terminology—in order to constitute the city in accordance with truths

⁸⁰ For a concise overview of these two kinds of lie, see Reeve, *Philosopher-Kings*, 208–13.

⁸¹ Danielle S. Allen, *Why Plato Wrote*, Blackwell Bristol Lectures on Greece, Rome, and the Classical Tradition (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 47–69.

that the citizens cannot grasp in and of themselves.⁸² He brings them collectively closer to the sunlight without forcing them to “endure looking at that which *is*” (*Resp.* 518c), which they are incapable of doing. This, after all, is why they are not philosophers themselves.

Both accounts of poetry in the *Republic* give the poets what Allen calls “an escape clause: they can return to the city if they can prove that their shadows are pragmatically valuable.”⁸³ The conclusion of the cave allegory shows how the philosopher himself may do so. If his knowledge of the truth is to be politically legible and viable, he must “get habituated” to what it is like to see only in terms of appearance—so that he may speak accordingly. Because mimesis is constrained by the circumstances of appearance, it “mustn’t be taken seriously as a serious thing laying hold of truth (οὐ σπουδαστέον ἐπὶ τῇ τοιαύτῃ ποιήσει ὡς ἀληθείας τε ἀπτομένη καὶ σπουδαία)” (*Resp.* 608a).⁸⁴ It is of no *inherent* value to the philosopher. However, this very constraint makes it the only way for him to engage the vast majority of other people, whose perception is limited to appearance. Grounded in his full apprehension of reality, “the philosopher shapes his image so as to point to the specific features of the original he intends to illuminate,” as Catherine Collobert has shown.⁸⁵ Put in terms of the allegory, mimesis softens that which makes most people’s “eyes hurt” (*Resp.* 515e), helping them to approach and to experience truth without having fully to “endure looking at that which *is*.”

⁸² *Ibid.*, 56–58.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 55; cf. Asmis’s concept of the “politically correct poet” in idem, “Poetic Creativity,” 358. The “escape clauses” themselves may be found at *Resp.* 398a–b; 607a, c.

⁸⁴ Cf. *Resp.* 602b.

⁸⁵ Catherine Collobert, “The Platonic Art of Myth-Making: Myth as Informative *Phantasma*,” in *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, eds. Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. Gonzalez, *Mnemosyne Supplements* 337 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 96; cf. *ibid.*, 94–98.

J. Tate was therefore mistaken when, in an influential study, he argued that Plato implicitly articulates two different kinds of mimesis.⁸⁶ The point, rather, is that the very thing that makes mimesis dangerous in the hands of the conventional poet makes it beneficial in the hands of the philosopher. It is no coincidence that Socrates describes the “lie in speeches”—the beneficial lie—as “a kind of imitation (μίμημά τι) of the affection in the soul, a phantom (εἶδωλον) of it that comes into being after it” (*Resp.* 382b). To the extent that poetry is the discursive rival of metaphysical accuracy, it is also the discursive medium of pragmatic efficacy. What makes for “the good poet (τὸν ἀγαθὸν ποιητήν)” is simply that he “be in possession of knowledge when he makes his poems (εἰδότα ἄρα ποιεῖν)” (*Resp.* 598e).⁸⁷ The cave allegory reveals the identity of this good poet: he is the philosopher-king.

At this point, the cave allegory might begin to seem peculiarly self-referential. As an illustrative image corresponding to abstract reality, it sounds quite similar to the poetry through which the philosopher-king renders truths legible to the cave-dwellers who are unable to grasp them otherwise. Allen has argued that, in fact, *all* of the colorful images with which Socrates engages his interlocutors in the *Republic* function in this manner. He presents the very task of imagining—note the etymological connection with images—the ideal city as “an exercise we are undertaking” like people “who don’t see very sharply (μὴ πάνυ ὀξὺ βλέπουσιν)” (*Resp.* 368c–d). The affinity with the cave allegory is striking. As cave-dwellers, Socrates’s interlocutors will be most receptive not to pure concepts but to images—to shadows. Allen explains,

By using *eidōla* such as this, Socrates can organize an ekphrastic model around his abstract conception of justice without Glaucon and the others immediately perceiving that

⁸⁶ J. Tate, “‘Imitation’ in Plato’s *Republic*,” *CIQ* 22 (1928): 16–23.

⁸⁷ Cf. Malcolm Schofield, “The Noble Lie,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato’s Republic*, ed. G. R. F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 143.

central, organizing abstraction; he distracts them with shadows that keep their attention on material phenomena. Then at the last minute, suddenly, he commands them to direct their attention toward the abstract principles ordering the image. This cognitive trick makes it possible for Glaucon and other readers of these Socratic images to “learn” something that was under their noses all the time. ... This sense of discovery, which brings with it an intuition of naturalness, gives force to the concepts so conveyed. They are memorable. ... And because concepts so conveyed are memorable, they are more likely to be activated as rules of action.⁸⁸

Socrates’s verbal illustrations are, in a word, mimetic poems. Unlike conventional poems, they do *not* “maim the thought of those who hear them” because they *do* “as a remedy (*φάρμακον*) have the knowledge of how they really are.” The metaphysical inaccuracies of philosophical poetry are a means to truth rather than a distraction from it. “Because of its power to shift the landscape of an audience’s imagination,” Allen explains, “imitation has life-changing force.”⁸⁹

Yet while Allen’s account of pragmatically efficacious shadows aptly characterizes how Socrates engages his own interlocutors *with* the cave allegory, it differs in a crucial way from how the philosopher-king engages the citizens *within* it. After readjusting to the darkness, the returnee does not build up to a “big reveal,” as it were, of the “the truth about fair, just, and good things.” Rather, he governs in *accordance* with these things. Even after his own successful readjustment, there is no indication that the cave-dwellers ever stop regarding the shadows as reality. Indeed, this would run directly contrary to the epistemological condition of political life, which does not admit of direct apprehension of truth; the philosopher who attempted to facilitate this would be killed. He therefore *keeps* the city within the shadows—its only possible existence—while shaping those shadows so as to align the citizens, unbeknownst to them, with the abstract principles of justice that he alone has apprehended. When speaking with proto-

⁸⁸ Allen, *Why Plato Wrote*, 53.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

philosophical interlocutors (like those of the *Republic*), the philosopher uses mimesis as a road toward the destination of truth—a “lie in speeches” whose pragmatic efficacy attaches to a gradual encounter with reality *through* the lie. By contrast, when ruling the city, the philosopher-king makes mimesis itself the destination—a “lie in speeches” whose pragmatic efficacy attaches simply to *believing* the lie. As Allen puts it, “The consequences of believing the serviceable lie should look very nearly identical to the consequences of knowing the truth.”⁹⁰ Since the citizens are incapable of the latter, the lie will have to do: “this kind of motivation structure ... is the best that can be achieved by those without a capacity for philosophy.”⁹¹

The most important example of such a lie in the *Republic* is the so-called “noble lie.” Socrates has socially stratified the ideal city so as best to facilitate justice. However, he fears that if the citizens were aware that this order is artificial, they would feel empowered to contravene it, throwing the city into disarray. He therefore proposes that they “somehow contrive (μηχανή γένοιτο) one of those lies that come into being in case of need (τῶν ψευδῶν τῶν ἐν δέοντι γιγνομένων), of which we were just now speaking, some one noble lie to persuade, in the best case, even the rulers, but if not them, the rest of the city” (*Resp.* 414b–c). This lie takes the form of an elaborate etiological narrative—a “Phoenician thing (Φοινικικόν τι)” (*Resp.* 414c)—in which social stratification, being divinely ordained, is innate and immutable. Inculcate this false reality, says Socrates, and the citizens will “care more for the city and one another” (*Resp.* 416c), promoting a city “most like a single human being”—the “city “best governed” (*Resp.* 462c).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

The phrasing of Socrates's proposal is deliberate and consequential. First, he connects the noble lie with mimetic poetry by means of the instrumental "lie in speeches," which, as we have seen, is a "kind of imitation" (μίμημά τι) and a "phantom" (εἶδωλον).⁹² Second, he connects it with the philosopher's obligation in the cave allegory to "contrive" (μηχανάομαι) the benefit of the city as a whole. The noble lie is therefore nothing less than a concrete example of what it would look like for the philosopher to rule through a pragmatically efficacious poem. He renders his true understanding of justice politically legible by dressing it up in precisely the kind of mythological coloring that, Socrates says, makes poetry so enchanting.⁹³ In the depths of the cave and from a shadowy imitation, truth emerges; without having to "endure looking at" true justice itself, the citizens uphold and reflect true justice in their constitution. Bloom calls the noble lie "a political expression of truths."⁹⁴ I would say that, more precisely, it *makes the city into* a political expression of truths. Poetry, quintessentially an act of "making" (ποίησις), becomes the means through which the philosopher quite literally *makes* the just city.⁹⁵

To say that the philosopher-king must be a poet is, in effect, to say that philosophy may rule only through noble lies—through shadows *designed* so as never to give way to clarity. "The good city is not possible," Strauss explains, "without a fundamental falsehood; it cannot exist in the element of truth, of nature."⁹⁶ Socrates indeed acknowledges, "Our rulers will have to use a

⁹² Cf. *ibid.*, 180 n. 17.

⁹³ Indeed, Socrates himself compares the lie to the kind of myth that "has already happened in many places before, as the poets assert and have caused others to believe (ὡς φασιν οἱ ποιηταὶ καὶ πεπέικασιν)" (*Resp.* 414c).

⁹⁴ Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," 367.

⁹⁵ Cf. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 220–30.

⁹⁶ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (1964; repr., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 102.

throng of lies and deceptions (συχνῶ τῶ ψεύδει καὶ τῇ ἀπάτῃ) for the benefit of the ruled (ὠφελίᾳ τῶν ἀρχομένων)” (*Resp.* 459c). Further linking these with poetry, he adds, “Everything of this sort is useful as a form of remedy (φαρμάκου)” (*Resp.* 459d).⁹⁷ The philosopher-king’s rule through poetry is therefore fundamentally paternalistic.⁹⁸ All that ultimately matters is that the citizens conform to the social order that he, in his unique access to the intelligible, knows to be true and just. Their own apprehension of the truth is irrelevant—or, better yet, it is actively impeded, since, in their vulgar inability to “endure looking at that which is,” their confrontation with truth would threaten its reign. This aligns well with Socrates’s pedagogical framing of poetry when he first introduces the subject: “Don’t you understand,” he asks, “that first we tell tales (μύθους) to children? And surely they are, as a whole, false (ψεῦδος), though there are true things (ἀληθῆ) in them too” (*Resp.* 377a).⁹⁹ The citizens of the ideal city are like perpetual children, capable of being shown how to act well but incapable of grasping the principles on which they do so. Poetry makes the rule of the philosopher-king both politically and epistemically absolute, for it cannot viably rule any other way.

The *Republic* positions the quarrel between philosophy and poetry as the discursive manifestation of the quarrel that constitutes its abiding theme: that between philosophy and politics. Philosophy is politically subversive because in positing truth beyond appearance, it destabilizes the understanding of reality on which politics depends. Poetry is the mode of speech attendant to this reality of appearances. If philosophy is to be politically legible and viable,

⁹⁷ On the connection between poetry and the “remedy” (φάρμακον), see Sonja Tanner, *In Praise of Plato’s Poetic Imagination* (2010; repr., Plymouth: Lexington, 2011), 129–75.

⁹⁸ Cf. Schofield, “Noble Lie,” 141.

⁹⁹ In Socrates’s closing treatment of poetry, he continues to associate it with children, calling mimesis “a kind of play and not serious (παιδιάν τινα καὶ οὐ σπουδῆν)” (*Resp.* 602b).

therefore, the philosopher must learn to speak the language that alienated him from the political realm in the first place. He must oust the poets as shadow-makers not in order to abolish the role but in order to adopt it for himself. By couching metaphysical truths in terms of pragmatically efficacious poetry, Socrates endows subversive philosophical speech with the political power actually to bring about a city oriented toward truth and goodness. In this city, through the power of poetry, the gadfly has become king.

3.3. Poetry and the Prophet in Ezekiel

Like the *Republic* with respect to Plato's oeuvre, the book of Ezekiel has long been regarded as a transitional work within the prophetic corpus. In the biblical chronology, Ezekiel is the first prophet whose career unfolded entirely in exile. It is in this context that Wellhausen located his pivotal significance: "The transition from the pre-exilic to the post-exilic period is effected, not by Deuteronomy, but by Ezekiel the priest in prophet's mantle, who was one of the first to be carried into exile."¹⁰⁰ More recently, scholars have framed this aspect in terms of "crisis" or "trauma literature." "The book of Ezekiel was composed," Michael A. Lyons explains, "to interpret this disaster and offer an almost unimaginable hope for the deportees' future."¹⁰¹ Ezekiel marks so momentous a transition because it is the first programmatic construction of prophecy in response to unprecedented circumstances of dislocation and disempowerment.

We saw that the transitional character of the *Republic* might initially seem to reflect a change in the presentation of Socrates, now less the marginal gadfly than the aspiring ruler. There has likewise been a venerable scholarly impulse, especially in early-twentieth-century

¹⁰⁰ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 59.

¹⁰¹ Lyons, *Study of Ezekiel*, 1.

work, to see in Ezekiel a shift away from earlier, subversive elements in the prophetic tradition and toward a domestication of prophecy within the “establishment.” Wellhausen implied as much in his dismissive reference to Ezekiel as a “priest in prophet’s mantle.” Later, Robert Hatch Kennett put the point about as explicitly as possible when he called Ezekiel

the father of Judaism, but of a Judaism in which the Gospel could not germinate. In Jeremiah on the other hand we see ‘as in a mirror darkly’ the truth which Jesus Christ made manifest in all its glory. Of Ezekiel’s teaching the almost inevitable outcome was Caiaphas: while Jeremiah marked out the way which led to Jesus Christ.¹⁰²

On this view, Jeremiah preserves the subversive spirit that animated the eighth-century critics of ritual hypocrisy, decrying those who would “steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, offer incense to Baal, and follow other gods” and still “stand before [YHWH] in this temple and say, ‘We are safe!’” (Jer 7:9–10).¹⁰³ By contrast, on the rare occasions when Ezekiel targets the priesthood, he displays an insider’s concern with ritual: “Her priests do violence to my teaching (תְּמַסּוּ תּוֹרָתִי), profane my sancta, make no distinction between sacred and profane, acknowledge no difference between impure and pure, and ignore my sabbaths” (Ezek 22:26). In short, Ezekiel represents rather than challenges human authority. Walther Eichrodt aptly summarized this reading: “It has been asserted that he confined the uninhibited flow of the prophetic message by specifically priestly ideas, and held it within legal banks until the channel was silted up.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Robert Hatch Kennett, *Old Testament Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 58.

¹⁰³ Cf. Martin Buber’s particular interest in Jeremiah in idem, *The Prophetic Faith*, trans. Carlyle Witton-Davies (1949; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), esp. 192–227. For discussion, see Samuel Hayim Brody, *Martin Buber’s Theopolitics*, New Jewish Philosophy and Thought (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 175–210; and Jon D. Levenson, introduction to *The Prophetic Faith*, by Martin Buber (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), ix–xxv. Likewise, Buber had something of a distaste for Ezekiel; see idem, *Prophetic Faith*, 231–34; and for discussion, see once again Brody, *Buber’s Theopolitics*, 200–201. Heschel also exhibited relative disinterest in Ezekiel, devoting no chapter to the book in *The Prophets* and citing it far less often than Isaiah or Jeremiah—or even far shorter books such as Hosea or Amos; cf. Levenson, “Heschel’s Biblical Interpretation,” 31–32.

¹⁰⁴ Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, trans. Cosslett Quinn, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 24.

Given the patent theological tendentiousness of this approach, it should hardly be surprising that subsequent commentators have challenged it. Eichrodt sought to rehabilitate Ezekiel as a priestly critique of the priesthood itself, saying that “what is really exciting and dramatic” in the book is that “the whole complex of priestly conceptions breaks down, being a world which must be given up as destined to pass away.”¹⁰⁵ More recently, Jonathan Klawans has developed this line of thought while resisting its attendant supersessionism and anti-Jewish animus. He argues that the vision of the rebuilt temple (Ezekiel 40–48), long dismissed as the most irredeemably priestly part of the book, “can be understood as a critique of the cult of the past. . . . It’s a different kind of critique from [that of earlier prophetic literature], but it’s a prophetic critique of a temple nonetheless.”¹⁰⁶ In light of such evidence, Wilson has speculated that Ezekiel’s “views were largely rejected by the orthodox Zadokite community.”¹⁰⁷

Yet to whatever extent one may cast Ezekiel as a critic of priestly authority in the spirit of earlier prophets, the book itself constructs subversive prophetic speech primarily in relation to the *people*—the whole “house of Israel”—as a social and political body. Although the indictment of the priests cited above is followed by attacks on other pockets of authority (i.e., political leaders and other prophets), it culminates with “the people of the land (עַם הָאָרֶץ),” who “oppress and steal, abuse the needy and impoverished, and unjustly oppress the stranger” (Ezek 22:29). Here, Ezekiel accuses the general population of just those injustices that his predecessors tend to link specifically with cultic excess.¹⁰⁸ More frequently, he trains his critique on the people’s very

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 31.

¹⁰⁶ Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple*, 96; cf. *ibid.*, 94–97.

¹⁰⁷ Wilson, *Prophecy and Society*, 285.

¹⁰⁸ On the term עַם הָאָרֶץ in Ezekiel, see, e.g., Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, AB 22 (1983; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 156; and Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, vol. 1, trans. Ronald E. Clements, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1979), 209. It likely has a more restricted meaning than the literal “people of the land” might

ideas about their relationship with YHWH. He has a penchant for retelling Israel’s history in a manner that completely upends their pretenses (e.g., Ezekiel 16; 20; 23). In one important episode to which we will return, he confronts the smug assertion of ancestral entitlement to the land (Ezek 33:23–29). Ezekiel challenges what might be called “popular” authority—the power borne in public consensus.¹⁰⁹ Like Socrates’s subversive philosophy, Ezekiel’s subversive prophecy brings him into conflict not just with this or that power structure—temple, king, etc.—but, in a more fundamental way, with the very condition of the public and political.

None of this would be out of place in the earlier prophets. Even Amos’s famous indictment of cultic impropriety, easily construable as a critique of priests, is in fact framed as a critique of the whole people (Am 5:1, 4). Where the book of Ezekiel offers a unique contribution, rather, is in how it implicitly positions the role of language in this dynamic. For Ezekiel, the prophet’s conflict with the political realm, like the philosopher’s, is realized discursively, in the interaction between prophecy and poetry. Now, it goes without saying that neither Ezekiel nor any biblical text offers the kind of metaphysical account of poetry that Plato does in the *Republic*. Indeed, the very premises and terms of this account would likely have been unintelligible to the biblical writers. However, the *political* conclusions to which Plato mobilizes it offer a framework for appreciating the constructed role of poetic imagery in Ezekiel. By making מִשַׁל an important component of the prophet’s activity, the book negotiates the discursive

suggest in English, referring specifically to landed citizens. However, this group still represents a broader target for Ezekiel’s prophecy than more concentrated, centralized authorities such as the priests or the king.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, “Proverb Performance and Transgenerational Retribution in Ezekiel 18,” in *Ezekiel’s Hierarchical World: Wrestling with a Tiered Reality*, eds. Stephen L. Cook and Corrine L. Patton, SymS 31 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 199; and Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 62.

constraints placed on subversive prophecy by its public function. The result is a prophet who powerfully wields poetic language while also being dangerously beholden to it.

3.3.1. Popular Speech as משל

In the Hebrew Bible, the term משל denotes a discrete speech performance, such as when Balaam “took up his משל” (Num 23:7, 18; 24:3, 15, 20, 23) or Solomon “spoke (וַיְדַבֵּר) three thousand משל, and his songs (שִׁירָו) numbered one thousand and five” (1 Kgs 5:12). Etymologically, it has been connected with Akkadian *mašālu*, the various meanings of which coalesce around a sense of correspondence or division—“to be similar,” “to be equal,” and “to be half.”¹¹⁰ Because the Hebrew term occurs in such a diversity of biblical contexts, it has been subjected to a dizzying number of English translations, including, in alphabetical order, “allegory,” “byword,” “metaphor,” “parable,” “proverb,” “riddle,” and “theme.”

Vayntrub has traced scholarly efforts to pinpoint the essential meaning of the term משל along two main lines.¹¹¹ The first, taking its cue from sapiential usage (most notably in the incipit of the book of Proverbs), identifies משל as the basic unit of biblical *wisdom*. The second, focusing instead on the parallelism of many individual משלים, identifies משל as the basic unit of biblical *poetry*. While these two approaches might seem distinct, Vayntrub has shown that they share a fundamentally developmentalist conception of biblical literature, in which brief, oral

¹¹⁰ CAD 10:355. On a sense of “likeness” as the basic meaning of משל, see, e.g., Otto Eissfeldt, *Der Maschal im Alten Testament: Eine wortgeschichtliche Untersuchung nebst einer literargeschichtlichen Untersuchung der משל genannten Gattungen „Volkspruchwort“ und „Spottlied.“* BZAW 24 (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1913); and A. R. Johnson, “משל,” in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, eds. M. Noth and D. Winton Thomas, VTSup 3 (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 162–69.

¹¹¹ See Vayntrub, *Beyond Orality*, 36–102.

kernels of poetry accrued gradually into long, written compositions of prose. The search for the essence of *משל* has therefore been, in both its sapiential and poetic reflexes, a search for pristine discursive origins. Vayntrub argues that this mistakenly discounts the significance of prose literary framing as a guide to how various biblical writers themselves understood and attempted to configure this speech-form. While blanket theories of *משל* might be attractively elegant, they risk flattening the native theories in which this term is employed and implicated.

Ezekiel is a vivid example of how biblical writers could mobilize this pliable term in ways that essentializing definitions are liable to efface. The book makes characteristic use of both *משל* and its derived verb (“to perform a *משל*”), the latter of which in fact occurs, with just a single exception (Num 21:27), only in Ezekiel. Vayntrub notes that it “designates an activity that Yhwh requires the prophet to perform for the house of Israel as well as one the prophet urges people to cease.”¹¹² How did the authors of Ezekiel understand *משל* such that they might use it in this unintuitive combination? Answering this question offers insight into how the book implicitly configures the role of language in prophecy.

Ezekiel situates the “natural” occurrence of *משל* within popular discourse. In what Walther Zimmerli called “disputation-oracles” or “discussion-oracles,” YHWH takes aim at two *משלים* that seem to enjoy notable currency.¹¹³ The scenes unfold as follows:

²¹ The word of YHWH came to me: ²² O mortal, what is this *משל* that you all have upon the land of Israel (לְכֶם עַל-אֲדָמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל): “The days drag on and every vision fails (יֵאָרְכוּ יְאָרְכוּ הַיָּמִים וְאֵבֶד כָּל-חֲזוֹן).” ²³ Now, say to them, “Thus says Lord YHWH: I have put an end to this *משל*; they shall not speak it anymore (וְלֹא-יִמְשְׁלוּ אֹתוֹ עוֹד) in Israel.” Rather, say (כִּי) to them, “The days arrive and [with them] the word of every vision (קָרְבוּ הַיָּמִים) (אִם-דִּבֶּר) (וְדִבֶּר כָּל-חֲזוֹן).” ²⁴ No longer shall there be vain vision or sycophantic sorcery in the midst

¹¹² Ibid., 88.

¹¹³ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:36.

of the House of Israel—²⁵ for it is I, YHWH, who shall speak what I speak (אֲדַבֵּר אֵת (אֲשֶׁר אֲדַבֵּר), the word (דְּבַר) to be executed without delay. In your own days, you rebellious house, I will speak a word (אֲדַבֵּר דְּבַר) and execute it”—oracle of Lord YHWH. (Ezek 12:21–25)

¹ The word of YHWH came to me: ² Why do you all speak (מִה־לְכֶם אַתֶּם מִשְׁלִים) this מִשַׁל upon the land of Israel (עַל־אֲדַמַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל):

“The fathers eat sour grapes

and the sons’ teeth are set on edge (אָבוֹת יֹאכְלוּ בֶסֶר וְשֵׁנֵי הַבָּנִים תִּקְהֶינָה).”

³ I swear—oracle of Lord YHWH—you shall no longer speak (מִשַׁל) this מִשַׁל in Israel. ⁴ See, all life belongs to me—the life of father and son alike belongs to me (הֲזוֹ כָּל־הַנְּפֹשׁוֹת (לִי הִנֵּה כְּנֹפֵשׁ הָאָב וּכְנֹפֵשׁ הַבֵּן לִי־הִנֵּה 18:1–4)

In dismissing contemporary prophets as futile, the first passage addresses the theme of prophetic legitimacy and efficacy, transitioning directly into YHWH’s condemnation of false prophecy (Ezek 13:1–16). Meanwhile, in affirming intergenerational retribution, the second one engages a pressing theological question that appears prominently elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (most notably in the Decalogue). These are self-evidently important matters. Understandably, then, most commentators have focused on the *content* of these מִשְׁלִים and the implications of YHWH’s rejection thereof.¹¹⁴ However, Ezekiel’s relentless emphasis on their מִשַׁל-character—using the term fully seven times in these nine verses—raises the possibility that the very mode of discourse is no less at issue. Without losing sight of content, we should also therefore scrutinize the speech performance that conveys it. Although, to be sure, Ezekiel nowhere offers an explicit, theoretical

¹¹⁴ In particular, many have cast Ezekiel 18 as an important development in Israelite legal and ethical thought; see, e.g., Bernard M. Levinson, “The Human Voice in Divine Revelation: The Problem of Authority in Biblical Law,” in *Innovation in Religious Traditions: Essays in the Interpretation of Religious Change*, eds. Michael A. Williams, Collett Cox, and Martin S. Jaffee, Religion and Society 31 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992), 35–72; Johan Lust, “The Sour Grapes: Ezekiel 18,” in *Scripture in Transition: Essays on Septuagint, Hebrew Bible, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honour of Raija Sollamo*, eds. Anssi Voitila and Jutta Jokiranta, JSJSup 126 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 223–37; Gordon H. Matties, *Ezekiel 18 and the Rhetoric of Moral Discourse*, SBLDS 126 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1990); and Andrew Mein, *Ezekiel and the Ethics of Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 177–215.

definition of *משל*, attention to its characteristics in these two oracles may reveal an implicit understanding of how it functions as speech.

First, the discursive setting of *משל* is necessarily communal and political. Both prophecies are addressed to pluralities (*לכם*), to such an extent that, as Moshe Greenberg noted, the prophet is folded in with them.¹¹⁵ The spatial location of the *משלים* “upon the land of Israel” further emphasizes this political character.¹¹⁶ They are effective because they are borne in and authorized by a public community—a feature to which Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, drawing on anthropological studies of proverbial sayings, has called attention.¹¹⁷

Second, *משל* is poetic in the broad sense of evocative representation. It is true that only the second *משל* here makes use of metaphor, while the first more straightforwardly asserts its claim. However, both are tight, elegant parallelisms, built upon cola with equal number of words and, in the case of the first, even syllables.¹¹⁸ They thereby express a cause-and-effect relationship not only semantically but also through their very rhythm. As poetic approximations of reality expressed in a stylistically balanced utterance, the *משלים* cited here nicely reflect

¹¹⁵ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 227.

¹¹⁶ The phrase “upon the land of Israel” has troubled many commentators because the book of Ezekiel never places its eponymous prophet in the land except in visions. Greenberg therefore argued, “We must assume that report of this proverb’s currency in Judah had reached Ezekiel.” Idem, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 227. By contrast, Lust has recommended taking the preposition *על* in a topical rather than a locative sense: it is a *משל* that they say *concerning* the land of Israel. LXX preserves an interesting translational variation: in Ezekiel 12, it renders literally, “upon the land of Israel (*ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς τοῦ Ἰσραηλ*),” while in Ezekiel 18, it renders more loosely, “among the children of Israel (*ἐν τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραηλ*).” On the one hand, Ezekiel’s marked preference for *בית ישראל* over *בני ישראל* would figure to mitigate against the possibility of a variable Hebrew Vorlage. On the other, if the Vorlage did read *על-אדמת ישראל* in both chapters, it is difficult to explain the divergent translational strategies in LXX. Either way, LXX recommends reading the phrase as a reference to spatial and social location (per Greenberg) rather than subject matter (per Lust). It is therefore justifiably read as a reflection of the public character of this mode of speech.

¹¹⁷ Darr, “Proverb Performance,” 208–209; cf., e.g., Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Toward a Theory of Proverb Meaning,” *Proverbium* 22 (1973): 821–27.

¹¹⁸ The decision by the editors of *BHS* to typeset the *משל* of the sour grapes as verse is therefore sound.

Akkadian *mašālu* in both its concrete (“half”) and abstract (“similar”) dimensions. As Zimmerli put it, “In the present text מִשָּׁל means a clever saying which in its concentrated diction gives expression to an idea in the most poignant possible way and is therefore repeated and believed by man—a well-phrased saying is already half a truth!”¹¹⁹

Third, and relatedly, מִשָּׁל bespeaks a pretense to a deep understanding of timeless truth. As Vayntrub notes, it “involves the generalization of events and phenomena and their reapplication to other, new contexts.”¹²⁰ Both examples here employ imperfect verbs with a durative sense, reflecting the static cyclicity well known from sapiential instantiations of the term.¹²¹ To speak מִשָּׁל is both to invoke and to reinforce a claim to authoritative insight into “the way things are.” As Hutton and Johan Lust have correctly noted in the case of the sour grapes, the people recite this מִשָּׁל because they *believe* it.¹²² In their eyes, the poetic power of the representation corresponds to the abiding truth of the referent.

Fourth and finally comes YHWH’s explicit rejection of this purported correspondence. An important aspect of the people’s מִשָּׁל-speech is that poetic approximation of reality risks distorting it. Both transition from the divine discourse of דָּבָר in the opening verse to the human discourse of מִשָּׁל in the body. While it is true, as we have seen, that “the דָּבָר of YHWH came” is Ezekiel’s standard introduction to a new literary unit, the fact that the subject of these oracles is language itself raises the possibility that a direct, substantive contrast is being drawn. In fact, the

¹¹⁹ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:280. On מִשָּׁל as repeated speech, see Rashi and Kimhi on Ezek 12:22.

¹²⁰ Vayntrub, *Beyond Orality*, 105.

¹²¹ On the significance of the imperfect אִכְלוּ in Ezekiel 18, see Rodney R. Hutton, “Are the Parents Still Eating Sour Grapes? Jeremiah’s Use of the *Māšāl* in Contrast to Ezekiel,” *CBQ* 71 (2009): 278–79.

¹²² *Ibid.*; and Lust, “Sour Grapes,” 233–34.

first oracle thematizes this contrast, responding to the people's משל with no fewer than seven instances of the root דב"ר in just two-and-a-half verses. This contrast is not, as Maimonides (under Plato's influence) might have had it, metaphysical. The implication, rather, is that YHWH's speech (דבר) has a claim of authority over against human speech (in the form of משלים) because it reflects the deity's superior understanding of the way things *really* are.

These passages do not offer—and, by all indications, do not *intend* to offer—a dedicated, abstracted theory of משל in the manner that Plato treats mimesis in the *Republic*. Rather, they show YHWH using the term as part of a different orienting goal: attacking particular משלים that express misguided views. What I have argued is that in doing so, these passages nevertheless encode an *implicit* understanding of the dynamics of language among the people to whom Ezekiel is sent. The idea of משל that emerges is one of human, public, and mediate speech. In these ways, the challenge it presents to prophecy is conceptually related to the challenge that poetry poses to philosophy in the *Republic*. Although משל may not simply be equated with mimesis, both involve an enticing but misleading reproduction of how the world appears to operate. Moreover, while Ezekiel offers nothing like Plato's *metaphysical* account of this process, these passages seem to reflect a similar understanding of the *political* implications: representative speech has a particular power in the public realm. Despite its currency, it is at least potentially inimical to a discourse rooted in truth—in Ezekiel's case, truth revealed in and constituted by YHWH's own speech. The unthinking use of flawed משלים is the Judahite manifestation of life among the shadows of the allegorical cave. By placing the prophet in

conflict with these משלים, the book of Ezekiel makes subversive prophecy a matter of what Davis aptly calls a “battle of opposed verbal forces.”¹²³

3.3.2. The Prophetic Redeployment of משל

It is a widely acknowledged paradox of the *Republic* that in the very dialogue in which Socrates banishes mimetic poetry from his ideal polis, he also offers a smorgasbord of captivating images that are justifiably dubbed poetic. Many have detected a similar tension in the book of Ezekiel. The prophet through whom YHWH attacks the people’s משלים nevertheless himself prophecies in vivid, figurative language that fits the profile of משל both in this book and elsewhere in the Bible.¹²⁴ Although, as we saw earlier, scholars have regularly maligned Ezekiel’s poetic *technique*, few have doubted his poetic *imagination*. Eichrodt, Greenberg, and Carol A. Newsom have all credited him with more frequent and more powerful employment of figurative language than any other prophet—and while such a claim is not easily proven, the aspect of the book that it captures is clear enough.¹²⁵ As Eichrodt memorably put it, Ezekiel’s “poetic creations follow their own laws and tower up into images and metaphors that are often daring, yet always enthralling.”¹²⁶

¹²³ Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 88.

¹²⁴ However, it should again be acknowledged that if YHWH’s contention is only with the *content* of the people’s משלים and does not extend to their *form*, then this need not be construed as a tension.

¹²⁵ Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 23; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, AB 22A (1997; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 419; and Carol A. Newsom, “A Maker of Metaphors—Ezekiel’s Oracles against Tyre,” *Int* 38 (1984): 151.

¹²⁶ Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 23.

The *Republic* offers a framework within which to make sense of this simultaneous aversion to *משל* and predilection for it. In conceding the power of poetry, Plato establishes the discursive terms for his project of effectively and safely reintroducing subversive philosophy into the political realm: rather than combatting poetry, the philosopher must channel it, using mimesis to impart philosophical truth in a pragmatically efficacious manner. Similarly, YHWH's placement of poetry in Ezekiel's mouth represents engagement with the discursive realities of the public realm. The prophet is commanded to return to the cave of human affairs, as it were, sully himself in the vulgar people's absurd misunderstandings even as (or, rather, precisely *because*), having received YHWH's direct communication, he grasps the absurdity. As a mode of discourse that people understand in their plurality, *משל* is an effective vehicle for the divine speech—for ensuring that its subversive message actually registers. In fact, a poignant rabbinic tradition suggests that Ezekiel's injunction to perform one of the *משלים* to which we will soon turn (Ezek 17:2) should be regarded as the conceptual opening of the book itself!¹²⁷

This dynamic is implicit in YHWH's confrontation with the popular *משלים* discussed above. In response to the refrain, “The days drag on and every vision fails (יֵאָרְכוּ הַיָּמִים וְאָבַד כָּל-חֲזוֹן),” Ezekiel is to proclaim, “The days arrive and [with them] the word of every vision (קָרְבוּ הַיָּמִים וְדָבַר כָּל-חֲזוֹן).” The divine rebuttal of the *משל* is itself a *משל*—a “counter-proverb,” as Greenberg put it.¹²⁸ It preserves the poetic parallelism of the original, nearly down to the syllable count. Moreover, the two lexical substitutions perhaps contain scribal plays on graphic

¹²⁷ “‘He said to me: O Mortal, riddle a riddle’ (Ezek 17:2)—this should have been the opening of the book, were it not for the fact that there is no earlier or later in the Torah” (Eccl. Rab. 1:12:1).

¹²⁸ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 227.

similarities: רכו and רבו in the first colon, בד and בר in the second.¹²⁹ When it comes to YHWH's pronouncement on transgenerational retribution, we find less obvious structural similarity to the משל that it rejects. However, here too there is preservation of a basic parallelism:

אבות יאכלו בסר // ושני הבנים תקהינה
הן כל־הנפשות לי הנה // כנפש האב וכנפש הבן ל־הנה

Underscoring the imbalance between past and present generations, the original quip distributes them across opposite cola of an antithetic parallelism. By contrast, YHWH's response poetically communicates his equitable approach to the generations by grouping them together on each side of a synonymous parallelism. This is underscored by the “rhyming” effect of לי הנה at the end of both cola. In these ways, the form of the counter-משל thereby serves subtly to subvert the content of its target. Another poetic feature of YHWH's response is phonological echo: the first colon picks up the repeated *o*-sound in its counterpart in the original, while the concluding הנה in both cola picks up the concluding תקהינה in the original. Finally, the sound *hēn* punctuates the counter-משל at beginning, middle, and end, endowing it with a discernible rhythm.

Read in this light, YHWH's responses to the people's problematic משלים are not a straightforward matter of confronting false, human speech with the brute force of true, divine speech. To be sure, these משלים subsist in and engender conventional misunderstandings that contradict the divine truth to which the prophet has been granted privileged access. However,

¹²⁹ Such graphic plays are well known in Akkadian literature; see, e.g., Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy before the Greeks*, 77–84. For an argument that Hebrew scribes also employed them, see Jeffrey L. Cooley, “Judean Onomastic Hermeneutics in Context,” *HTR* 112 (2019): 203–206. Given the Babylonian setting of the book of Ezekiel, it makes sense that its approach to language might reflect sensibilities and practices characteristic of cuneiform culture.

YHWH commissions the prophet to convey this truth in the very מַשַׁל-form that is being rejected.

Davis has argued that in doing so, the prophet

focuses his attack directly on the heart of the tradition whose distortions it is his charge to expose. Ezekiel opposes anonymous (in this case, insidiously so) popular wisdom with the much more powerful authority, repeatedly and unambiguously identified, of divine speech. ... Ezekiel fights archival speech with archival speech, turning pithy sayings back on their speakers (18.25), replacing corrupt proverbs with new ones which accurately represent the power of God and, moreover, validate his own position (12.22–23).¹³⁰

Recalling Socrates's use of mimesis, YHWH's use of מַשַׁל represents constructive engagement with the discursive realities of Israel's social and political existence.¹³¹ Allen writes that philosophical analogies "are constructed ... out of expectations about social order that Plato takes his readers to have" in order to endow them with the "moral authority derived from 'naturalness.'"¹³² Couching divine truth in מַשַׁל coopts just this modality of authority.¹³³ As Eichrodt noted, Ezekiel "has glimpsed the line the defence is taking, and selects an answer to penetrate that line of defence, and make it impossible for those who hear it to feel comfortable about the attitude of resistance which they have once again taken up."¹³⁴

Paradoxically, then, the problematic power of poetry is precisely its boon for the prophetic task: it makes YHWH's speech publicly intelligible and compelling. When it comes to

¹³⁰ Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 90; cf. *ibid.*, 93–94.

¹³¹ Because it is mastery of mimesis that allows the philosopher to rule as king, Plato might well have appreciated that מַשַׁל refers not only to representative speech but also, homonymously, to the act of ruling.

¹³² Allen, *Why Plato Wrote*, 53.

¹³³ As McKane wrote, "The effectiveness of a *māšāl* derives from its concreteness and from the circumstance that a model of a general truth stimulates the imagination and clamours for attention, as a matter-of-fact statement would not. It may even offer some resistance in the first place to understanding, but this works to its advantage in the long run, because once the representative character of the model is grasped and the relationship of resemblance intuited, the initial effort expended adds to the impressiveness of the discovery." *Idem, Proverbs: A New Approach*, OTL (1970; repr., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 28.

¹³⁴ Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 155. He notes, moreover, that this strategy is far more common in Ezekiel than in any other prophetic book.

	The Eagles and the Cedar (Ezekiel 17)	The Boiling Cauldron (Ezekiel 24)
1a. Command to perform משל	vv. 1–3aα	vv. 1–3a
1b. משל	vv. 3aβ–10	vv. 3b–5
2a. Command to explain the משל	vv. 11–12a	vv. 6, 9
2b. Explanation	vv. 12b–22	vv. 6–8, 9–14

Figure 3.2. Structure of the משלים in Ezekiel 17 and 24

Ezekiel, then, those who, like Heschel, describe prophecy as an act of mimetic representation or translation have not entirely missed the mark. However, they *are* mistaken to credit this act to the prophet as a necessary reflection of his own humanity. Instead, YHWH himself renders prophetic poetry as a strategic response to his *audience*'s humanity. As his mortal mouthpiece, Ezekiel literally embodies the discursive situation of prophecy at the fraught intersection of singular, true, divine speech (דבר) and plural, representative, human speech (משל).

The dynamic is presented in a more developed form in Ezekiel 17 and 24, where YHWH directly commands the prophet to perform משל as a matter of discursive strategy. These two משל-discourses have the same structure (see Figure 3.2). First, the דבר of YHWH comes to the prophet bearing the instruction to speak a משל to the people:

¹ וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: ² בְּן־אָדָם
חוד חידה ומשל ומשל אל-בית ישראל:
^{3aα} ואמרף בה-אמר אדני יהוה

¹ The word of YHWH came to me: ² O mortal, riddle a riddle and speak a משל to the House of Israel. ^{3aα} Say to them, “Thus says Lord YHWH.” (Ezek 17:1–3aα)

¹ וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי בַּשָּׁנָה הַתְּשִׁיעִית
בחדש העשירי בעשור לחדש
לֵאמֹר: ... ^{3a} ומשל אל-בית-המרי משל
ואמרף אליהם בה אמר אדני יהוה

¹ The word of YHWH came to me in the ninth year, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month: ... ^{3a} Speak a משל to the rebellious house. Say to them, “Thus says Lord YHWH.” (Ezek 24:1, 3a)

As noted earlier, this juxtaposition of *דבר* and *משל* serves to distinguish them.¹³⁵ By giving Ezekiel a *משל*, YHWH gives him the means to convey the *דבר* to the people effectively.

The second movement lays out this *משל* in fantastic detail and gripping poetic language. In Ezekiel 17, YHWH tells an elaborate tale about the sorry fate of a transplanted cedar at the hands of two great eagles and the blistering east wind. In Ezekiel 24, he describes a boiling cauldron filled with meat and bones. Yet while the two *משלים* share this vividness of imagery, they are not easily assimilable to a single generic category. As Davis, Greenberg, and Zimmerli note, Ezekiel 17 is a kind of fable, personifying plants and animals in a story with a discernible (if, like most fables, simple) plot.¹³⁶ By contrast, the much briefer *משל* in Ezekiel 24 has no such narrative arc, reading more like a “ditty” (Greenberg) or “work song” (Zimmerli) that might naturally accompany the labor of stewing.¹³⁷ This generic divergence corresponds to their ostensible rhetorical appeals. The story of the cedar is poetic in a higher register, captivating in its elaborate imagery and complex language—a real work of literary art. As both Davis and Eichrodt correctly stress, not every granular detail of this *משל* need have an allegorical referent. To a significant extent, the purpose of the language is simply to enchant.¹³⁸ Meanwhile, the song

¹³⁵ Readers of Ezekiel have long striven to explain the pairing of *משל/משיל* with *חידה/חיד* in the opening of the *משל* of the cedar (Ezek 17:2). Kimhi understood them to reflect different dimensions of the same rhetorical activity: “The *חידה* is the concealed matter (*הדבר הסתום*), from which they understand something else. The *משל* is the process of likening (*דמיון*) one thing to another, like this *משל*, which analogizes (*שהמשיל*) the king to an eagle. It is a *חידה* because not just anyone may understand it, only the prudent.” Kimhi on Ezek 17:2. Several modern commentators adopt basically this approach; see Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 95; Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 223; and Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 309 (who directly cites Kimhi). However, I am inclined to agree with Zimmerli that it is simply a synonymous parallelism, well attested elsewhere (Hab 2:6; Prov 1:6; 49:5; 78:2); see idem, *Ezekiel*, 1:360. In this way, the very locution by which YHWH commands poetic prophecy is itself poetic.

¹³⁶ Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 96; Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 307–24; and Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:359–68.

¹³⁷ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 503; and Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:496–501.

¹³⁸ Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 99; and Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 223–24.

of the cauldron is poetic in a lower register, appealing to the familiar rhythms of the quotidian. As Zimmerli puts it, “The listeners are called to a quiet everyday occupation, which is described in all the details of the work involved, until finally everyone can picture the steaming cooking pot.”¹³⁹ These differences underscore our earlier observation that *משל* is doing more complex conceptual work for Ezekiel than any one-to-one generic correspondence could capture. At stake in this term is the public power and efficacy of representative language.

In the third movement of Ezekiel’s *משל*-discourses, YHWH mobilizes this power and efficacy. He instructs the prophet to transition from the oblique language of *משל* to the direct language of the interpretation thereof:

וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: ^{12a} אֲמַר־נָא לְבַיִת הַמְּרִי הַלֵּא יִדְעֶתֶם מָה־אֵלֶּה ¹¹ 11 The word of YHWH came to me: ¹² Say to the rebellious house, “Do you know what these things means?” (Ezek 17:11–12a)

לְכֹן כֹּה־אָמַר אֲדַנְי יְהוָה Now then, thus says Lord YHWH. (Ezek 17:19aα; 24:6aα, 9aα)

These deceptively simple statements effect a twofold movement of coordination and disjunction. On the one hand, the deictic particle *אלה* and the repetition of “thus says Lord YHWH” (used to frame both *משלים*) signal logical progression from the foregoing speech performances. What follows will develop them in some way. On the other hand, the posing of a question and the particle *לכן* signal rupture.¹⁴⁰ What follows the *משלים* will develop them, more specifically, in an

¹³⁹ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:496–97.

¹⁴⁰ On the rhetorical function of *לכן* as a disjunctive call to attention, see Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 319–21; and idem, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 499.

unexpected way. This synthesis of continuity and discontinuity, familiarity and uncanniness serves to engage the audience, setting them on edge through a sense that all is not as it seems.¹⁴¹

This sets the stage for the fourth and final movement of the *משל*-discourses, which at last delivers their prophetic purpose: the explanation of what the *משל* in fact means. The enticing, elusive imagery of *משל* gives way jarringly to a plainly (if still powerfully) expressed rebuke and premonition of destruction.¹⁴² The following excerpts from each chapter illustrate:

²⁰ I will spread my net round about [the king of Judah] and he will be caught in my trap. I will bring him to Babylon and take him to trial there for the treachery that he committed against me. ²¹ As for all his choice soldiers and troops, they shall fall by the sword, and whatever remain shall be scattered by the wind—and you will know that I, YHWH, have spoken. (Ezek 17:20–21)

¹³ For your vile impurity—because I sought to cleanse you of your impurity, but you would not be cleansed—you shall never be clean again until I have satisfied my fury upon you. ¹⁴ I, YHWH, have spoken: it shall come to pass and I will execute it. I will not

¹⁴¹ Cf. Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 93, 96; and Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 223.

¹⁴² It must be acknowledged that the *משל* in Ezekiel 17 concludes with a promise not of destruction but of restoration: “Thus says YHWH: I myself will take from the crown of the exalted cedar and set it, from its very canopy I myself will pluck a tender twig and plant it, on a high and lofty mount. I will plant Israel on a sublime mountain; it will blossom and bear fruit, becoming a mighty cedar. Every manner of bird and winged thing will shelter beneath it, shelter in the shadow of its branches. All the trees of the field will know that I, YHWH, have lowered an elevated tree and elevated a lowly one; I have desiccated a lush tree and caused a desiccated one to flower. I, YHWH, have spoken and will execute it” (Ezek 17:22–24). However, I do not believe that this encouraging conclusion disrupts my claim that the *משל*-discourse is basically animated by a transition from enchanting image to terrifying explanation. For one, even if future restoration is ultimately assured, the more immediate circumstances—those which directly impact the audience—remain dire. Moreover, it seems likely that this coda is a late redactional addition, perhaps connected with or influenced by the oracles of restoration later in the book; see Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 324; and Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:366–68. The presence of a contradictory message of hope is not itself sound basis for suggesting redaction; plenty of prophetic oracles feature both rebuke and redemption. Rather, what makes this coda literarily conspicuous is its ungainly combination of the botanical imagery of the *משל* with the transparency of the explanatory section. Lyons claims, “When employing symbolic language, Ezekiel has a notable tendency to move back and forth between symbol and interpretation, or between symbol and reality.” Idem, *Study of Ezekiel*, 44. Yet while that certainly applies elsewhere, I find it difficult in this case to square the rhetorical subtlety of the move from *משל* to explanation with the unsubtle intrusion of the referent into the resumption of the *משל*-language—to say nothing of the fact that, rather awkwardly, only part of the initial *משל* is even resumed. For these reasons, I do not agree with Greenberg that “in language and conception the coda suits the body of the oracle, and completes it.” Idem, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 324. These verses look to me like a relatively late editorial attempt to cram a promise of restoration into a unit that was already rhetorically complete. While there is something to be said for this redactor’s appropriation of the cedar imagery, it ultimately calls attention to its rhetorical dissimilarity from the oracle to which it has been appended.

refrain or spare or relent. You shall be punished according to your ways and your deeds—declaration of Lord YHWH. (Ezek 24:13–14)

Davis and Greenberg affirm that these interpretations play an inextricable rhetorical role within the *משל*-discourse as a whole.¹⁴³ Others, however, have called this unity into question. In keeping with his separation of poetry and prose, Hölscher took this to the extreme, relegating the entirety of the interpretation to a later editorial stage—such that the original, lived speech performance would have consisted of the *משל* alone.¹⁴⁴ Eichrodt took a more cautious and conceptual, rather than redactional, approach, characterizing the interpretation as a contingent effort “to prevent [the audience’s] misunderstanding” of the poetic imagery that preceded it.¹⁴⁵ Zimmerli’s reading reflects something of both Hölscher’s and Eichrodt’s impulses.¹⁴⁶

There can be little denying that the presence in both oracles of two (complementary) interpretations (Ezek 17:12b–18, 19–22; 24:6–8, 9–14), each with their own incipit, raises the possibility of redactional augmentation.¹⁴⁷ However, demoting the interpretive stage altogether, whether redactionally or conceptually, misses that the essential rhetorical move of Ezekiel’s *משלים* is their transition to explanation. They function like Socrates’s pragmatically efficacious *εἰδωλα*, such that Allen’s language about the philosopher may seamlessly be applied to the prophet: “He distracts [the audience] with shadows that keep their attention on material phenomena. Then at the last minute, suddenly, he commands them to direct their attention

¹⁴³ Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 100–101; and Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20*, 317.

¹⁴⁴ Hölscher, *Hesekiel*, 100.

¹⁴⁵ Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 223.

¹⁴⁶ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:364.

¹⁴⁷ On the redactional shaping of the explanatory passages in Ezekiel 17, see Davis, *Swallowing the Scroll*, 99–104; on those in Ezekiel 24, see Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:497.

toward the abstract principles ordering the image.” On a macrostructural level, Lawrence Boadt observed, “Because of chap. 20’s shocking and difficult message, the prophet has employed highly poetic symbol and metaphor in chaps. 15–19 to prepare the reader for this confrontation, this new way of seeing themselves.”¹⁴⁸ This is how each individual *משל* functions as well. The language of human *משל*, elusive and mediate, sets the audience up for a more impactful encounter with direct divine speech, concrete and immediate. The difference in the *content* of Ezekiel’s “abstract principles”—covenantal, not epistemic—does not undermine the important parallels in *how* he imparts them, nor in what this reflects about the writers’ understandings of language. It is because poetry is connected with human plurality that it has for the prophet, as it does for the philosopher, the “power to shift the landscape of an audience’s imagination,” granting it nothing less than “life-changing force.”

However, there is a crucial difference between prophetic and philosophical poetry, corresponding to a difference in how the book of Ezekiel and the *Republic* construct the political tasks of their respective protagonists. For Socrates, mimesis is a means to soften and to obscure—to make subversive truths palatable. As we have seen, this takes one of two forms depending on the context. The philosopher as such uses poetic imagery to impart truth to his proto-philosophical interlocutors gradually, through the pleasure of discovery, as Allen explains. As a creator of philosophical analogies, he meets them on the terms of the cave—of the mimetic-poetic realm—in order to lead them out of it, but only delicately. The philosopher-*king*, however, uses poetic imagery to constitute the city in such a way that the citizens live according to truth even without grasping it, which they cannot do. As a creator of noble lies, he meets them on the

¹⁴⁸ Lawrence Boadt, “The Poetry of Prophetic Persuasion: Preserving the Prophet’s Persona,” *CBQ* 59 (1997): 21.

terms of the mimetic-poetic realm in order to *keep* them there. In the public realm, pragmatic efficacy is the ultimate criterion of the success of subversive philosophy.

Ezekiel's משלים play precisely the opposite function. They sharpen and shaken; they make subversive truths *more* vividly and terrifyingly destabilizing. Unmediated subversive prophecy is easy to dismiss; think, for instance, of how blithely people nowadays stroll right on past those who “prophecy” about the eschaton in, say, Times Square. However, the almost violent transition from the enchanting mediation of משל back to the brute immediacy of direct divine speech forces the audience to reflect on their situation and behavior with greater pause. As Zimmerli notes about the boiling cauldron, “This everyday action, as a משל, is full of a hidden, threatening significance.”¹⁴⁹ While the prophet, like the philosopher, meets his audience on the terms of the mimetic-poetic realm, his poetry serves ultimately to jolt the people *out* of it.

This divergence in goal reflects a more fundamental divergence in what it means for the prophet to act in the public realm. The authors of Ezekiel do not acknowledge—indeed, likely could not even have conceptualized—a distinction between epistemic and pragmatic truth. The notion of societal stability at the price of the people's own covenantal understanding is incoherent, for the measure and condition of Israel's success is first and foremost their faithful acknowledgment of YHWH. This is why Ezekiel has such a characteristic concern with the “heart/mind” (לב) and “spirit” (רוח) of the whole people (Ezek 11:19–20; 18:31; 36:26–27).¹⁵⁰ Paternalism and noble lies are out of the question. The political task of subversive prophetic

¹⁴⁹ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:497.

¹⁵⁰ On the concern with moral agency and selfhood in the book, see Jacqueline E. Lapsley, *Can These Bones Live?: The Problem of the Moral Self in the Book of Ezekiel*, BZAW 301 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000). Given that at least part of Ezekiel 36 may well be read as a later redactional précis of the book as a whole, the fact that it appears to develop earlier reflexes of the concern with moral agency and selfhood speaks to the centrality of this concern in the Ezekielian tradition; see, e.g., Klein, “Prophecy Continued,” 578–81.

poetry is to effect a wholesale transformation of *both* consciousness and action.¹⁵¹ As Eliezer of Beaugency said with regard to the *משל* of the cedar, “Perhaps [through this] the words will enter their heart (יִכְנְסוּ הַדְּבָרִים בְּלִבָּם) and they will tell them to their brethren in the land—and repent.”¹⁵² For the prophet, poetry must always lead the people back to the God who authored it.

3.3.3. The Perils of Poetic Prophecy

In both the *Republic* and the book of Ezekiel, poetry may be likened to fire: a powerful natural phenomenon that is dangerous when left on its own but constructive when brought under the control of the right person. Plato is optimistic about the prospects of taming the flames. While he offers a sustained account of why and how the philosopher-king must coopt mimesis, he nowhere indicates that once so coopted, it might yet singe its new master. Philosophically domesticated poetry may safely be redeployed. The book of Ezekiel does not share this optimism. In two brief but crucial scenes, the prophet faces a distressing state of affairs: his audience hears only poetry and its pleasurable representation, not poetic prophecy and its urgent call to action. YHWH’s strategic deployment of the fire of poetry in the mouth of the prophet has ignited conflagrations that rage far beyond the latter’s control. While couching divine speech in human *משל* has succeeded in engaging the audience, it has done so at the price of obscuring the very pragmatics of the discourse. Confronting this danger is an essential part of how the book of Ezekiel navigates the politics of subversive prophetic speech.

¹⁵¹ This does not, however, mean that the outlook for the success of this project is hopeful. On the tension between repentance and pessimism in the book, see Lyons, *Study of Ezekiel*, 126–32.

¹⁵² Eliezer of Beaugency on Ezek 17:2.

The first scene occurs in response to an oracle concerning, appropriately enough, fire. The word of YHWH comes to Ezekiel, commanding him to prophesy to the forest of the Negeb: YHWH is preparing to kindle a fire that will utterly consume it (Ezek 21:1–4). Rather than transitioning immediately to the next oracle, as is typical of the book, this unit is followed by a rare moment of insight into Ezekiel’s subjective experience.¹⁵³ The prophet reports his reaction to the foregoing injunction in the first person:

וְאָמַר אֶהְיֶה אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה הַמָּה אֹמְרִים לִי
הֲלֹא מִמְשַׁל מְשָׁלִים הוּא: I said, “Ah! Lord YHWH! They are saying
of me, ‘He is a משל-speaker!’” (Ezek 21:5)

To the God who has commanded him to speak משלים, Ezekiel cries out in exasperation. As Newsom aptly puts it, “He was developing something of a reputation.”¹⁵⁴ The very mode of speech that characterizes his prophetic mission is being thrown back in his face!¹⁵⁵ However, we are justified in asking *how* this is the case. After all, the people are not wrong: Ezekiel patently does speak in משל with some frequency. What precisely is the implication of the moniker ממשל משלים such that it troubles him so?

There is a prominent and readily understandable tendency to interpret it as a sneer meant to impugn Ezekiel’s authenticity as a prophet—“contemptuous mockery,” as Eichrodt put it.¹⁵⁶ Joseph Kara glossed, “This man is a teller (מספר) of משלים and a liar (ומכזב). Evil will not befall us.”¹⁵⁷ Geller spells out the connection: “He knows that to be called a poet”—i.e., one who

¹⁵³ On the unusualness of this, see Lyons, *Study of Ezekiel*, 26.

¹⁵⁴ Newsom, “Maker of Metaphors,” 151.

¹⁵⁵ As far as I am aware, the Peshitta is alone among the witnesses in reinforcing this confrontational character by rendering “you” (אַתָּה) in place of “he.”

¹⁵⁶ Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 288.

¹⁵⁷ Kara on Ezek 21:5.

creates one's own literary art—"is an accusation of false prophecy."¹⁵⁸ This reading perhaps gains support from the use of *משל* in the *piel* stem, the only such use in the Bible, as commentators regularly note. (The *qal* is common.) Insofar as the *piel* stem often serves as a semantic intensifier, it might suggest here a strong degree of fabrication: Ezekiel does not simply *speaks* משלים but *weaves* them out of thin air—hence the rendering “maker of allegories” by NRSV and many others. Alternatively, the *piel* could bear an iterative sense, presenting משל as Ezekiel's characteristic and consistent mode of speech. Isaiah di Trani glossed, “He never (שלעולם אינו) speaks except in משל.”¹⁵⁹ Luther rendered, “Does he not speak always (*immer*) in riddles?” The iterative spin endows the complaint with a pointed dismissiveness, chalking Ezekiel's משלים up to the idiosyncrasies of an eccentric who is to be either mocked or ignored but certainly not taken seriously. Many take הלא as a trivializing term that further fosters a dismissive tone—“He is just a riddlemonger,” as NJPS and others put it.

However, there is another possible reading: Ezekiel's audience has misunderstood the pragmatics of the discourse. The prophet hopes that the people will appreciate the משל for what it is: a distillation of a more sublime and authoritative form of divine speech. Instead, they assume that it is no different from the all-too-human משלים with which they are familiar from everyday public life. Kimhi brought this problem out excellently in his gloss on the protest:

<p>איך תשלחני אליהם לדבר דרך משל, והנה המה אומרים לי, כשאני אומר להם הנבואות דרך משל – כמו הנבואות שקדמו, כנבואת הנשר הגדול ונבואת אמך כגפן בדמדך וכן השאר – אומרים בעבורי: הלא ממשל משלים הוא – מדבר משלים</p>	<p>How can you dispatch me to them to speak in the form of משל when here they are saying of me—whenever I prophesy to them in the form of משל (as in the previous prophecies, like that of the great eagle, of the mother like a vine, and all the rest)—“He is a ממשל משלים,” i.e.,</p>
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¹⁵⁸ Geller, “Were the Prophets Poets?” 212; cf. Kara on Ezek 21:5.

¹⁵⁹ di Trani on Ezek 21:5.

הוא, ואינו אומר על פי הנבואה, אלא להראות עצמו כי הוא יודע למשל משל. someone who speaks משלים not according to prophecy but in order to demonstrate that he knows how to speak in the משל-form.¹⁶⁰

To be sure, on this reading as well the people do not accept Ezekiel's prophetic authenticity.

However, Kimhi's last clause introduces a subtlety. They have not simply rejected the prophet on his terms. They have misconstrued the terms altogether. For them, the prophet's recitation of משל is a display of poetic virtuosity. Far from being disdainful, the moniker משלים might well be laudatory, as Greenberg translates it: "He is certainly a master of figurative speech!"¹⁶¹

In this context, the purpose of the *piel* of מש"ל might be primarily stylistic rather than semantic. It achieves a repetition both of the *shewa* under the initial *mem* and of two three-syllable words. Both would be lost in משל משלים, the *qal* version. The resulting משל משלים is almost a tongue-twister. The very phrase by which the people refer to Ezekiel already phonologically suggests their (mis)understanding of the standards by which he communicates. Harold Fisch has helpfully framed the problem in terms of a "contract" between speaker (or writer) and audience (or reader). "In the case of Ezekiel," he explains, "we seem to have a failed contract. He rejects with some violence the role of minstrel that has been assigned to him[,] ... while the audience for their part reject what he has determined as his mode of speech, i.e., the prophetic word as command."¹⁶² We might justifiably wonder whether it is in fact the case that marveling at the beauty of Ezekiel's words necessarily entails a failure to appreciate their

¹⁶⁰ Kimhi on Ezek 21:5.

¹⁶¹ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 419.

¹⁶² Harold Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation*, ISBL (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 44.

existential import. However, if this is indeed so, then to be called a poet is not, as Geller would have it, merely to be *accused* of being a *false* prophet. It is actually to *be a failed* prophet.

It is impossible to determine which of these two senses of the moniker ממשל משלים (if not some other) was originally intended. There is simply not enough context; indeed, the exclamation itself constitutes the entire narrative—a point to which we will return shortly. However, what we *can* say with certainty is that a sequentially later, much more developed episode aligns squarely with the second reading:

<p>וְאַתָּה בְּיַד אֲדָמִים בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ הַנִּדְבָרִים בְּדֹאֲלֵי הַקִּירוֹת וּבִפְתָחֵי הַבָּתִּים וְדִבְרֵי־חֵד אֶת־אֶחָד אִישׁ אֶת־אֶחָיו לֵאמֹר בְּאוֹנָא וְשָׁמְעוּ מִהַדְּבָר הַיּוֹצֵא מֵאֵת יְהוָה: ³¹ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֵלֶיךָ כְּמִבּוֹא־עַם וַיֵּשְׁבוּ לִפְנֵיךָ עַמִּי וְשָׁמְעוּ אֶת־דְּבָרֶיךָ וְאוֹתָם לֹא יַעֲשׂוּ כִּי־עֲגָבִים בְּפִיהֶם הֵמָּה עֹשִׂים אַחֲרַי בְּצַעֲמֵם לִבָּם הַלֵּךְ: ³² וְהִנֵּךְ לָהֶם כְּשִׁיר עֲגָבִים יִפֶּה קוֹל וּמִטֵּב נִגֵּן וְשָׁמְעוּ אֶת־דְּבָרֶיךָ וְעֹשִׂים אֵינָם אוֹתָם: ³³ וּבִבְאֵה הַנָּה בְּאֵה וַיִּדְעוּ כִּי נָבִיא הָיָה בְּתוֹכְכֶם:</p>	<p>³⁰ As for you, O mortal: Your compatriots gossip about you by the walls and in the thoroughfares, saying one to another, each to the next, “Come on, hear the word issuing from YHWH!” ³¹ So they come to you in throngs, my people do, and sit before you and listen to your words—but they do not act upon them. For they have love songs on their lips, so <i>that</i> is how they act; their heart seeks only spoils. ³² To them, you are a singer of those love songs—a beautiful vocalist, a skilled player. They hear your words—but they do not act upon them. ³³ But when it comes—lo, it is coming—they will know that a prophet was among them. (Ezek 33:30–33)</p>
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As Gershon Brin has noted, this passage directly takes up the theme of “the reciprocal relationship between the people and the prophet.”¹⁶³ Even if the people’s characterization of Ezekiel as a singer of love songs—and a ממשל משלים, we might justifiably add—amounts to a rejection of his prophetic authenticity, this does not cause them to spurn him. On the contrary, it is precisely *because* they understand him in this manner that they flock to him with such enthusiasm! In this way, the scene dramatizes the “failed contract” that Fisch describes.

¹⁶³ Gershon Brin, *Studies in the Prophetic Literature*, The Biblical Encyclopaedia Library 22, Heb. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2006), 196.

As with the מִשַׁל passages, this scene turns on a contrast between prophetic and popular discourse. However, instead of focusing on how YHWH attempts to make prophecy legible to the people, it shifts the perspective to how the people in fact receive it. The scene is deeply set in the public realm, in the people’s gathering “by the walls and in the thoroughfares.” The condition of plurality is emphasized relentlessly with plural verbs, multiple uses of the word “people” (עַם), and the artfully repetitive phrase, “one to another, each to the next.” As Brin correctly notes, this scene is specifically about the prophet’s relationship to the masses, not the elite.¹⁶⁴ In this realm, the divine speech that undergirds Ezekiel’s prophecy is confronted by the people’s speech, described with a rare usage of דַּבַּר in the *niphal* form. The *niphal* likely indicates a reciprocal, conversational character, rather than the unidirectionality of the common *piel* form. However, the few other biblical attestations of the *niphal* form (Mal 3:13, 16; and Ps 119:23) all reflect a pointedly negative valence. As most of the classical Jewish commentators note, the term in Ezekiel is therefore best read not simply as conversation but as idle gossip.¹⁶⁵ In fact, the passivity that often characterizes the *niphal* stem might well intimate a sense in which the people are “given over” to this idle talk, underscoring its thoughtlessness and vulgarity.

In setting the people’s idle, vulgar speech alongside the prophet’s urgent, inspired speech, this scene shows how the former shapes the reception of the latter as an ironic result of the prophet’s very attempt to overcome their abysmal difference. Because Ezekiel appeals to the audience’s discursive assumptions, these assumptions shape their understanding of the terms of his prophetic speech performance in the first place. Because *they* communicate in a certain

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 197.

¹⁶⁵ See Rashi, Kimhi, Kara, di Trani, and Menahem ben Simeon on Ezek 33:30; cf. Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 686.

manner, this is how they hear everything Ezekiel says. This is perhaps further implied in the repetition of “love songs” (עגבים) to refer to both the people’s and Ezekiel’s speech.¹⁶⁶ Their own love songs indicate what they desire—and they believe that the prophet can provide it. As Fisch puts it, “The prophet is their bard and minstrel, and the beauty of his language only confirms them in their way of relating to him.”¹⁶⁷ Their mutual invitation, “Come on, hear the word (הַדְּבָר) issuing from YHWH!” is therefore not so much sarcastic (“Come on, get a load of this guy!”) as frivolous (“Come on, hear what wondrous tales Ezekiel the bard has in store for us today!”).¹⁶⁸ They have misconstrued the dynamic of prophetic poetry, valorizing its beautiful language as the content of YHWH’s speech rather than its medium. The very discursive condition of plurality prevents them from understanding that, in Brin’s wonderful turn of phrase, beyond the “delivery” (מסירה) there is also, more importantly, a “message” (מסר).¹⁶⁹

We saw that for Plato, poetry is dangerous because it upends any pretenses to a purely aesthetic realm. Even if people treat mimetic representation of unvirtuous behavior as “just entertainment,” it will inevitably inculcate that unvirtuous behavior. The philosopher’s task is therefore to master poetry in order to turn this inevitability into an engine of virtue. For the book of Ezekiel, by contrast, the problem is precisely that people *do* have the discursive power (even

¹⁶⁶ Cf. di Trani on Ezek 30:31. It should be noted that some read כזבים (“lies,” “falsehoods”) in place of the first instance of עגבים (Ezek 30:31) on the basis of LXX (ψεῦδος) and the Peshitta (הַדְּבָרִים), although this is hardly a matter of consensus; cf. Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, vol. 2, trans. James D. Martin, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 196.

¹⁶⁷ Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose*, 43.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Brin, *Prophetic Literature*, 205.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

if, and perhaps *especially* if, they are not aware of it) to create a purely aesthetic space.¹⁷⁰

Although Ezekiel’s poetic prophecy bears divine truth and command, his audience neutralizes it by *hearing* it only as poetry. The passage plays on what Brin identifies as “the two senses of the verb *שמע*: listening and obedience.”¹⁷¹ The “hearing” that is to be expected in connection with YHWH’s word is the covenantal sense of “heeding” or “hearkening” that we find especially in the deuteronomic literature: “Now, O Israel, give heed (*שמעו*) to the laws and statutes that I am teaching you to execute (*לשמועו*)” (Deut 4:1a).¹⁷² This, as Zimmerli put it, is “the way in which the divine word really ought to be heard—binding, so that hearing should be translated into action.”¹⁷³ Quite unexpectedly and distressingly, then, the “hearing” in this scene turns out to be nothing of the sort. Rather, it is the soft, purely aesthetic hearing of the throngs who delight in the bard’s beautiful poetry and then, when he is finished, go about their wicked business as if they did not hear a word he said—because, in a manner of speaking, they did not.

The problem, of course, is that because the people *do* sincerely seek out the prophetic performance, the prophet cannot easily distinguish these two modes of hearing. “How, indeed,” Eichrodt rightfully asks, “could Ezekiel not have been provoked to joy at having at last secured recognition?”¹⁷⁴ This, I would suggest, is why the scene unfolds, as Zimmerli observes, “entirely

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 466.

¹⁷¹ Brin, *Prophetic Literature*, 201; cf. Kara on Ezek 33:32.

¹⁷² Although the book of Ezekiel is conventionally (and correctly) associated most closely with P (and H), there has been recent attention to its relationship with D as well; see, e.g., Risa Levitt Kohn, *A New Heart and a New Soul: Ezekiel, the Exile and the Torah*, JSOTSup 358 (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 86–95.

¹⁷³ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:201.

¹⁷⁴ Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 465.

in the style of an address to the prophet” rather than as a first- or third-person narrative report.¹⁷⁵ Only YHWH may access this inner truth of what “their heart seeks.”¹⁷⁶ The prophecy therefore serves “to prevent Ezekiel from drawing any false conclusions from the striking improvement in his position.”¹⁷⁷ In so doing, the prophet gives vivid expression to the bleak irony that “the prophet can count on an increase in the numbers and attentiveness of his audience every time he opens his mouth” without having the slightest clue as to whether he is actually accomplishing anything toward his urgent task.¹⁷⁸

Some have marveled at the fact that the people could derive aesthetic pleasure from a prophet animated to such an extent by wrath and destruction. This so troubled Greenberg that he resorted to positing that the people reacted only to the positive component of “a prophetic message that was at once soothing and demanding.”¹⁷⁹ As to which prophecy this might have been, he could only offer the rather milquetoast excuse that “we have no guarantee that our record contains every oracle of Ezekiel.”¹⁸⁰ Hölscher entirely depreciated the unit as a late redactional bridge to the prophecies of salvation in the remainder of the book.¹⁸¹

Against these approaches, I suggest we look to the preceding scene (Ezek 33:21–29) for context. When a refugee from Jerusalem informs the prophet that the city has been sacked, YHWH releases him from his dumbness and informs him that those who remain among the ruins

¹⁷⁵ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:200.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 465.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37*, 691.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Hölscher, *Hesekiel*, 168.

continue to assert their patrimonial entitlement to the land. In response to this brazen conceit, Ezekiel is to pronounce one of the most deeply subversive prophecies in the book:

²⁵ Now then, say to them, “Thus says Lord YHWH: You eat with blood, venerate your filthy fetishes, shed blood—and *you* shall take possession of the land? ²⁶ You depend upon your sword, commit abominations, defile every man his neighbor’s wife—and *you* shall take possession of the land?” ²⁷ Say to them, “Thus says Lord YHWH: I swear, those amid the ruins will fall by the sword, those in the field I have given as food for the beast, and those in strongholds and caves will die from plague. ²⁸ I will make the land a weltering waste (שְׂמָמָה וּמְשָׂמָה), its mighty pride shall cease (וְנִשְׁבַּת גְּאוֹן עָזָה), and the mountains of Israel will waste away (וְשָׂמָמוּ)—none passing through. ²⁹ And when I make the land a weltering waste (שְׂמָמָה וּמְשָׂמָה) because of all the abominations they committed—then they shall know that I am YHWH.” (Ezek 33:25–29)

This prophecy assaults the very foundation of the people’s (woefully mistaken) understanding of the terms of their inheritance. How, then, could it prompt the adoring frenzy described immediately thereafter? We should not chalk it up to exilic schadenfreude, tensions between the two communities notwithstanding. Surely, as Thomas Renz points out, “the exiles are not exempt from the moral requirements outlined in the preceding oracle.”¹⁸² Rather, the transition serves to underscore just how powerful poetry really is. While this oracle is no משל in any strict sense—indeed, it could not be more straightforward—it nevertheless partakes of the same artistry, including vivid language, parallelism, alliteration, and rhyme. Such poetry is necessary to focus the people’s attention on the severity of the situation. Once Ezekiel has done so, however, there is no way to prevent them from regarding this poetry as an end in itself. By assuming that only a prophecy of redemption could have enchanted the people in Ezek 33:30–33, Greenberg in fact drastically undercut the profundity of the scene. Couched in arresting poetry, even the most fundamentally subversive prophecy may be mistaken for entertainment.

¹⁸² Thomas Renz, *The Rhetorical Function of the Book of Ezekiel*, VTSup 76 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 104–105.

The politics of poetry in Ezekiel culminates (conceptually, if not strictly sequentially) with a conundrum that Plato’s metaphysics either precludes or prevented him from seeing. The medium of subversive prophecy—its poetry—is also the potential motor of its misunderstanding; making divine speech broadly legible necessarily entails the risk that it will be heard not as poetic prophecy but simply as poetry. Zimmerli saw in Ezek 33:30–33 “the vexation of being listened to meekly and even eagerly and at the same time not being heard properly. Can one, under these circumstances,” he asks, “still be a prophet?”¹⁸³ Yet, as Fisch points out, Ezekiel *must*—in accordance with YHWH’s own instruction, no less—be “a poet as well as a prophet[.] ... He would banish his audience, and yet without their presence, his words will echo in the vacant air. He needs to fascinate them with words.”¹⁸⁴ In response to Ezekiel’s protest that he is misunderstood as a ממשל משלים, YHWH simply commissions yet another figurative image for the prophet to relate (Ezek 21:6–22).¹⁸⁵ If the places “by the walls and in the thoroughfares” are perhaps where prophecy falters, they are also ultimately where prophecy matters.

3.4. Conclusion

In the introduction to this dissertation, we saw that “social location” has been one of the orienting concerns of the critical study of subversive prophetic speech. Scholars have attempted

¹⁸³ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:201.

¹⁸⁴ Fisch, *Poetry with a Purpose*, 44.

¹⁸⁵ Eichrodt, Hölscher, and Zimmerli argued that this prophecy of the divine sword is in fact a concession to Ezekiel’s protest because it provides an interpretation of the image of the burning forest; see Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, 287–88; Hölscher, *Hesekiel*, 111; and Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 1:424. However, they admitted that even this alleged interpretation is itself imagistic. Hölscher criticized this continued use of representative language as “clumsy.” I would counter that it appears so only because Hölscher has forced it into a purely interpretive role that it is not in fact meant to play. While the sword passage certainly relates to and develops the ממשל that precedes it, it is also a ממשל in its own right.

to recover the typical social conditions of prophetic performance underlying the textually concretized performances that make up the prophetic book. It seems likely that Ezekiel's prophetic performances reflect, at least in part, this sort of ancient social reality. In fact, Dijkstra has called attention to the similarities between the public gathering in Ezek 33:30–33 and a similar response to Balaam in the Deir 'Alla Inscription.¹⁸⁶ In this chapter, however, I have argued that social location can itself be literarily constructed, unfolded within—not obscured behind—the fictive world of the text. To whatever extent subversive prophets like Ezekiel might have been socially expected to interact with their audiences in ancient Israel, the highly developed literary form in which his performances are preserved also encodes an implicit argument regarding these dynamics.

Plato's *Republic* has helped us to appreciate the role of language in this implicit argument. In the book of Ezekiel, poetry is political in a broad sense—a matter of how, and to what ends, the prophet appears and acts in public. While Ezekiel's use of *משל* lacks the rigorous theoretical development with which Plato advances his account of mimesis, it reflects an implicit contention with the discursive condition of the public realm. Their different projects notwithstanding, neither the prophet nor the philosopher can effectively subvert their respective audiences' pretenses unless they convey them poetically—through the kind of representative language to which the people are accustomed and that they are prepared to accept. Yet while Plato sees the citizens' acceptance of poetic philosophy as the linchpin of a largely foolproof strategy for inculcating virtue, the book of Ezekiel grapples with the distressing fact that Israel's mode of accepting poetic prophecy is all too liable to neutralize it. These audiences, no less than

¹⁸⁶ Dijkstra, "Among the Prophets," 63.

the protagonists themselves, are *characters* within a literary world, serving to thematize the complications attending to the very language in which subversive speech is expressed.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE SUBVERSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF SUPERORDINATE AUTHORITY:
LITERARY FRAMING IN THE LATTER PROPHETS AND IN SOCRATES'S LAST DAYS

4.1. Introduction

Nothing has done more to make subversive prophetic speech an object of scholarly fascination than the paradox that such critiques of authority should be scripturally authorized themselves. In this paradox, many have detected aftershocks of the seismic religious, political, and social forces that produced the biblical canon and even biblical religion as a whole. According to this construal, the canonization of such prophecy is a problem that needs to be solved. However, what if we treated it as an additional literary means of constructing subversive prophetic speech? What if we read the tension itself for native claims about prophecy and authority? Blenkinsopp intuited this possibility when, in his study of the formation of the prophetic canon, he argued, “Tension between normative order (from that time known as Torah) and prophecy is a constituent element in the origins of Judaism.” Accordingly, “the present form of the Hebrew canon reflects a certain way of dealing with this tension.”¹ Treating the paradox of canonized prophetic critique as a historical accident begs the question. It forecloses the possibility that for the redactors of this literature—no less than for many of its contemporary readers, I might add—the prophets’ critiques of institutional authority structures are not an inconvenience or an embarrassment but rather part of what made their words worth preserving in the first place.

Following Blenkinsopp’s lead, this chapter explores how the redactional presentation of subversive prophetic speech in the Second Temple period in fact *orchestrated* this tension as part of a constructive effort to work through the problematics of institutional religious authority. It is

¹ Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon*, 2.

impossible to access—in a historically responsible manner, at least—the actual intentions of the subversive prophets themselves (if ever they existed) or those who first committed their critiques to writing.² However, we should not trivialize the intentions that later scribes embedded in their arrangement of this material; after all, it is to these scribes that we owe the prophetic canon altogether. Childs argued as much when he wrote,

It is constitutive of the canonical process that texts have been shaped to provide the community of faith with guidelines for its appropriation. The hermeneutical task of actualizing past traditions for each successive generation lies at the heart of the process. Theological reflection on its actualization has been built into the structure of the canonical text. The modern hermeneutical impasse has arisen in large measure by disregarding the canonical shaping.³

This is the sort of statement for which many historical critics (mistakenly) lambast Childs's canonical approach as a post- or anti-critical exercise in Protestant theology. However, it is more productively understood as a theological construal of a basically hermeneutical argument that, as I noted in the introduction, redaction critics now widely adopt: redaction is a creative, constructive, and even artful process not only of preserving but also of curating and reconceiving earlier material. Tellingly, Stephen B. Chapman's characterization of Blenkinsopp is strongly reminiscent of Childs: "What was truly fresh about Blenkinsopp's work was his understanding of the *way* in which the biblical literature was 'canon-conscious'; namely, by providing hermeneutical *guidelines* for its own interpretation."⁴ When it comes to subversive prophetic speech, these guidelines relate specifically to how the prophetic critique of authority is to be understood within the broader authorizing function of the canon as a whole.

² Cf. Weiss, "Amos' Repudiation of the Cult," 213.

³ Brevard S. Childs, "The Canonical Shape of the Prophetic Literature," *Int* 32 (1978): 49.

⁴ Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation*, FAT 27 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 42.

Like Jewish scribes in the Second Temple period, Plato was also concerned with establishing “guidelines” for (what he viewed as) the correct interpretation of a complex figure. As a participant in a lively and contentious culture of Socratic writing—“a literary community of Socratic authors reacting to one another’s work,” as Kahn has put it—Plato wrote dialogues that mediated a tradition neither entirely of his own making nor ultimately under his own control.⁵ It is in this relief, as discussed earlier, that scholars like Kahn have come to appreciate the constructive, fictive dimension of Plato’s literary presentation of his subversive Socrates. For instance, in an important study of his appropriation and transformation of divinatory phenomena, Kathryn A. Morgan has argued,

If we change our focus from what Socrates may have believed to how he was received by his contemporaries and the first generation of his students, we can see that locating the master in a proper religious context was essential. In Xenophon’s case, this meant arguing that Socrates’ religious beliefs were nothing out of the ordinary and that he practised a familiar type of divination. Plato’s technique is subtler. He constructs for Socrates a relationship with the religious world that shows him to be pious, but also shows how philosophy transforms religious paradigms. This is important not just for Plato’s portrayal of Socrates’ beliefs, but because it engages with the problem of philosophical reception of Socrates.⁶

This is the posture of “negotiation” for which I argued earlier in relation to Delphic tropes in the *Apology*. What Morgan helpfully emphasizes here is how Plato mobilized a traditional, general association of Socrates with divination to advance an innovative, specific claim. The structural similarities between Socrates’s subversive philosophical activity and prevailing Athenian notions of piety paradoxically provided the means for Plato to articulate an intellectual revolution.

One might reasonably object that this sort of engagement with a broader intellectual tradition is incapable of furnishing a valid hermeneutical comparison with the scribes who

⁵ Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 4; cf. idem, “Plato as a Socratic,” 380–82.

⁶ Kathryn A. Morgan, “The Voice of Authority: Divination and Plato’s *Phaedo*,” *CQ* 60 (2010): 65.

redacted the prophetic corpus. For such a comparison to be compelling, Plato would need to have directly incorporated the earlier Socratic traditions as discrete components in his dialogues, like the scribe who, as we saw in chapter 2, redactionally mapped a preexistent cultic תורה-exchange (Mic 6:6–8) onto Balak and Balaam (Mic 6:5). This is certainly not the case. Setting aside quotations of poetry and allusions to mythology (which, at any rate, are entirely different), there is no indication that Plato repurposed earlier material so directly—at least, not in anything approaching the scale of the prophetic corpus, where this compositional mode is constitutive and essential. In pointed contrast to biblical scribes, Plato did not preserve and recast preexistent, discrete texts. He was not a redactor but an *author*, creating wholly original works.

That being acknowledged, however, we should not make Plato’s oeuvre more static than it actually is. While *each* dialogue is a synchronic product of his own individual mind, the dialogues *together* have a diachrony that, not unlike the biblical corpus, is obscured by their canonical presentation: Plato wrote them over an extended period of time, against the backdrop of shifting philosophical and political currents as well as, one can only imagine, the sorts of personal changes that all human beings experience. Pinning down the precise chronology of the dialogues, often by means of stylometric criteria, is among the most contentious—and some would say pointless—endeavors in Plato studies.⁷ Nevertheless, most scholars would acknowledge that, viewed synoptically, the dialogues reflect some sort of dynamism—whether we attribute it, like Vlastos, to Plato’s intellectual development; like Kahn, to his various literary

⁷ A comprehensive review of the history of this subfield may be found in Leonard Brandwood, *The Chronology of Plato’s Dialogues* (1990; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For a helpful overview of the stylometric approach, see idem, “Stylometry and Chronology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*, ed. Richard Kraut (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 90–120.

goals; or any number of other possible accounts.⁸ In light of this, we may justifiably ask whether, as Plato's career went on, he might at times have found it philosophically, literarily, or otherwise necessary to shape subsequent dialogues so as to recontextualize or to clarify his own earlier presentations of Socrates. While such a move still would not constitute redaction in any strict sense, it *would* represent something hermeneutically closer than straightforward authorship to the scribal reworking of preexistent deposits of earlier prophetic material.

There is good reason to see this sort of "redaction" at work in Plato's configuration of Socrates's subversiveness in relation to Athenian norms of piety. While Morgan's aforementioned characterization aptly applies to Plato's overall picture of Socrates, it is significant that her main focus is the *Phaedo*. Scholars widely situate this dialogue within Plato's middle, transitional period, in close association with the *Republic*. Dramatically set sometime after Socrates's execution, the *Phaedo* recounts his final moments, establishing an unmistakable narrative link with the *Apology*.⁹ Here, Socrates retrospectively undermines the charge of impiety far more explicitly than he did previously: philosophy is revealed to be *the* paragon of pious service to Apollo—even on the hero's deathbed, when there would be no reason for the dissimulation or irony that a public trial might invite. The *Euthyphro*, which likely postdated the *Apology* but directly precedes it in the dramatic sequence, effects a related transformation. Set outside the courthouse, this aporetic dialogue reports Socrates's conversation about the nature of piety with the eponymous Euthyphro, a well-meaning but self-important Athenian mantic.

⁸ For a prodigious if idiosyncratic attempt to read the whole Platonic corpus synchronically, see Catherine H. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁹ The chronologically earlier *Crito*, in which the eponymous interlocutor presses in vain for an imprisoned Socrates to avoid execution by fleeing to Crete, intervenes in the dramatic sequence.

While both the *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo* have their own philosophical goals, their combined literary effect is to recontextualize Socrates's alleged *subversion* of piety in terms of his orienting *concern* with piety. By orchestrating a dramatic frame, Plato retrospectively clarified what might otherwise have remained ambiguous: it is not simply that philosophy subverts piety but rather that authentic piety "will turn out to be philosophy," as Morgan puts it.¹⁰ Socrates's subversion of the norms of Athenian religious life is now seen from the perspective of his commitment to a superordinate religious ideal: authentic service to Apollo, *manifest as philosophy*, gives the lie to the crude institutional pretenses to this service. Socrates's very critique of authority becomes a potent discursive means for Plato to make a bid for the transcendent authority of his own intellectual project.

In this chapter, I argue that Plato's qualification of Socrates's subversiveness through the *Euthyphro* and *Phaedo* offers an instructive (though, as we shall see, not exact) parallel for the discursive dynamics at work in the large-scale redactional shaping of the Masoretic prophetic corpus. The opening chapter of Isaiah and the brief book of Malachi function together as a redactionally orchestrated frame that contextualizes subversive prophetic speech as an expression, not a transgression, of the תורה of YHWH. When the cult is operating correctly, YHWH authorizes the cultic establishment as the legitimate representative of תורה. However, in extraordinary cases of systemic cultic impropriety, he reassigns this authority to the subversive prophets, whose prophetic counter-תורה indicts the cultic establishment for its failures. In this way, the redactional frame of the prophetic corpus promotes subversive prophetic speech while also mobilizing it toward the reinforcement of the authority of תורה itself: in the mouths of the

¹⁰ Morgan, "Voice of Authority," 64.

subversive prophets, the power of YHWH's תורה transcends all institutional attempts to contain it—even those that usually do so legitimately. The tension inherent in the canonical authorization of prophetic critiques of authority is the literary expression of this awesome power.

4.2. The *Euthyphro*, the *Phaedo*, and Pious Philosophy

Plato's *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, and *Phaedo* are three very different kinds of dialogues. The first, in fact, is not really a dialogue at all but a (putative) transcript of a forensic oration, spoken by the protagonist himself. The second is a sprightly elenctic conversation, reported by an anonymous narrator, in which the interlocutors try (and fail) to define a particular virtue. The third, reported retrospectively by a narrative-internal character, proceeds relatively leisurely, with the protagonist musing at length and coming closer to satisfying philosophical conclusions on a more composite, abstract topic. Moreover, Plato likely authored the three texts in importantly distinct stages of his career. Most scholars identify the *Apology* as among the earlier (if not *the* earliest) of his writings on Socrates—although, as mentioned in chapter 2, there remains debate about whether this relative temporal proximity to Socrates himself correlates with historicity.¹¹ The *Euthyphro* is generally situated after the *Apology* but still in the early part of Plato's career, among a cluster of other definitional dialogues that proceed by means of the elenchus and end in aporia.¹² Finally, most situate the *Phaedo* still later, the herald (along with the *Republic*) of an

¹¹ Kahn, as noted earlier, breaks from his fictive construal of the dialogues to argue that the *Apology* is a “quasi-historical document”; see idem, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 88–89. For a critique of Kahn's approach, see Dorion, “Socratic Problem,” 16–18. A reasonable overview of the issue may be found in Donald R. Morrison, “On the Alleged Historical Reliability of Plato's *Apology*,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 82 (2000): 235–65.

¹² For a developmentalist account of this placement, see Vlastos, *Socrates*, 45–80. For an account based on Plato's protreptic literary goal, see Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 148–82.

intellectual transition in which Plato traded elenchus for hypothesis and his philosophy became more explicitly and exclusively preoccupied with the metaphysics of the Forms.¹³

These differences notwithstanding, the *Apology*, *Euthyphro*, and *Phaedo* also have some important affinities. One is dramatic: all three texts are set around (or during) Socrates's trial as part of a large-scale narration of his final days.¹⁴ This is reflected already in the canonical Stephanus printing of Plato (1578), which groups them sequentially at the beginning of the corpus; it may still be seen in the numerous contemporary English editions that gather the dialogues relating to Socrates's trial. Another affinity is thematic: all three prominently take up Socrates's complicated relationship with official Athenian religion. In the following sections, I explore how these dramatic and thematic affinities intersect. The *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo* make two related claims: first, that Socrates's critique of conventional Athenian piety is in fact true piety itself; and second, that Socrates pursues this piety out of genuine desire to serve the gods. In these ways, Plato uses a dramatic frame to recontextualize his teacher's response to the charge of impiety in the *Apology*. Socratic philosophy is not subversive of piety itself; it is subversive because it *is* piety itself.

4.2.1. The Pious Critique of Conventional Piety

The drama of Socrates's last days opens with a chance encounter outside of the king-archon's court. Awaiting his indictment, the philosopher happens upon Euthyphro, ostensibly an upstart religious functionary of some kind. For one, he publicly performs mantic activities, even if they are received with some ambivalence (*Euthyph.* 3c). Most importantly, he claims technical

¹³ See once again Vlastos, *Socrates*, 45–80; and Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 292–370.

¹⁴ As noted above, the *Crito* is also part of this dramatic group.

religious expertise, implying a professional position: “I should be of no use (ὄφελος), Socrates, and Euthyphro would not be superior to the majority of men, if I did not have accurate knowledge (ἀκριβῶς εἰδείην) of all such things” (*Euthyph.* 4e–5a). Yet despite this apparent connection with the traditional cult, he is certainly unaffiliated with those who have indicated Socrates for subverting it.¹⁵ In fact, when he learns of the specific charges, he leaps indignantly to the philosopher’s defense, protesting that Meletus risks “harming the very heart of the city by attempting to wrong you” (*Euthyph.* 3a).

Euthyphro’s religious expertise is at issue because he has come to the court in order to prosecute his own father for murder. Socrates is scandalized. What self-respecting Athenian, much less a religious figure, he wonders, would pursue so impious a course of action as to bring charges against his own father? Yet Euthyphro reassures him that such “ideas of the divine attitude to the religiously proper and improper (τὸ θεῖον ὡς ἔχει τοῦ δόσιου τε περὶ καὶ τοῦ ἀνοσίου) are wrong” (*Euthyph.* 4e). Socrates realizes—almost certainly with tongue in cheek, as we will address below—that he is in luck: on the cusp of “being prosecuted by Meletus ... for impiety (ἀσεβείας)” (*Ap.* 35d), he has found an expert on piety who can explain to him how he may best defend himself! He therefore asks Euthyphro,

What kind of thing (ποιόν τι) do you say that the pious (τὸ εὐσεβές) and the impious (τὸ ἀσεβές) are, both as regards murder and other things; or is the religiously proper (τὸ ὄσιον) not the same and alike in every action, and the religiously improper (τὸ ἀνόσιον) is the opposite of all that is religiously proper and like itself, and everything that is to be religiously improper presents us with one form or appearance insofar as it is religiously improper? (*Euthyph.* 5c–d)¹⁶

¹⁵ Cf. Taylor, *Plato*, 147.

¹⁶ A challenge for the translation of Plato’s writings on religion here and elsewhere is his use of two different words for positive religious activity: εὐσέβεια (and cognates) and ὄσιον (and cognates), both of which can also be negated. As noted in my brief mention of the *Euthyphro* in chapter 2, I have adapted the translator’s rendering of this terminology. This is chiefly because the original rendering of εὐσέβεια as “godliness” misleadingly implies that this is a quality of gods rather than of people. Instead, I translate εὐσέβεια as “piety” and ὄσιον as “religiously proper.” As I will discuss shortly, I do not believe that too much should be invested in these translations. It seems

This question is an exquisite example of the opening volley of an elenctic inquiry, zeroing in a particular virtue and attempting to clarify its definitional essence.¹⁷ The hopelessly earnest Euthyphro is off the races: “I say that the religiously proper is to do what I am doing now, to prosecute the wrongdoer” (*Euthyph.* 5d).

Any reader even mildly familiar with Plato will immediately see that Euthyphro has set himself up for Socrates’s elenchus by answering a definitional question with only a specific example.¹⁸ Before we turn to this answer and its sequels, however, we must pause to clarify the terms of the question. At first, Socrates’s framing of the issue links up terminologically with his legal situation: because he is on trial for ἀσέβεια, he wants to understand τὸ εὐσεβές. However, he then brings a second pair of opposites into the picture: τὸ ὄσιον and τὸ ἀνόσιον. In a dialogue that is concerned with definition, this variation in diction calls for readerly care. In an interesting study of how Greek philosophy may serve as a historical resource for the understanding of popular Greek religion, Jon D. Mikalson scolds Plato scholars for too flippantly treating the different terms as mere synonyms. “‘Religious correctness’ (ὀσιότης) judges whether [actions] conform to Greek religious law, traditions, and precedents. ‘Proper respect’ (εὐσέβεια) indicates rather the attitudinal environment, whether the action or person shows appropriate honour for the

likely that Plato’s understanding of these concepts precludes a one-to-one English correspondence. In other words, we should not read back into the Greek terms whatever nuances their English translations may carry.

¹⁷ Cf., e.g., *Lach.* 190e.

¹⁸ Note how similarly Laches answers Socrates’s initial inquiry as to the definition of courage: “Good heavens, Socrates, there is no difficulty about that: if a man is willing to remain at his post and to defend himself against the enemy without running away, then you may rest assured that he is a man of courage” (*Lach.* 190e). Like Euthyphro, Laches quickly and confidently answers by providing an *example* of the virtue rather than its *definition*.

deity.”¹⁹ By contrast, in a comprehensive semantic study of ὅσιος, Saskia Peels canvasses all classical attestations of the terms and concludes that they are “extremely alike in almost all respects.”²⁰

Each of Mikalson’s and Peels’s respective approaches has merits and flaws. For instance, I think Mikalson is correct to focus on philosophical texts.²¹ It is in the nature of philosophy—and perhaps specifically a dialogue whose very concern is definitions—to construct an idiosyncratic lexicon that does not necessarily reflect general usage.²² Even if Peels’s survey effectively gives an overall picture of this general usage, this has no determinative bearing on how Plato would have understood the terms. However, her broader approach does have the benefit of cultivating an openness to letting terminological fluidity emerge naturally from the target corpus. By contrast, one gets the sense that Mikalson’s rigid dichotomy—nigh Pauline in its formulation—is as much an imposition onto Plato’s use of the terms as a product thereof. For instance, if proper treatment of parents is the province of δσιότης but proper treatment of foreigners is the province of εὐσέβεια, is it not the case that each term is at least *capable* of accommodating both action and attitude?²³ Indeed, while Walter Burkert characterizes εὐσέβεια

¹⁹ Jon D. Mikalson, *Greek Popular Religion in Greek Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 143.

²⁰ Saskia Peels, *Hosios: A Semantic Study of Greek Piety*, Mnemosyne Supplements 387 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 106. For a helpful overview of scholarly debate on the difference between the two terms, see *ibid.*, 70–72.

²¹ I will note, however, that Mikalson exhibits some sloppiness when it comes to distinguishing between different philosophers. (This is, in fact, an overall weakness of the book.) Because he leans by far the most heavily on Plato yet also includes sundry citations from other writers (e.g., Xenophon, Aristotle, and Theophrastus), his findings may soundly be presented neither as a Platonic theory of religion nor as a general Greek philosophical theory.

²² This recognition is precisely what motivated the critique that the Ordinary Language movement in philosophy advanced against the philosophical tradition in the mid-twentieth century; see, e.g., Gilbert Ryle, “Systematically Misleading Expressions,” in *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard M. Rorty (1967; repr., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 85–100.

²³ Mikalson, *Greek Popular Religion*, 148–50, 157–58.

as awe, he clarifies that “outward *eusebeia* guided by *nomos* is civic duty.”²⁴ For these reasons, it is probably best to approach *εὐσέβεια* and *ὄσιον* in the *Euthyphro* as two pliable terminological reflexes of one overarching concern with proper religious conduct.²⁵ The customary shorthand, “piety,” will certainly suffice, provided that its potentially misleading Christian associations are kept in mind.

Euthyphro’s responses eventually lead Socrates to his first and most famous avenue of interrogating piety: its causal relationship to divine favor. The interlocutors agree to a provisional definition: piety is that which all the gods love, impiety that which all the gods hate (*Euthyph.* 9e). On this view, to call something “pious” is simply to designate that the gods love it; piety does not inhere in the things independently. Socrates then asks, “Is the religiously proper being loved by the gods because it is religiously proper, or is it religiously proper because it is being loved by the gods (ἄρα τὸ ὄσιον ὅτι ὄσιόν ἐστιν φιλεῖται ὑπὸ τῶν θεῶν, ἢ ὅτι φιλεῖται ὄσιόν ἐστιν)?” (*Euthyph.* 10a). Euthyphro does not follow, so Socrates explains that every transitive action has a passive consequence; one can describe the action from either perspective. He proposes the following principle: “If anything is being changed (γίγνεται) ... in any way, it is not being changed because it is something changed, but rather it is something changed because it is being changed (οὐχ ὅτι γιγνόμενόν ἐστι γίγνεται, ἀλλ’ ὅτι γίγνεται γιγνόμενόν ἐστιν)” (*Euthyph.*

²⁴ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. John Raffan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 274.

²⁵ The word “conduct” is especially useful here because, at least to my ear, it blends the concepts of action and attitude more than other possible English terms, such as “behavior.” Think, for instance, of the allegation that someone has engaged in “questionable conduct.” This is not just an assessment of the person’s actions but also of how those actions reflect on deeper matters of character.

10c). The active idea has explanatory priority over the passive idea. In S. Marc Cohen's helpful formulation, "A ϕ -ed thing is a ϕ -ed thing because someone or something ϕ -s it."²⁶

If Socrates is just ϕ -ing with Euthyphro, so to speak, the young mantic does not seem to realize it. On the contrary, he readily assents to the rule. Yet it is precisely here that Socrates has set his elenctic trap, which he springs in the course of the following exchange:

- S. "Is [the religiously proper] being loved because it is religiously proper, or for some other reason?"
E. "For no other reason."
S. "It is being loved then because it is religiously proper, but it is not religiously proper because it is being loved?"
E. "Apparently."
S. "And yet it is something loved and god-loved because it is being loved by the gods?"
E. "Of course."
S. "Then the god-loved is not the same as the religiously proper, Euthyphro, nor the religiously proper the same as the god-loved, as you say it is, but one differs from the other."
E. "How so, Socrates?"
S. "Because we agree that the religiously proper is being loved for this reason, that it is religiously proper, but it is not religiously proper because it is being loved. Is that not so?"
E. "Yes."
S. "And that the god-loved, on the other hand, is so because it is being loved by the gods, by the very fact of being loved, but it is not being loved because it is god-loved."
E. "True."
S. "But if the god-loved and the religiously proper were the same, my dear Euthyphro, then if the religiously proper was being loved because it was religiously proper, the god-loved would also be being loved because it was god-loved; and if the god-loved was god-loved because it was being loved by the gods, then the religiously proper would also be religiously proper because it was being loved by the gods. But now you see that they are in opposite cases as being altogether different from each other: the one is such as to be loved because it is being loved, the other is being loved because it is such as to be loved. I'm afraid, Euthyphro, that when you were asked what the religiously proper is, you did not wish to make its nature clear to me (*τὴν μὲν οὐσίαν μοι αὐτοῦ οὐ βούλεσθαι δηλώσαι*), but you told me an affect or a quality of it, that the religiously proper has the quality of being loved by all the gods, but you have not yet told me what the religiously proper is (*ᾧ*)." (*Euthyph.* 10d–11b)

²⁶ S. Marc Cohen, "Socrates on the Definition of Piety: *Euthyphro* 10a–11b," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 9 (1971): 7.

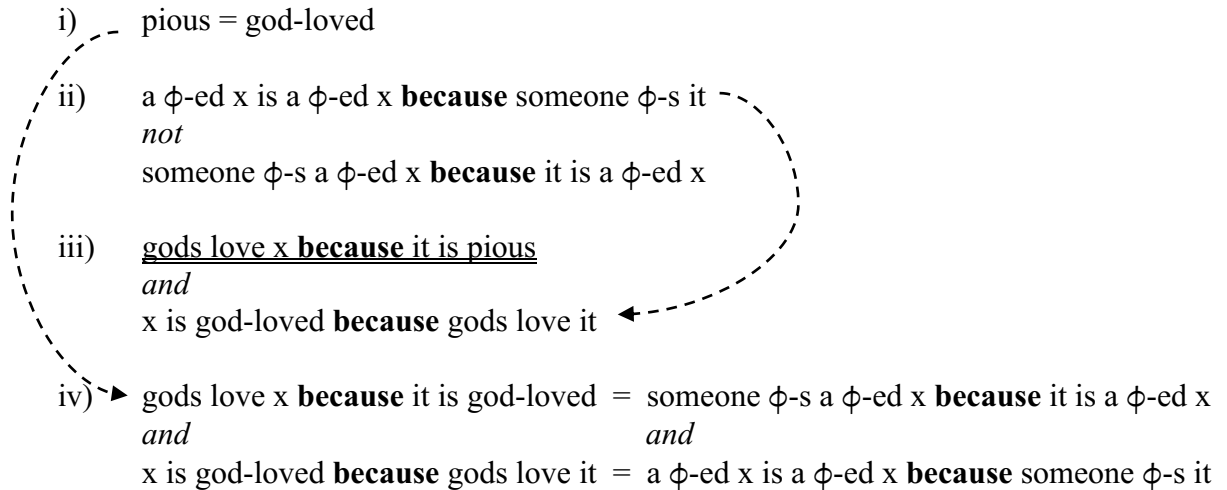


Figure 4.1. Euthyphro's mistake

Euthyphro has affirmed a contradiction (see Figure 4.1). Although, as we have seen, he defines the pious as god-loved, he also appears to maintain an instinctive belief that the gods love pious things *because* they are pious—i.e., that piety inheres in things and the gods simply recognize it (marked with the double underscore). By a simple transitive substitution, this means that the gods love god-loved things because they are god-loved—or, in Cohen's terms, that someone or something ϕ -s a ϕ -ed thing because it *is* a ϕ -ed thing. This is the direct inverse of the principle of explanatory priority to which Euthyphro has agreed. On this basis, Socrates rejects Euthyphro's first definition of piety.

Euthyphro's confusion has been received in the history of philosophy as the so-called "Euthyphro Dilemma": Is piety a property that *reflects* divine approval or *prompts* divine approval?²⁷ This is a "dilemma" in the technical philosophical sense of a problem whose every solution entails affirming something conceptually unacceptable: piety is either the arbitrary expression of capricious deities or an inherent property that obviates the conceptual need for

²⁷ In the philosophical reception of this question, "piety" is usually replaced with either "the good" or "the ethical."

deities in the first place. Plato's perception of this problem has led many readers to construe the *Euthyphro* as a nascent articulation of philosophical monotheism (like that which dominated much of medieval Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) or even a kind of veiled atheistic naturalism.²⁸ The latter certainly seems to be how Socrates's accusers understood things (*Ap.* 26c)—and the philosopher himself concedes that he does question the received orthodoxy about, at a minimum, petty disagreement within the pantheon. "This," he says, "is the reason why I am the defendant in the case, because I find it hard to accept such things like that being said about the gods, and it is likely to be the reason why I shall be told I do wrong (ἐξαμαρτάνειν)" (*Euthyph.* 6a–b). To this extent, as Strauss observed, Socrates's accusers have a point.²⁹

In this way, the Euthyphro Dilemma accurately captures the conceptual background out of which Plato has Socrates challenge his interlocutor. As Roslyn Weiss has shown, rejection of "the belief that the gods are not ethically omniscient unifies the dialogue dramatically, philosophically, and practically."³⁰ However, the Dilemma also consequentially misconstrues Socrates's actual challenge in the passage on which it is pegged.³¹ Socrates has no apparent

²⁸ The monotheistic reading is rooted in Socrates's and Euthyphro's aforementioned decision to sidestep the complexities attendant to polytheism by imagining a kind of Venn diagram of the pantheon and situating piety at its center. This move clearly empowered later thinkers to apply Plato's dialogue to a monotheistic metaethical question—as if there were no substantive difference between "what all the gods, as a unity, love" and "what God, in his unity, loves"; see, e.g., Nicholas Denyer, "The Real *Euthyphro* Problem, Solved," in *Religio-Philosophical Discourses in the Mediterranean World: From Plato, through Jesus, to Late Antiquity*, eds. Anders Klostergaard Petersen and George van Kooten, *Ancient Philosophy & Religion 1* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 66. Once this move has been made, it is only a matter of time before the transitivity begins to run the other way, such that the *Euthyphro* itself becomes a nascently monotheistic articulation of this metaethical question.

²⁹ Leo Strauss, "On the *Euthyphron*," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 200.

³⁰ Roslyn Weiss, "Euthyphro's Failure," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24 (1986): 437.

³¹ Cf. Richard Joyce, "Theistic Ethics and the Euthyphro Dilemma," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30 (2002): 49–75. Joyce correctly notes, "The Euthyphro Dilemma, as it is now widely understood, bears little resemblance to anything presented by Socrates." *Ibid.*, 50. However, having asserted as much, he still positions the dialogue as an essay in the same basic metaethical problem posed by the Euthyphro Dilemma, writing, "The Divine Command Theorist can happily ignore the Euthyphro Dilemma (both Socrates's original and the modern version)." *Ibid.*, 65.

interest in the horns of the Dilemma itself; he gives no consideration to the substantive implications of defining piety *as* the gods' love or an independent quality that *prompts* the gods' love. What matters to him, rather, is simply that these options pose a contradiction in the first place.³² Put differently, Socrates never says, "Your understanding of piety makes the gods either capricious or superfluous, neither of which is acceptable." All he says is, "Your understanding of piety is internally contradictory—so you clearly don't understand piety as well as you think you do." He is trying to show that his confident interlocutor does not in fact know the first thing about his professed expertise. In classic elenctic fashion, he does so by getting the interlocutor to testify against himself.³³ It is Euthyphro who ultimately articulates (with Socrates's prodding) that his own understanding of piety entails confusion about explanatory priority.

The *Euthyphro* appears to model what we earlier called the "coextensive" elenchus. On this view, Socrates's subversive speech cultivates the epistemic humility that inheres in investigating one's opinions. He disabuses Euthyphro of a mistaken conception of piety but does not simply replace it with a correct one. While this is true, its implications for Socrates's understanding of piety are more complex than this might suggest. Strauss intuited that Socrates *does* open up space for a new, positive concept of piety—but not one that can be dogmatically declaimed in the manner that Euthyphro would clearly prefer. Strauss wrote,

The half-truth presented through the *Euthyphron* is not a generally accepted half-truth. It is unpopular. Since it is unpopular, it is irritating. [Yet] an irritating half-truth is in one

³² Cohen has summarized the argument as follows: "'Pious' cannot be defined as 'god-loved' if the gods' reason for loving what is pious is that it is pious. ... The more general point I take to be this. If a moral concept M is such that there is an authority whose judgment whether or not something fails under M is decisive and is rationally grounded, then 'M' cannot be defined in terms of that authority's judgment." Cohen, "Definition of Piety," 13. While the Euthyphro Dilemma can perhaps be spun out of this, the crucial point is that at its core, Socrates's argument does not pose a "dilemma" in the strict philosophical sense.

³³ On this elenctic move, see Vlastos, "Socratic Elenchus," 11.

respect superior to the popular half-truth. In order to arrive at the irritating half-truth we must make some effort. We must think.³⁴

Socrates's "half-truth" about the essence of piety *is* epistemic humility. It is but a half-truth because it is not absolutely assured, positive knowledge; indeed, it is precisely the recognition that such knowledge is out of reach. *This* is piety. As McPherran puts it,

In the *Euthyphro* it is precisely Socrates' pious activity to attack the impiety underlying Euthyphro's presumptuous claims, which take divine things to be possible objects of certain knowledge for mortals and a reliable source of moral justification. Philosophy on the Socratic model is then a prime case of pious activity designed to reveal the real epistemic state of affairs between humans and gods. ... Socrates, it seems, offers us a theistically mitigated skepticism in the service of a skeptically mitigated theistic commitment. ... [He] emerges from the *Euthyphro* as not only a hero of critical rationality, but of a kind of religious faith as well.³⁵

Socrates cannot simply explain this to Euthyphro because to do so would deprive him of the thought in which this piety actually consists. He can "teach" Euthyphro such piety only by helping him to see the inadequacies in his own preconceptions thereof.

For this reason, Euthyphro's self-contradiction is not inherently a failure, however much it may frustrate him. Rather, it is, at least in principle, the opening for pious self-questioning. His true failure comes later, when it finally becomes clear that he has missed every such opening. In the hilarious closing exchange, he attempts to extract himself from the conversation with all the delicacy of someone trying to evade a telemarketer: "Some other time, Socrates, for I am in a hurry now, and it is time for me to go" (*Euthyph.* 15e).³⁶ It is here, not in any of his earlier

³⁴ Strauss, "On the *Euthyphron*," 187.

³⁵ McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 81–82.

³⁶ Prior to this attempted exit, Socrates ironically mocks Euthyphro's pretenses: "If you had no clear knowledge (*μη ᾗδησθα σαφῶς*) of the religiously proper and improper, you would never have ventured to prosecute your old father for murder on behalf of a servant. For fear of the gods you would have been afraid (*τοὺς θεοὺς ἂν ἔδεισας*) to take the risk lest you should not be acting right (*παρακινδυνεύειν μή οὐκ ὀρθῶς αὐτὸ ποιήσεις*)" (*Euthyph.* 15d). On the surface, Socrates is saying that Euthyphro *must* know—even if only "deep down," as it were—what piety is, since no one who lacked such knowledge would act as confidently and drastically as he. The implication, of course, is that he does not in fact have such knowledge and has therefore acted not only rashly but also impiously, without

stumbles, that Euthyphro ultimately confirms how sorely he has misunderstood what piety really is. It is here that we glimpse the depth of the chasm between the gravity he attaches to his purportedly pious actions and the thoughtlessness with which he pursues them.

In this relief, we can see that in spite of Euthyphro's initial warmth toward Socrates and alienation from the religious authorities, he comes to represent the latter. Indeed, as Daniel E. Anderson and Strauss both noted, Plato's dramatic coordination of the *Euthyphro* with the *Apology* turns Euthyphro into nothing less than a literary prefiguration of Meletus.³⁷ Both prosecute impiety out of a pretense to expertise in the pious; both wither at the slightest philosophical resistance to that pretense; both press on anyway.³⁸ For Plato, Euthyphro embodies the shallowness of conventional Athenian piety. In this way, paradoxically, Socrates's patently ironic interest in learning about piety from Euthyphro actually underscores his quite unironic (indeed, gravely sincere) interest in piety itself.

Like the *Euthyphro*, the *Phaedo* addresses a topic of self-evident religious relevance: the fate of the soul after the expiration of the body. Also like the *Euthyphro*, this topic is intimately connected with the dramatic setting of the *Phaedo*: following his capital sentence, Socrates reassures his companions that a philosopher need not fear death. He frames this with a reprise of his legal oration in the *Apology*. "I want to make my argument before you (τὸν λόγον ἀποδοῦναι), my judges (τοῖς δικασταῖς)," he enjoins, "as to why I think that a man who has truly spent his life

sufficient "fear of the gods." It should be noted that the syntax of the final sentence is quite difficult; for discussion, see, e.g., John Burnet, ed., *Plato: Euthyphro, Apology of Socrates, Crito* (1924; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 141–42. The translation cited here apparently construes ἔδεισας as doing double duty, taking both the gods and the infinitive παρακινδυνεύειν as separate direct objects.

³⁷ Daniel E. Anderson, "Socrates' Concept of Piety," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 5 (1967): 1–5; and Strauss, "On the *Euthyphron*," 194.

³⁸ Cf. *Ap.* 24c–27e.

in philosophy (τῷ ὄντι ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ διατρίψας τὸν βίον) is probably right to be of good cheer in the face of death” (*Phaed.* 63e).³⁹ Socrates seizes the opportunity to recast his defense for the philosophical audience that he now enjoys. Euthyphro and Meletus are outsiders to philosophy who must therefore be elenctically escorted into this kind of thinking. By contrast, Socrates’s companions in the *Phaedo* are part of the club; they are already philosophers, if not (yet) on the level of their master.⁴⁰ This is why Socrates conducts the discussion in the *Phaedo* not through elenchus but through hypothesis—a more advanced argumentative technology, befitting of philosophical initiates.⁴¹ In an elegant reversal, they, not those who technically constituted the jury (“dicasts”), will be the true judges (δικασταῖ) of his case for the philosophical life.

This shift in dramatic setting explains a key difference in how the two dialogues that unfold the *Apology* situate philosophy amid the tension between religious pretenses and true piety. Whereas the *Euthyphro* gives only an implicit (if nevertheless vivid) account, the *Phaedo* picks up the question from its predecessor and thematizes it explicitly. Socrates can be more forthcoming with his fellow philosophers without thereby depriving them of the opportunity, as Strauss pointed out, to think their own way to an epistemically humble appraisal of their religious views. He therefore closes his apologia redux by declaring in no uncertain terms,

Wisdom itself is a kind of cleansing or purification. It is likely that those who established the mystic rites for us were not inferior persons but were speaking in riddles long ago when they said that whoever arrives in the underworld uninitiated and unsanctified will wallow in the mire, whereas he who arrives there purified and initiated will dwell with the gods. *There are indeed, as those concerned with the mysteries say, many who carry the thyrsus but the Bacchantes are few.* These latter are, in my opinion, no other than those

³⁹ Although the word ἀπολογία does not appear here explicitly, it is hidden in Socrates’s statement that he will “give” (ἀποδίδωμι) an “argument” (λόγος). He does use the word itself at the end of the speech, cited below.

⁴⁰ Cf. David Gallop, “The Rhetoric of Philosophy: Socrates’ Swan-Song,” in *Plato as Author: The Rhetoric of Philosophy*, ed. Ann N. Michelini, Cincinnati Classical Studies 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 316–17.

⁴¹ On hypothesis in the *Phaedo*, see Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 313–21.

who have practiced philosophy in the right way (πεφιλοσοφηκότες ὀρθῶς). I have in my life left nothing undone in order to be counted among these as far as possible, as I have been eager to be in every way. ... This is my defense (ἀπολογοῦμαι). ... If my defense (τῆ ἀπολογία) is more convincing to you than to the Athenian jury (τοῖς Ἀθηναίων δικασταῖς), it will be well. (*Phaed.* 69c–e; emphasis added)

Here, Socrates introduces a theme that, as Michael L. Morgan has discussed, pulsates throughout the dialogue: his reframing of philosophy in terms of the mystery cults (Bacchic, Orphic, Pythagorean, and Eleusinian).⁴² Kathryn Morgan notes that by “reinterpreting the enigmatic formulation of those who established the mysteries and redescribing them as philosophy,” Plato “appropriates their cultural authority.”⁴³ Philosophy bests and absorbs all other competing means of accessing transcendent wisdom, which in the *Phaedo* turns out to be the Forms.⁴⁴

While I agree with this general picture, I would argue more specifically that Plato’s religious construal of philosophy in the *Phaedo* is especially rooted in an effort to distinguish authentic from inauthentic religious activity. The mystery cults facilitated and legitimated genuine communion with the divine over against the hollowness that is always bound to plague more public and exoteric forms of worship, not least the mainstream cult of the polis.⁴⁵ Such is the spirit of the Bacchic saying that Socrates invokes: “There are indeed ... many who carry the thyrsus but the Bacchantes are few”—i.e., while many may put on airs of piety, precious few actually live it.⁴⁶ The philosophical appropriation of these rituals and language turns on this

⁴² Michael L. Morgan, *Platonic Piety: Philosophy and Ritual in Fourth Century Athens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 55–79. For general discussion of these cults, see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 276–304.

⁴³ Morgan, “Voice of Authority,” 73.

⁴⁴ Cf. Morgan, *Platonic Piety*, 56, 64–67.

⁴⁵ For an overview of the differences and tensions between the official state religion and the mystery cults, see Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 276–78.

⁴⁶ On the likely preexistence of this saying (if perhaps in a slightly different form), see John Burnet, ed., *Plato’s Phaedo* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1911), 45.

contrast. Socrates clarifies that it is specifically “these latter” who are the philosophers, cultivating proper religious conduct through psychic purgation in the form of philosophical investigation. The implication is that the former, those who superficially perform cultic rites without the proper orientation, are Socrates’s Athenian accusers. It is in large part for this reason that, in Michael Morgan’s words, “the *Phaedo* is blatantly revolutionary, a nearly seditious document.”⁴⁷ Philosophy is the most destabilizing possible critique of those who claim to represent and to enforce piety precisely because it presents itself as the most complete possible expression of the mystery cultists’ pursuit of a deeper piety through purification and transcendence.

We opened with Mikalson’s distinction between *δσιον* (or *δσιότης*) as a matter of correct procedure and *εὐσέβεια* as a matter of correct attitude. While I remain skeptical that the *terminological* contrast is as clean as Mikalson would have it, Plato’s treatments of authentic piety in the *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo* nevertheless do seem to bear out the broader *conceptual* contrast. Plato’s dramatic portrayals of these two episodes in Socrates’s last days share an effort to set philosophy over against the shallowness of much of prevailing Athenian religious practice. In the *Euthyphro*, this emerges implicitly in the blustery persona of Euthyphro himself. In the *Phaedo*, Socrates confides it explicitly to his compatriots as a parting legacy. While Socrates never calls for an abdication of traditional, external worship, he does imply that such worship cannot be truly pious without the orientation that only a life of philosophy can cultivate. Put differently, while Socrates never quite makes philosophy a sufficient condition of true piety, he does make it a necessary one.⁴⁸ Dramatically framing the *Apology* in this manner serves to

⁴⁷ Morgan, *Platonic Piety*, 58.

⁴⁸ Cf. McPherran, *Religion of Socrates*, 71.

convey that what makes Socrates so subversive is not simply that he challenges conventional piety. Rather, it is that he does so *on the authority of true piety itself and as an expression of true piety itself*. “We might even say,” in McPherran’s apt formulation, “that by rejecting more than most Athenians, he ‘out-believed’ them all.”⁴⁹ Socratic philosophy is radical in the most literal sense of that word: it is a discursive claim to the roots of his very debate with Athenian society.

4.2.2. Apollo’s True Servant

Socrates’s dismantling of Euthyphro’s definition of piety as that which all the gods love is the most famous part of the dialogue because it gave rise to the Euthyphro Dilemma. However, the two in fact continue their conversation, switching gears and attempting to pin down the relationship between piety and justice. Having settled that the former is a subset of the latter, Euthyphro proposes a new definition: “The pious and the religiously proper is the part of the just that is concerned with the care of the gods (τὴν τῶν θεῶν θεραπείαν), while that concerned with the care of men is the remaining part of justice” (*Euthyph.* 12e).

Socrates finds this proposal promising but points out that if they are going to define piety as care (θεραπεία) of the gods, they had better well know what care itself is. He suggests that it essentially “aims at the good and the benefit of the object cared for (ἐπ’ ἀγαθῷ τινί ἐστι καὶ ὠφελία τοῦ θεραπευομένου)” (*Euthyph.* 13b). Euthyphro assents, so Socrates continues, “Is the religiously proper then, which is the care of the gods, also to benefit the gods and make them better? Would you agree that when you do something religiously proper you make some one of the gods better?” (*Euthyph.* 13c). This time, the young mantic roundly objects, scandalized at the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 82.

suggestion that the gods might stand to benefit from mere mortals.⁵⁰ What kind of care, then, does he imagine piety to be? “The kind ... that slaves take of their masters (οἱ δοῦλοι τοὺς δεσπότης θεραπεύουσιν)”—or, as Socrates paraphrases, “a kind of service (ὕπηρετική τις) of the gods” (*Euthyph.* 13d). Reasoning that all service aims to facilitate some good—service to doctors, health; service to shipbuilders, ships—Socrates asks, “To the achievement of what aim does service to the gods tend (ἢ δὲ θεοῖς ὑπηρετικὴ εἰς τίνος ἔργου ἀπεργασίαν ὑπηρετικὴ ἂν εἴη)?” (*Euthyph.* 13e). Euthyphro does not understand the question. In his response, he reverts to an even sloppier version of his earlier definition of piety as that which the gods love.

Having careened from justice to care to service, the interlocutors might seem once again to have ultimately arrived nowhere. However, Socrates intimates that, for the first time, they have in fact come within striking distance of their goal: “If you had given that answer,” he complains to Euthyphro, “I should now have acquired of you sufficient knowledge of the nature of the religiously proper” (*Euthyph.* 14c). If piety is care for the gods in the form of service—i.e., a subsidiary but necessary contribution to an orienting good—then defining piety will depend upon identifying an orienting good that both befits the gods and requires human participation. Plato does not, of course, have Socrates (and certainly not Euthyphro) do so; this is another of Strauss’s “irritating half-truths.” In an important study of this section of the *Euthyphro*, C. C. W. Taylor convincingly situated Socrates’s implicit understanding of the god’s orienting good at the intersection of (a) a characteristically Socratic emphasis on moral self-cultivation and (b) a more typical Greek understanding of divine power. Taylor explained,

Plainly the gods don’t need human help in creating and maintain the natural world, assuming those to be divine tasks. But there is one good product which they can’t

⁵⁰ As McPherran notes, “These implications ... are incompatible with Euthyphro’s conception of the relative powers of gods and humans, which, in accord with popular belief, represents the gods as vastly superior to humans in respect of knowledge, power, self-sufficiency, and enjoyment.” *Ibid.*, 52.

produce without human assistance, namely, good human souls. For a good human soul is a self-directed soul, one whose choices are informed but its knowledge of and love of the good. A good world must contain such souls and hence, if the beneficent divine purpose is to be achieved, human beings must play their part by knowing (and hence loving) the good and acting in accordance with that knowledge. True *hosiotēs*, the real service of the gods, turns out to be nothing other than *aretē* itself. It is, however, *aretē* under a certain aspect: ... *aretē pros ton theon*, goodness of soul seen as man's contribution to the divine order of the universe.⁵¹

If Weiss is correct that Socrates pushes Euthyphro to recognize that the gods are “ethically omniscient,” then Taylor clarifies that ethical omniscience does not entail ethical omnipotence. Though the gods are, contra Euthyphro, unified in their estimation of goodness, they cannot fully bring about cosmic goodness unless human beings invest locally in the cultivation of their own goodness.⁵² Because philosophy is the means of doing so, it once again turns out to be piety.

As with the notion of authentic piety, the *Phaedo* picks up this implicit theme of divine service in the *Euthyphro* and develops it more systematically. Both of the primary interlocutors, Cebes and Simmias, object to Socrates's acceptance of death with reference to the care and service of the gods. To cite the former:

It is not logical that the wisest of men should not resent leaving this service (ταύτης τῆς θεραπείας) in which they are governed by the best of masters, the gods, for a wise man cannot believe that he will look after (ἐπιμελήσασθαι) himself better when he is free. A foolish man might easily think so, that he must escape from his master (δεσπότης); he would not reflect that one must not escape from a good master (τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ) but stay with him (παραμένειν) as long as possible, because it would be foolish to escape. But the sensible man would want always to remain with (εἶναι παρὰ) one better than himself. (*Phaed.* 62d–e).⁵³

⁵¹ C. C. W. Taylor, “The End of the Euthyphro,” *Phronesis* 27 (1982): 113; cf. Vlastos, *Socrates*, 175–76.

⁵² This naturally suggests a comparison with the Priestly elevation of humanity as the deity's earthly viceroys, the stewards of his creation, and his allies in the cosmic battle against chaos. On the significance of this theme in P, see Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (1987; repr., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁵³ Cf. Simmias's remark, “Why should truly wise men want to avoid the service of masters (δεσπότης) better than themselves, and leave them (ἀπαλλάττοντο) easily?” (*Phaed.* 63a). It will be noted that in the *Phaedo*, the translator renders *θεραπεία* as “service” rather than, as in the *Euthyphro*, “care.” This runs the risk of obscuring the nuance of divine service that Socrates develops in the *Euthyphro*. However, I have chosen not to modify the translation because in this context, speaking of the “care of the gods” would also be especially ambiguous, potentially

The assumption here is one that Euthyphro might well have shared, if in a less sophisticated register: human life (piously conducted, at least) is a state of service to the gods. Because caring for such exalted masters is the best existence for which a mortal could hope, one should want nothing more than to prolong one's life in this state of service. Death, on the other hand, should be frightful specifically because it terminates one's blessed service. *Welcoming* death, then, as Socrates does, amounts to fleeing a better life for a worse one. How, Cebes and Simmias wonder, could someone as wise as Socrates make such a foolish trade? This concern about divine service prompts the subsequent discussion of the fate of the soul after death.

In his *apologia* redux, Socrates turns this concern on its head: "The body and the care of it, to which we are enslaved (*δουλεύοντες τῇ τούτου θεραπείᾳ*), ... makes us too busy to practice philosophy" (*Phaed.* 66d). If Cebes and Simmias are optimistic about the value of bodily life, Socrates is pessimistic (or, at least, realistic). Humanity's basic state is one of slavery and servitude, yes, but to the *body*, not to the gods. Philosophy is the psychic struggle against this somatic supremacy, striving to bring about the "release and separation of the soul from the body (*λύσις καὶ χωρισμὸς ψυχῆς ἀπὸ σώματος*)" (*Phaed.* 67d). Because only death ultimately accomplishes this release, philosophy is nothing other than a dress rehearsal for dying.

Later in the dialogue, as part of his so-called "affinity argument" for the immortality of the soul (*Phaed.* 78b–84b), Socrates offers a more systematic account of this provocative thesis.⁵⁴ In this context, he provides the crucial missing piece: "The soul is most like the divine ... whereas the body is most like that which is human" (*Phaed.* 80a). Philosophy cares for the

suggesting an idea of *receiving* care *from* the gods. In fact, Cebes means precisely the opposite: *rendering* care *to* the gods.

⁵⁴ For an overview, see Taylor, *Plato*, 189–92.

gods by caring for what is godly in oneself; it affirms divine sovereignty by affirming the sovereignty of what is divine in oneself.⁵⁵ There is a natural overlap—an identity, even—between philosophy as preparation for death and philosophy as service of the gods: both reflect the cultivation of the soul. It is this view to which Socrates gives such stirring expression in his famous “swansong,” which directly follows the affinity argument:

When [the swans] realize that they must die they sing most and most beautifully, as they rejoice that they are about to depart to join the god whose servants they are (*παρὰ τὸν θεὸν ἀπιέναι οὐπὲρ εἰσι θεράποντες*). But men, because of their own fear of death, tell lies about the swans and say that they lament their death and sing in sorrow. They do not reflect that no bird sings when it is hungry or cold or suffers in any other way, neither the nightingale nor the swallow nor the hoopoe, though they do say that these sing laments when in pain. Nor do the swans, but I believe that as they belong to Apollo, they are prophetic, have knowledge of the future and sing of the blessings of the underworld, sing and rejoice on that day beyond what they did before. As I believe myself to be a fellow servant (*ὁμόδουλός*) with the swans and dedicated (*ἱερός*) to the same god, and have received from my master (*δεσπότης*) a gift of prophecy not inferior to theirs, I am no more despondent than they on leaving (*ἀπαλλάττεσθαι*) life. (*Phaed.* 84e–85b)

Here, Socrates reconfigures precisely the language of service that Cebes and Simmias deployed in their charge of desertion.⁵⁶ We may now finally appreciate how this conception of philosophy is meant to respond to them.⁵⁷ The death for which philosophy prepares the soul is the culmination, not an abdication, of divine service—a glorious communion with those good masters with whom the philosopher has cast his lot.

Deborah Kamen has compellingly demonstrated that in presenting Socrates’s account of philosophy as psychic release in service to the gods, Plato coopts and transforms the legal

⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 190.

⁵⁶ The directly shared terms are *ἀπαλλάσσω* (“release”); *δεσπότης* (“master”); *θεραπεία* (“service,” “care”); and *παρά* (“with,” “near”).

⁵⁷ For what it is worth, they are not convinced. This is why the dialogue continues for some time, giving Plato the opportunity to have Socrates explain the Forms (*Phaed.* 102a–107b). For discussion, see, e.g., Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 355–59; and Taylor, *Plato*, 204–206.

language of manumission. Epigraphic evidence attests manumission through various processes of symbolically transferring a slave to a god's possession. In some cases, the owner made the slave *ἱερός* (i.e., consecrated) to the god—the same word that Socrates uses to describe his relationship to Apollo.⁵⁸ In others, the owner figuratively sold the slave to the god. Kamen notes that this method “is found predominantly in central Greece, especially in Delphi”—with which, of course, Socrates is associated.⁵⁹ She points further to the “so-called *paramonê* clause, mandating that the freedman ‘remain’ (*παραμένειν*) and serve his former master,” as well as the use of *ἀπαλλάσσω* (“release”) in the technical sense of “manumit.”⁶⁰ The interlocutors in the *Phaedo* employ both terms in their discussions of divine service. By metaphorically redeploying this cluster of technical legal terminology, Plato casts philosophy as a process of manumitting the soul from the body to the gods.

Kamen argues—correctly, in my opinion—that this move is significant because it maps what we might call a “cosmic” conception of slavery onto philosophy. Contrary to contemporary sensibilities, Plato (like many ancient thinkers) did not see slavery as an inherent wrong. Rather, he thought that it is “good both for the slave (because he lacks *logos*, ‘reason’) and for the master; [that] the difference in status between master and slave is due to a difference in ‘native endowment’; and [that] this difference in turn reflects a larger cosmic hierarchy.”⁶¹ A corollary of this view is that when manumission is sound, it is a kind of cosmic corrective: a slave whose “native endowment” does not justify slavery is restored to his proper place. The application to

⁵⁸ Deborah Kamen, “The Manumission of Socrates: A Rereading of Plato’s *Phaedo*,” *CLAnt* 32 (2013): 82–83.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 84, 93.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

philosophy is obvious enough: it relieves the soul of its perverse and unnatural (if tragically common) enslavement to the body—at least, to whatever extent this is possible before death. Yet this is not the whole story, for by drawing on the language and structure of manumission, Plato makes this liberation contingent upon—or better, coextensive with—a “re-enslavement” to the gods. The implication is startling: the philosopher’s proper cosmic position remains one of subordination. Kamen describes cosmically good slavery as “a mutually beneficial relationship *with a natural superior*.”⁶² Tellingly, this is about as apt a paraphrase of Socrates’s notion of pious “care” (θεραπεία) as one could provide. Philosophy is a lifelong process of manumitting oneself not into unqualified freedom but into the freedom from the wrong kind of master that inheres in being a slave to the right kind of master: the gods. It is a distinction less between slavery and freedom than between degrading slavery and exalted slavery.⁶³

Mikalson has noted that “despite the statement in the *Euthyphro* and its prominence in the *Phaedo*, the conception of god as master and human as slave ... is but one, and the least common, analogy of gods’ relationship to humans in the philosophical tradition.”⁶⁴ I would suggest that Plato found this metaphor literarily appropriate to these two dialogues because of

⁶² Ibid., 88 (emphasis added).

⁶³ A strikingly similar idea appears in YHWH’s statement at the conclusion of the Jubilee law: “It is to *me* that the children of Israel are slaves (כִּי־לִי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲבָדִים); they are *my* slaves (עֲבָדֵי הָאֵל), whom I took out from the land of Egypt” (Lev 25:55a). Sommer explicates, “The covenant formed at Sinai is correlational, but it is not a contract between equals. Modern Jews eagerly embrace the idea of a dialogical covenant; we are comfortable with, indeed delighted by, the notion that we are God’s partners. We have failed, however, to acknowledge the covenant’s hierarchical side. Consequently, we cannot claim to have fully embraced the Sinai covenant, for in this covenant, there is a master and there are slaves, and as Leviticus 25.42 and 55 state clearly, the Jewish nation are the slaves. God did not tell Pharaoh, “Let My people go, because freedom is a good thing,” but “Let My people go, so that they may serve Me” (Exodus 7.16, 7.26, 8.16, 9.1, 9.13, 10.3). Redemption from Egyptian slavery carries little value on its own in the Pentateuch, which does not find the notion of Israel’s slavery inherently bothersome. The Pentateuch is concerned, rather, with the question of whom the slaves serve, and how.” Idem, *Revelation and Authority*, 248–49. The *Phaedo* is animated by its own version of this question.

⁶⁴ Mikalson, *Greek Popular Religion*, 34.

their dramatic connection with the *Apology*, where Socrates emphasizes his service to Apollo.⁶⁵ The *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo* clarify how his status as a divine servant shapes his conflict with the official Athenian cult.⁶⁶ By having Socrates raise this idea first with Euthyphro, Plato anticipates the philosopher's subsequent defense. The novum in his suggestion is that this service is animated by a dimension of "care"—specifically, care in service of the divine task. The *Phaedo* resumes this theme of caring service and explores its power dynamics by casting it as a metaphorical process of manumission. In this way, the coordinated presentation of philosophy in the two dialogues may justifiably be read as large-scale narrative exegesis of a single, crucial line from the *Apology*: "I will obey the god rather than you (πείσομαι δὲ μᾶλλον τῷ θεῷ ἢ ὑμῖν), and as long as I draw breath and am able, I shall not cease to practice philosophy" (*Ap.* 29d). The thoughtless maintenance of conventional piety is counted along with the body among those things from which Socrates has manumitted himself through philosophy. His seemingly brazen questioning of Athenian norms in fact bears witness to—for it is but an extension of—his genuine, complete subordination to the very god whom his accusers claim to serve.

4.2.3. A Dramatic Frame for Subversive Socratic Speech

Did framing Socrates's tour de force in the *Apology* constitute Plato's primary motivation for writing the *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo*? While the question is understandably tantalizing, it is also problematic for a number of reasons. In the first place, it is unanswerable. Plato famously

⁶⁵ See *Ap.* 23b (λατρεία); 30a (ὑπηρεσία). The latter is related to Socrates's term (ὑπηρετικὴ) in the *Euthyphro*.

⁶⁶ On the Apollonian connection between the *Apology* and the *Phaedo* specifically, see, e.g., Gallop, "Rhetoric of Philosophy," 315; and Morgan, "Voice of Authority," 66.

left no sort of “manual” for how he intended his readers to approach the dialogues.⁶⁷ Any pronouncement on *the* reason—in the sense of Plato’s own intention—for this or that feature of his writings is necessarily speculative. Furthermore, such a suggestion unjustifiably depreciates the individual philosophical content of each text. In (rightly) emphasizing that Plato was not just a philosopher but also a literary artist, we ought not cause the pendulum to swing too far in the opposite direction. Plato *was* still a philosopher, deploying his artistry *in the service of* philosophy. It is no less an error to efface this philosophical goal than to efface its literary medium. I would therefore caution against any attempt to tie the meanings of the *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo* too tightly to their function as literary contextualization for the *Apology*. Whatever else the former may be, it is certainly an investigation of piety; whatever else the latter may be, it is certainly an inquiry into the nature of the soul.⁶⁸

At the same time, the connection between these two dialogues and the *Apology* is an objective feature of their dramatic presentation. If this connection coheres with more broadly attested literary patterns in Plato’s writing, I believe that we may responsibly ascribe *some* degree of artistic purpose to it. Put differently, the three dialogues may responsibly be read together as a kind of “macro-dialogue” addressing Socrates’s relationship with institutional religion and how it shaped his ultimately fatal reception in Athens.

As it turns out, this connection does cohere with what is arguably the single most distinctive literary feature of Plato’s early-to-middle dialogues: the *philosophical* significance of

⁶⁷ Cf. Leo Strauss, “The Problem of Socrates: Five Lectures,” in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 151.

⁶⁸ Indeed, late antiquity evinces a robust tradition of reading the *Phaedo* in particular as something of a psychological treatise, with relatively little attention to its dramatic features; for analysis, see Sylvain Delcomminette, Pieter d’Hoine, and Marc-Antoine Gavray, eds., *Ancient Readings of Plato’s Phaedo*, PhA 140 (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

his dramatic portrayal of Socrates as a person. Advocates of the “literary turn” in Plato studies routinely emphasize that this portrayal was not simply a flourish or a medium but was in fact argumentatively pregnant. Kahn, for instance, has written powerfully,

The dialectical invulnerability to contradiction which Socrates claims for his basic thesis—that *aretē* is what we really want, our true good and happiness—is matched by the dramatic appeal of the portrait of Socrates as the embodiment of this very thesis. I want to suggest that the portrayal of Socrates is the positive complement to the negative results of the elenchus. And here too Plato’s artistry lies in combining the personal and doctrinal elements, which fit together perfectly in Socrates’ case. . . . It is the extraordinarily seductive power of this portrait of Socrates that helps to make so many of us sympathetic, at least at the instinctive level, to the philosophical claims of these dialogues.⁶⁹

Kathryn Morgan has similarly argued that the *Phaedo* in particular “is perhaps Plato’s most moving creation and Socrates is at his most admirable,” for it “demonstrates how . . . Socrates the man becomes Socrates the lifestyle.”⁷⁰ Given this orienting use of Socrates, it is scarcely believable to me that the shared focus on his subversion of Athenian religion across the *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, and *Phaedo* could be accidental. Socrates only gets one swansong; he can only be tried and executed once. Plato would not have squandered such valuable dramatic “real estate” on discussions that could just as well have been situated otherwise. To adapt my formulation above: whatever else the *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo* may do, they certainly provide dramatic context for subversive Socratic speech in the *Apology*.

We saw in the preceding pages that these two dialogues clarify something crucial about Socrates’s attack on Athenian religious power: it comes not from an anarchistic rejection of all power outside of himself but from a profound recognition of just that power—the gods

⁶⁹ Charles H. Kahn, “Drama and Dialectic in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1, ed. Julia Annas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 113, 120.

⁷⁰ Morgan, “Voice of Authority,” 80–81.

themselves—to whom the Athenians, it turns out, pay only lip service. Socrates philosophizes on the authority that true piety and divine service connote, for philosophy turns out to be just such piety and divine service. Now, many will want to know whether Plato genuinely believed this or merely deployed it rhetorically.⁷¹ What I want to suggest, however, is that without venturing into this speculative territory, we may appreciate the *discursive* consequences of this move for his presentation of philosophy in this complex of dialogues. Socrates’s piety and divine service turn about a discourse of religious authenticity that bears an important implication for how different strata of authority interact: through a claim to authenticity, someone with no authority (Socrates) may subvert a putative authority (Athens) on the basis of a superordinate authority (the gods) that the putative authority also acknowledges. As a frame for the *Apology*, the *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo* arrogate this discourse to philosophy. In their light, Socrates’s subversive speech testifies to the authority on the basis of which he speaks it over against all the other authorities into which it brings him into conflict. The gadfly becomes the dramatic embodiment of the superordinate authority of philosophy itself.

4.3. Isaiah 1, Malachi, and Prophetic תורה

The *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo* demonstrate the hermeneutical power of recontextualization. By coordinating a narrative frame for the *Apology*, Plato was able—retrospectively and without changing a word of the speech itself—to clarify the dynamics of subversive Socratic speech and to mobilize it toward the construction of philosophical authority. In the following pages, I draw

⁷¹ One’s answer to this question will depend a great deal on if and how one understands “Socratic irony” to be a feature of Plato’s treatment of Greek religion. For a helpful overview of the history of the concept and scholarly approaches thereto, see Melissa Lane, “Reconsidering Socratic Irony,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. Donald R. Morrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 237–59.

on this literary maneuver in order to illuminate a related (though not identical) strategy in the Masoretic prophetic corpus. Conspicuously, this corpus is enclosed by two blistering prophetic indictments of cultic corruption, opening with Isaiah 1 and closing with Malachi. Like the *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo*, these prophetic texts are concerned with authenticity and integrity: cultic impropriety is the result of a misguided *attitude* toward worship. Also like the two Platonic dialogues, Isaiah 1 and Malachi take pains to connect this discourse of authenticity with a mode of authority recognized in the cultic sphere itself: the תורה of YHWH.

The individual books that make up the Latter Prophets reflect both thematic and chronological affinities: each is connected with an individual prophetic figure who was active between the rise of the Neo-Assyrian empire and the early postexilic period (to the extent that we can identify such information). However, they do not share the kind of straightforward dramatic connection that binds the *Euthyphro-Apology-Phaedo* complex; they do not produce a single, emergent story, for the logic of their combination is anthological rather than narrational. On what basis, then, may we read Isaiah 1 and Malachi as a *frame* in the way that the *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo* clearly are? Why look specifically to the beginning and end of such a diverse anthology?

In the final section below, I argue that comparative, innerbiblical, and composition-historical evidence converges in support of the notion that these textual units were redactionally coordinated so as to frame the prophetic corpus as a whole. While this frame is not *dramatic* in the manner of the *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo*, it still achieves a similarly retrospective recontextualization of earlier literary instances of subversive speech. The coordination of Isaiah 1 and Malachi represents an incipiently canonical effort to harness the power of subversive prophecy as an expression of תורה itself, reinforcing תורה as a superordinate authority. One

major implication is that, as several recent studies have also shown, subversive prophetic speech is more at home in the postexilic period than earlier scholarship tended to assume.

4.3.1. The Proper Orientation to Cultic Worship

Isaiah 1 and Malachi share an animating concern with the integrity of cultic worship. They both make proper worship dependent upon a broad set of standards that the worshipers must meet if the deity is to find favor in it. Accordingly, they both condemn failure to live up to these standards, doing so with similarly violent language. Nevertheless, the two texts have some consequential divergences in what they think those standards actually are—and to whom they think these standards apply. Investigating these divergences will allow for a more sophisticated appreciation of how these two texts work together to frame the prophetic corpus in terms of a subversive demand for an authentic *orientation* to the practice of worship. In this section, I limit this investigation to the present, canonical form of the passages. Only in the subsequent two sections do I introduce the diachronic dimension.

The first chapter of Isaiah is an internally diverse yet overarchingly coherent oracle of rebuke, redemption, and retribution. It opens with a bleak outlook: Israel is a wayward child, buckling under the weight of sin (Isa 1:2–4); their bodies are maimed by their transgressions (Isa 1:5–6); their land is scorched (Isa 1:7–9). This sets the stage for one of the most iconic examples of the prophetic critique of cultic impropriety—a passage that, “thanks to the drama of its poetry,” as Otto Kaiser aptly put it, “is ... one of the most impressive sayings in the book, so that

it transcends all scholarly arguments in capturing the mind of anyone who reads it with attention or listens to it carefully.”⁷² It reads,

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>שְׁמְעוּ דְבַר־יְהוָה ¹⁰
 קְצִינֵי סֹדָם
 הֶאֱזִינוּ תוֹרַת אֱלֹהֵינוּ
 עִם עֹמְרָה:
 לְמַה־לִּי רַב־זִבְחֵיכֶם ¹¹
 יֹאמֶר יְהוָה
 שָׁבַעְתִּי עֲלוֹת אֵילִים
 וְחֶלֶב מְרִיאִים
 וְדָם פָּרִים וְכִבְשִׁים וְעֵתוּדִים
 לֹא חִפְצָתִי:
 כִּי תָבֵאוּ לָרְאוֹת פָּנָי ¹²
 מִי־בִקַּשׁ זֹאת מִיָּדְכֶם
 רֶמֶס חֲצָרָי:
 לֹא תוֹסִיפוּ הִבִּיא מִנְחַת־שָׁוְא ¹³
 קִטְרֵת תוֹעֵבָה הִיא לִי
 חֹדֶשׁ וְשַׁבָּת קָרָא מִקְרָא
 לֹא־אוּכַל אֲוֹן וְעֲצָרָה:
 חֲדָשֵׁיכֶם וּמוֹעֲדֵיכֶם ¹⁴
 שָׁנְאָה נַפְשִׁי
 הָיוּ עָלַי לְטָרַח
 נִלְאַיתִי נָשָׂא:
 וּבִפְרִשְׁכֶם כַּפֵּיכֶם ¹⁵
 אֲעֲלִים עֵינַי מִכֶּם
 גַּם בִּי־תִרְבוּ תִפְלָה
 אֲיַנְנִי שִׁמְעַ
 יְדֵיכֶם דָּמִים מְלֹאוּ:
 רַחְצוּ הַזְּבוּ ¹⁶
 הִסִּירוּ רַע מֵעַלְלֵיכֶם
 מִנְגֵד עֵינַי
 חִדְלוּ הָרָע:
 לְמַדּוּ הַיָּטִב ¹⁷
 דַּרְשׁוּ מִשְׁפָּט
 אֲשֶׁרוֹ חֲמוּץ
 שִׁפְטוּ יְתוּם
 רִיבוּ אֶלְמָנָה:</p> | <p>¹⁰ Hear the word of YHWH,
 you chieftains of Sodom;
 listen to the תורה of our God,
 you people of Gomorrah:
 ¹¹ “Why all these sacrifices for me?”—
 says YHWH—
 “I am fed up with offerings of rams,
 suet of fatlings,
 blood of bulls, sheep, goats—
 I take no delight in any of it.
 ¹² That you come to appear before me—
 who asked this of you,
 trampling my courts?
 ¹³ Stop bringing worthless offerings!
 Incense has become disgusting to me.
 New moon, sabbath, festival—
 I cannot handle wickedness along with
 solemnity.
 ¹⁴ Your new moons and appointed times
 make me nauseous;
 they have become a burden upon me—
 I cannot bear it anymore.
 ¹⁵ So when you spread out your hands,
 I avert my eyes from you;
 when you pray at length,
 I am not listening.
 Your hands are drenched in blood.
 ¹⁶ So, wash yourselves! Clean yourselves!
 Wipe away your evil deeds
 from before my eyes!
 Stop doing evil!
 ¹⁷ Instead, learn to do good;
 seek justice;
 do right by the wronged;
 ensure justice for the orphan;
 plead the case of the widow.”
 (Isa 1:10–17)</p> |
|---|--|

⁷² Otto Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, 2nd ed., trans. John Bowden, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1983), 24; cf. Douglas Jones, “Exposition of Isaiah Chapter One Verses Ten to Seventeen,” *SJT* 18 (1965): 461; and Levine, “Prophetic Attitudes,” 213.

YHWH confronts the audience with a disorienting inversion of expectations. Communing with the deity through cultic observance turns out to be neither the means to achieve a healthy society nor an assurance of already possessing one. Rather, a healthy society is the necessary precondition for communing with the deity through cultic observance in the first place!⁷³ In a depraved society, by contrast, Israel’s cult is an abomination regardless of how scrupulously they maintain it. In fact, the *more* scrupulously they maintain it, the *more* abominable it is, because all the more flagrantly does it reflect their misunderstanding of the God they claim to serve. In Greenberg’s excellent turn of phrase, “The worship tendered by villains was worse than worthless; it was hateful to YHWH.”⁷⁴

Part of what makes this passage so arresting is its rhetoric of totality. This begins straightaway with the address. As several commentators have noted, the pairing of “chieftains” (קצינים) and “people” (עם) creates a vast vertical sweep across society, from the elite down to the laypeople.⁷⁵ All of Israel is implicated in this condemnation. What follows is a panoramic vista of official religious activity. It is as if the author tried to use as many technical cultic terms as he could remember: איל (“ram”); דם (“blood”); זבח (“sacrifice”); חֹדֶשׁ (“new moon”); חֶלֶב (“fat”); חצר (“court”); כבש (“sheep”); מועד (“appointed time”); מנחה (“grain offering”); מקרא (“assembly”); מריא (“fatling”); עֶלֶה (“burnt offering”); עצרה (“assembly”); עתוד (“goat”), פר (“bull”); קטרת (“incense”); שַׁבָּת (“sabbath”); and תפילה (“prayer”). The strong impression is that

⁷³ On the rhetorical “shock factor” of this inversion, see Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, 30; and Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, trans. Thomas H. Trapp, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 47.

⁷⁴ Moshe Greenberg, “Religion: Stability and Ferment,” in *The World History of the Jewish People*, ed. Abraham Malamat, vol. 4/2 (Jerusalem: Massada, 1979), 112.

⁷⁵ Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, 29; Lafferty, *Prophetic Critique*, 64; Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 39; and H. G. M. Williamson, *Isaiah 1–27*, vol. 1, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 87.

this dizzying litany is oriented less toward detail than toward volume; it is less about *how* Israel is doing *each* of these things than about *that* they are doing *all* of them. Israel's failure cannot be a matter of cultic procedure, for the fantastic descriptions of abundance clearly suggest a cult that is thriving.⁷⁶ Yet where they see pious prosperity, YHWH sees abominable excess—a “ballet of flesh and blood under stress,” to borrow an appropriately gruesome phrase from Margaret Atwood.⁷⁷ As Francis Landy has keenly perceived, this inverts the generally positive valences of corporeality and consumption in the cultic sphere.⁷⁸ Like the generation of the wilderness, YHWH has meat pouring out of his nose.

This rhetoric of totality continues into the “counter-litany” of positive actions that YHWH demands in response to Israel's failure. I disagree with Theresa V. Lafferty's suggestion that this sequence “spells out concretely what seeking justice entails,” as well as Hans Wildberger's characterization of it as “reasoned” and “detailed”—as if YHWH were offering a sequential recipe for ethical course correction.⁷⁹ Instead, like the condemnatory verses that precede it, this counter-litany is more rhetorical and impressionistic, using volume and stereotype to convey a general (yet nonetheless potent) societal imperative to affirm justice and decency.⁸⁰ Nevertheless, there is a crucial stylistic shift. If the cultic verses suggest a swirling menagerie of overwhelming and disarming sensory stimulation, the final two verses violently slice through it

⁷⁶ Cf. Levine, “Prophetic Attitudes,” 213.

⁷⁷ Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (2003; repr., New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 86.

⁷⁸ Francis Landy, “Torah and Anti-Torah: Isaiah 2:2–4 and 1:10–26,” *BibInt* 11 (2003): 324.

⁷⁹ Lafferty, *Prophetic Critique*, 83; and Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 48.

⁸⁰ The reference to orphans and widows, symbols of disenfranchisement and vulnerability throughout the ancient Near East, is a case in point; cf. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, AB 19 (1964; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 185; Kaiser, *Isaiah 1–12*, 35; and Lafferty, *Prophetic Critique*, 78. For an overview of the orphan and widow as symbolic social types more generally, see Charles F. Fensham, “Widow, Orphan, and the Poor in Ancient Near Eastern Legal and Wisdom Literature,” *JNES* 21 (1962): 129–39.

with a staccato series of nine imperatives rattled off nearly in succession (save some intervening objects and prepositional phrases). Wildberger called the contrast “a fundamentally new direction for human existence” and “a new ‘way of thinking.’”⁸¹ I would suggest that it is more hierarchical than developmental. The sharp pronouncement of these moral demands conveys a fundamentality and inalienability over against the contingencies of institutional worship.

The critique of cultic impropriety in Isa 1:10–17 is but the overture to the single longest and most internally diverse book in the prophetic canon, most of which concerns issues far afield.⁸² By contrast, the brief book of Malachi (only 55 verses in length) is more tightly structured around this type of critique. Its most sustained example reads as follows:

<p style="text-align: center;">בֶּן יְכַבֵּד אָב⁶ וְעַבְדֵּי אֲדֹנָיו וְאִם־אָב אָנִי אֵיךְ כְּבוֹדִי וְאִם־אֲדֹנִים אָנִי אֵיךְ מִזְרָאִי אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת לְכֶם הֲפָתַנְתֶּם בְּזוּי שְׁמִי וְאָמַרְתֶּם בְּמָה בְזִינוּ אֶת־שְׁמִי: מִגִּישִׁים עַל־מִזְבְּחִי⁷ לֶחֶם מִגָּאֵל וְאָמַרְתֶּם בְּמָה גָאֵלְנוּךָ בְּאֵמַרְכֶם שְׁלַחַן יְהוָה נִבְזָה הוּא: וְכִי־תִגְשׁוּן⁸ עֹר לְזִבַּח אִין רָע וְכִי תִגְשׁוּ</p>	<p>⁶ A son honors his father, a slave his master. If I am a father, what of my honor? If I am a master, what of my reverence?— says YHWH of Hosts to you, priests, who spurn my name. You say, “How have we spurned your name?” ⁷ By bringing upon my altar foul offerings! You say, “How have we befouled you?” By saying to yourselves, “YHWH’s table is spurned!” ⁸ When you bring a blind animal to slaughter— Is there nothing wrong with that? When you bring a lame or sick animal— Is there nothing wrong with that?</p>
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⁸¹ Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 49. His Pauline tendency becomes even more apparent elsewhere in his discussion.

⁸² In addition to Isa 1:10–17, there are two dedicated critiques of cultic impropriety in the book: Isa 43:22–28 and 58:1–14. Remarkably, each of the three customary critical divisions of the book (First, Second, and Third Isaiah) contains one of these passages. A comprehensive study of them as a series within the book may be found in Hrobon, *Ethical Dimension of Cult*.

פֶּסַח וְחֹלֶה
אֵין רָע
הִקְרִיבֵהוּ נָא לְפָנֶיךָ
הִירְצֵךָ אוֹ הִישָׂא פְּנֶיךָ
אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת:
⁹ וְעַתָּה חֲלוּ-נָא
פְּנֵי-אֵל וַיִּחַנְנוּ
מִיַּדְכֶם הֵיחָה זֹאת
הִישָׂא מִכֶּם פָּנִים
אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת:
¹⁰ מִי גַם-בְּכֶם וַיִּסְגַּר דְּלֹתֵיכֶם
וְלֹא-תֵאֵירוּ מִזִּבְחֵי חַנָּם
אֵין-לִי חֶפֶץ בְּכֶם
אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת
וּמִנְחָה לֹא-אֶרְצֶה מִיַּדְכֶם:
¹¹ כִּי מִמְזִרְח־שֶׁמֶשׁ וְעֵד-מְבוֹאוֹ גְּדוֹל
שָׁמַי בְּגוֹיִם וּבְכָל-מְקוֹם מְקַטֵּר מִגֶּשֶׁת
לְשָׁמַי וּמִנְחָה טְהוֹרָה כִּי-גְדוֹל שָׁמַי
בְּגוֹיִם אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת: ¹² וְאַתֶּם
מְחַלְלִים אוֹתוֹ בְּאַמְרֵיכֶם שְׁלַחן אֲדֹנָי
מְגֻאֵל הוּא וְנִיבוּ נְבוּזָה אֶכְלוּ: ¹³
וְאַמְרֵיכֶם הִנֵּה מִתְּלֹאָה וְהִפְחַתֶּם אוֹתוֹ
אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת וְהִבַּאתֶם גְּזוֹל וְאַתֶּם-
הַפְּסַח וְאַתֶּם-הַחֹלֶה וְהִבַּאתֶם אֶת-
הַמִּנְחָה הָאֶרְצָה אוֹתָהּ מִיַּדְכֶם אָמַר
יְהוָה: ¹⁴ ס וְאָרוֹר נוֹכַל וַיֵּשׁ בְּעֵדְרוֹ זָכָר
וַיִּנְדֵּר וַיִּזְבַּח מִשְׁחַת לְאֲדֹנָי כִּי מִלֶּדָּה גְּדוֹל
אֲנִי אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת וְשָׁמַי נוֹרָא
בְּגוֹיִם:

Go ahead, try offering it to the governor.
Will *he* accept you? Will *he* approve of you?—
says YHWH of Hosts.
⁹ [Yet you say,] “Now go ahead and entreat
God that he may show favor to us.”
It is because of you:
will he approve of you?—
says YHWH of Hosts.
¹⁰ Would that you would seal up the doors
and not frivolously set my altar alight!
I take no delight in you—
says YHWH of Hosts—
and no offering will I accept from you.
¹¹ For from east to west, my name is great among the
nations; in every which place, incense and pure grain
are brought for my name—for my name is great
among the nations—says YHWH of Hosts. ¹² But
you—you profane it by saying to yourselves, “My
Lord’s table is foul; its food is spurned.” ¹³ You say,
“Why bother?” and scoff at it—says YHWH of Hosts.
So you bring [offerings that are] stolen, blind, or
diseased, and thus you make your offerings. Am I
supposed to accept *this* from you?—says YHWH. ¹⁴
Moreover, a curse upon the cheat who has a male in
his flock and vows it—only to sacrifice a maimed
animal to the Lord. For I am the great king—says
YHWH of Hosts—and my name is great among the
nations. (Mal 1:6–14)

Several themes here recall the passage from Isaiah. Failure to meet certain standards for worship is not only an abomination; it is, in fact, the single most damning possible indictment of those who do so. YHWH reacts to this failure with visceral anger and disgust. The deity is extremely harsh in his reproach, as Joachim Schaper has discussed.⁸³ The targets of this reproach seem pathetically oblivious to the existence of a problem. Additionally, the passage shares a cluster of

⁸³ Joachim Schaper, “The Priests in the Book of Malachi and Their Opponents,” in *The Priests in the Prophets: The Portrayal of Priests, Prophets and Other Religious Specialists in the Latter Prophets*, eds. Lester L. Grabbe and Alice Ogden Bellis, JSOTSup 408 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 185–86.

terminology with its Isaianic predecessor, mostly relating to the cult: בּוֹא (“come,” “bring”); זָבַח (“sacrifice”); חִפּוּץ (“take delight”); מִנְחָה (“grain offering”); and קִטְוֶר (“offer incense”)—as well as the specific prepositional construct, מִיַּדְכֶם (“from your hand”).

At the same time, however, there are some obvious and crucial differences. For all his harshness, Malachi does not employ a rhetoric of totality. First and foremost, whereas Isa 1:10–17 addresses the people as a whole, Mal 1:6–14 pointedly addresses only the priests.⁸⁴ In keeping with this specialist focus, the particular cultic failures at stake pertain far more specifically to technical matters of procedure—especially the physical condition of the animals. “As a rule he sets about it from a ritualistic standpoint,” Lods wrote, “as might be expected from a religious writer of his day.”⁸⁵ In place of Isaiah’s impressionistic panorama, we have here what David L. Petersen aptly called “a bill of particulars concerning improper ritual practice.”⁸⁶ The picture of the temple in this passage is that of a sleazy, decrepit restaurant operating perpetually in violation of city health codes, its attendants either incompetent or untrustworthy (or both). The rather

⁸⁴ Drawing on Jakob Wöhrle’s work, Aaron Scharf has recently argued that this passage (or, really, the larger unit of which it is a component) conceals a base text that was originally, like Isa 1:10–17, addressed to the general populace. A series of redactors subsequently overlaid this lay-oriented base text with a series of priest-oriented strata; see idem, “Cult and Priests in Malachi 1:6–2:9,” in *Priests and Cults in the Book of the Twelve*, ed. Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, ANEM 14 (Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 213–34. While I would not go so far as to call Scharf’s argument definitive, his evidence is certainly compelling. Especially intriguing is the fact that after he has pared the text down to its lay-oriented layer, most of the lexical affinities with Isa 1:10–17 remain; given that the Isaianic passage addresses a similarly general audience, this overlap lends additional support to Scharf’s reconstruction. That being said, I believe that he has overstated the incoherence of the present form of the text. The passage is readily intelligible as an indictment of the priests. For Wöhrle’s original argument, see idem, *Der Abschluss des Zwölfprophetenbuchs: Buchübergreifende Redaktionsprozesse in den späten Sammlungen*, BZAW 389 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008), 222–33.

⁸⁵ Lods, *Rise of Judaism*, 276.

⁸⁶ David L. Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 180.

straightforward problem is that this is, of course, grossly unbecoming of the deity, who receives more respect even from the other nations.⁸⁷

This could not be further from Isa 1:10–17, where it is precisely the people’s dedicated attention to the cult that offends YHWH—because they pursue it alongside utter inattention to social injustice. To be sure, Malachi does call attention to such injustice in a later passage:

<p>וְקִרְבֹּתַי אֶלֵיכֶם לְמִשְׁפָּט וְהָיִיתִי עַד מְמַהֵר בְּמִכְשָׁפִים וּבְמִנְאָפִים וּבְנִשְׁבָּעִים לְשָׁקֵר וּבְעֹשֵׂי שְׂכָר־שָׂכִיר אֶלְמִנָּה וַיְתוּם וּמִטִּיגֵר וְלֹא יִרְאוּנִי אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת:</p>	<p>I will take you to court and eagerly testify against those who practice sorcery; the adulterers; those who swear falsely; those who oppress the hired worker, the widow, and the orphan; and those who deal unjustly with the resident alien, not fearing me— says YHWH of Hosts. (Mal 3:5)⁸⁸</p>
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Rainer Albertz takes this to reflect Malachi’s condemnation of “the wicked who thought that they could set themselves above Yhwh’s commandments, i.e. also and particularly above his social commandments.”⁸⁹ Such sentiment is obviously of a piece with Isa 1:10–17, as is the invocation of the familiar widow-orphan pair. That being said, Malachi does not single out oppression of the vulnerable but lists it alongside more strictly “ritual” improprieties—in keeping with his focus. As Chapman puts it, “Social decay is but a symptom of a greater illness.”⁹⁰

⁸⁷ It is hardly necessary to follow Schart in tracing the positive invocation of the other nations (Mal 1:11, 14b) to a more universalistic redactional layer; see idem, “Cult and Priests,” 226–27. The rhetorical device of unfavorable contrast with outsiders is well enough attested in prophetic literature (see, e.g., Jeremiah 35).

⁸⁸ Given the reference to the purification of the Levites immediately before this (Mal 3:3), it seems reasonable to assume that the audience is still primarily priestly—or, at least, that YHWH is giving special attention to the priests amid a broader address; cf. Tiemeyer, *Priestly Rites*, 146.

⁸⁹ Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, vol. 2, trans. John Bowden, OTL (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 504.

⁹⁰ Chapman, *Law and the Prophets*, 141.

Mal 1:6bβ–7

Priests, who spurn (בז'ה) my name.
How have we spurned (בז'ה) your name?
By bringing (נג'ש) foul (ל'גא) offerings upon my altar!
How have we befouled (ל'גא) you?
By saying (אמ'ר) to yourselves, “YHWH’s table is spurned (בז'ה)!”

Mal 1:12–13a

But *you*—you profane it by saying (אמ'ר) to yourselves, “My Lord’s table is foul (ל'גא); its food is spurned (בז'ה).” You say, “Why bother?” and scoff at it—says YHWH of Hosts.

So you bring (בו'א) [offerings that are] stolen, blind, or diseased, and thus you make your offerings.

Figure 4.2. Logic of the priests' cultic failure in Malachi 1:6–14

Yet for all the emphasis in Mal 1:6–14 on technical, ritual violations of the regulations for valid offerings, two key sections of the passage (Mal 1:6bβ–7, 12–13a) suggest that this decrepit state of affairs is in fact the *consequence* of something more basic (see Figure 4.2).⁹¹ In the sharp exchange in the former section, the priests press YHWH to explain why he claims that they “spurn” (בז'ה) him. By stitching together the questions and answers with the words בז'ה and ל'גא (“foul”), the passage roots the *action* of improper sacrifice in the fundamental *attitude* of assuming that the cult is already such as to be spurned.⁹² Later, Mal 1:12–13a makes the same point with the reverse sequence. *Before* the priests take any illicit ritual action, they profane the

⁹¹ On the structural similarity of these sections, see Petersen, *Zechariah 9–14 and Malachi*, 184.

⁹² Karl William Weyde has argued, “It appears that the participles נבז'ה and מגא'ל and are interchangeable and probably have the same meaning.” Karl William Weyde, *Prophecy and Teaching: Prophetic Authority, Form Problems, and the Use of Traditions in the Book of Malachi*, BZAW 288 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000), 125. While this may very well be true semantically, the terminological distinction remains structurally critical for grounding the priests' improper action in their improper attitude. By contrast, Wöhrle has argued that the use of two different terms in two different questions bespeaks a process of redactional augmentation; see idem, *Abschluss des Zwölfprophetenbuches*, 223–24. As noted above, while this is certainly plausible, the exchange is intelligible even without this reconstruction.

altar through simply assuming that it is already defiled. As a result of this assumption, they wonder what the point even is and scoff at it. *Only then*, having so given up on the whole enterprise, do they bring illicit offerings.

For Mal 1:6–14, cultic impropriety is not a narrow matter of technical negligence but a symptom of a deeper spiritual infirmity. The priests perform rituals incorrectly because they have *approached the whole process* incorrectly in the first place. I suspect that Lods’s recognition of this dynamic lies behind his (somewhat backhanded) compliment that “there is, however, in Malachi a keen moral sense, that sometimes breaks through the cramping restrictions of the narrow-minded outlook of the day, and regains the freedom of thought, and even the audacity, of the older prophets.”⁹³ This is not, of course, to suggest that the differences between Mal 1:6–14 and Isa 1:10–17 are insignificant. If, as Lods wrote, Malachi is upset that “faith in the efficacy of sacrifice is undermined,” then Isaiah condemns the fact that faith in the efficacy of sacrifice has burgeoned so as to subsume all other sense of obligation to YHWH.⁹⁴ However, these divergent emphases in fact belie a shared core concern: the fundamental importance of the proper *attitude* or *orientation* toward the cult. Inattention to social injustice and cynicism about the prospects of genuine divine communication each, in its own way, constitutes so profound a misunderstanding

⁹³ Lods, *Rise of Judaism*, 276. Elsewhere, he hardly conceals his contempt: “[Malachi] is in fact hardly a prophet, in the strict sense of one who reveals the will of Jhwh for his own times. He is above all a preacher, a moralist who is trying to instil God’s will into minds already familiar with it, an advocate of a written law and an eschatology already defined. The manner of his preaching differentiates him still further from former prophets. He does not proceed from revelation to revelation, he develops an argument. His book is composed of a series of debates, with statement, counter-statement, and reply. Even though these discussions have nothing in common with the controversies of the schools as regards their subject-matter, but grapple directly with the practical difficulties of life, ‘Malachi’ is a forerunner of the scribes and of the Talmudists.” *Ibid.*, 278–79.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 275. On the critique of the people’s valorization of ritual efficacy in Isa 1:10–17, Wildberger wrote that the prophets “saw their task in heading off a fatal danger for the faith of their people: the danger that the people would sink into a purely formalized cultic religion, in which the person thought, because of having completed some magically potent rites, that the deity could be forced to act in a beneficial way and also that an individual could manipulate the deity so as to ward off threatening forces.” Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 51.

of the terms of worship as to doom the worshiper from the start. The destabilizing implication is that institutional religious authority is endemically susceptible to such misunderstanding.

We have seen that by means of the *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo*, Plato showed that Socrates is so subversive of institutional Athenian religion because his philosophical questioning exposes its shallow pretense. Those who accuse him of impiety are themselves impious in their thoughtlessness. Meanwhile, the very practice for which they indict Socrates is in fact what constitutes his own piety. Isaiah 1 and Malachi both configure subversive prophetic speech in relation to a similar dynamic. Like Socrates, these prophets are so biting subversive because they boldly call attention to the fact that it is nothing less than the audience's own misguided conduct that truly subverts the audience's cultic efforts. Coordinated at the beginning and end of the prophetic corpus, the difference between what sort of conduct these passages condemn only emphasizes the range and profundity of the subversive prophetic demand for integrity.

4.3.2. Prophetic Corrective as תורה

So far, we have seen that Isaiah 1 and Malachi critique the authority of the cult by appealing to a countervailing authority borne in authenticity—specifically, authenticity in how one approaches cultic activity and conceives of its relationship to YHWH. In this section, I show that both passages also take the consequential step of identifying this countervailing authority as an expression of תורה. This word is among the most iconic in the Hebrew Bible because of its emergence as a native term for the Pentateuch in the Second Temple period and for Judaism itself in the rabbinic period. It is especially in Deuteronomy and associated literature that we find the biblical beginnings of this understanding of תורה as YHWH's authoritative covenantal

teaching, both as a concrete text and more abstractly.⁹⁵ However, it also enjoyed a much wider semantic range in ancient Israel.⁹⁶ There is biblical evidence for more restricted usages in the sense of sapiential teaching (e.g., Prov 4:2), ritual regulation (e.g., Num 19:14), legal ruling (e.g., Deut 17:11), cultic responsum (e.g., Hag 2:11), and oracle (e.g., Isa 2:3). Because so many of these usages easily admit of reinterpretation in light of later, canonically oriented understandings, historical delimitation is crucial when the meaning of this term is at stake.⁹⁷ As such, in showing how my previous, synchronic observations interact with the usages of תורה in these passages, I will take steps to situate these usages diachronically.

We begin this time with Malachi, in which the word תורה appears more frequently (on average) than in any other prophetic book.⁹⁸ Malachi is notoriously lacking in obvious diachronic anchors.⁹⁹ However, on linguistic, thematic, and innerbiblical grounds, the majority of scholars situate at least the core of the book between the late-sixth and mid-fifth centuries, at the time of the fledgling Second Temple and roughly contemporary with Ezra and Nehemiah.¹⁰⁰ An era with

⁹⁵ See, e.g., Moshe Greenberg, “Three Conceptions of the Torah in Hebrew Scriptures,” in *Die hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte: Festschrift für Rolf Rendtorff zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Erhard Blum, Christian Macholz, and Ekkehard W. Stegemann (Hamburg: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990), 365–78; and Jon D. Levenson, “The Sources of Torah: Psalm 119 and the Modes of Revelation in Second Temple Judaism,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, eds. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (1987; repr., Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 559–74.

⁹⁶ For an overview, see Heinz-Josef Fabry, “תורה,” in *TDOT*, vol. 15, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 609–46.

⁹⁷ For instance, the rabbinic liturgy for transferring the Torah scroll to and from the ark reapplies both Isa 2:3 and Prov 4:2 to the scroll and its contents; cf. Levenson, “Sources of Torah,” 559–61.

⁹⁸ According to analytics in Accordance Bible Software, the word תורה appears 3.81 times per one thousand words in Malachi. It appears five times total in the book. Only Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel use the term more (12, 12, and nine times, respectively), but owing to the substantially greater lengths of these books, the density of the term is far lower than in Malachi (0.47, 0.37, and 0.30 times per one thousand words, respectively).

⁹⁹ Cf. Schaper, “Priests in the Book of Malachi,” 177–79.

¹⁰⁰ For overviews of the dating, see Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy*, 209–12; and Tiemeyer, *Priestly Rites*, 82–84.

such entrenched hieratic tensions would certainly lend intuitive context to the critique of priestly conduct discussed above.¹⁰¹ It also sheds light on the usage of תורה in the book. Malachi is highly allusive, which fits the profile of Second Temple literature. A number of scholars have argued, on slightly different grounds in each case, that Malachi reflects an incipiently canonical purview because it was written to serve as the conclusion of some canonical configuration.¹⁰²

This is certainly the sense given by the famous colophon:

<p>זָכְרוּ תוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה עַבְדִּי ²² אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִי אוֹתוֹ בְּחֹרֵב עַל־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל חֻקִּים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים: הִנֵּה אֲנֹכִי שֹׁלַח לָכֶם ²³ אֶת אֱלִיָּהּ הַנָּבִיא לִפְנֵי בּוֹא יוֹם יְהוָה הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא: וְהִשִּׁיב לִב־אֲבוֹת עַל־בָּנִים ²⁴ וְלִב בָּנִים עַל־אֲבוֹתָם פְּנֹאֲבוֹא וְהִכִּיתִי אֶת־הָאָרֶץ חָרָם:</p>	<p>²² Remember the תורה of my servant, Moses, with which I charged him at Horeb on behalf of all Israel— statutes and laws. ²³ I am dispatching for you Elijah the prophet before the arrival of the Day of YHWH, great and terrifying; ²⁴ he will reconcile fathers to sons and sons to fathers, lest I come and smite the land utterly. (Mal 3:22–24)</p>
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¹⁰¹ Cf. Lester L. Grabbe, “The Priesthood in the Persian Period: Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi,” in *Priest and Cults in the Book of the Twelve*, ed. Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, ANEM 14 (Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 154; Rex Mason, “The Prophets of the Restoration,” in *Israel’s Prophetic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter Ackroyd*, eds. Richard Coggins, Anthony Phillips, and Michael Knibb (1982; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 149–150; and Julia M. O’Brien, *Priest and Levite in Malachi*, SBLDS 121 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 113–42. For general discussion of social tensions in the postexilic period and their possible connection to the priesthood, see Hanson, *Dawn of Apocalyptic*; as well as the critique of Hanson in Brooks Schramm, *The Opponents of Third Isaiah: Reconstructing the Cultic History of the Restoration*, JSOTSup 193 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995).

¹⁰² See especially Donald K. Berry, “Malachi’s Dual Design: The Close of the Canon and What Comes Afterward,” in *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D.W. Watts*, eds. James W. Watts and Paul R. House, JSOTSup 235 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 269–302; Chapman, *Law and the Prophets*, 131–49; Rainer Kessler, “The Unity of Malachi and Its Relation to the Book of the Twelve,” in *Perspectives on the Formation of the Book of the Twelve: Methodological Foundations, Redactional Processes, Historical Insights*, eds. Rainer Albertz, James D. Nogalski, and Jakob Wöhrle, BZAW 433 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 223–36; James D. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve*, BZAW 218 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993), 182–212; and van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 252–56.

All told, we can safely assume that in Malachi, the word תורה carries the authoritative force of the deuteronomic and Priestly traditions in the nascent Pentateuch.¹⁰³

We will return to the composition-historical implications of this striking colophon in the following section. For now, however, I would like to focus on a (sequentially) earlier passage that concludes the critique of priestly impropriety discussed above:

<p style="text-align: center;">וידעתם⁴</p> <p>כי שלחתי אליכם את המצוה הזאת להיות בריתי את־לוי אמר יהוה צבאות: בריתי היתה אתו⁵ החיים והשלום ואֶתְנַם־לוֹ מוֹרָא ויִירָאֵנִי ומפני שמי נחת הוא: תורת אמת היתה בפיהו⁶ ועולה לא־נמצא בשפתיו בשלום ובמישור הלך אתי ורבים השיב מעון: בי־שפתי כהן ישמר־דעת⁷ ותורה יבקשו מפיהו כי מלאך יהוה־צבאות הוא: ואתם סרתם מן־הדרך⁸ הכשלתם רבים בתורה שחתם ברית הלוי אמר יהוה צבאות: וגם־אני נתתי אתכם נבזים⁹ ושפלים לכל־העם כפי אשר אינכם שמרים את־דרכי ונשאים פנים בתורה:</p>	<p>⁴ Know that I have dispatched to you this commandment, that my covenant should [continue to] be with Levi— says YHWH of hosts. ⁵ My covenant was with him; life and peace I gave to him— reverence too, and he revered me; he feared my name. ⁶ An honest תורה was upon his mouth and crookedness could not be found upon his lips; he walked with me in peace and integrity and brought back many from transgression. ⁷ For a priest’s lips guard knowledge and [people] inquire תורה from his mouth; he is indeed a messenger of YHWH of Hosts. ⁸ But you—you have strayed from that path; you have tripped up many by means of תורה. You have corrupted the Levitical covenant— says YHWH of Hosts. ⁹ So for my part, I will make you spurned and lowly before the whole people, inasmuch as you are not guarding my ways nor according respect to תורה. (Mal 2:4–9)</p>
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This is the most concentrated usage of the word תורה in the Latter Prophets. YHWH explains that on the terms of an ancestral covenant with Levi himself, the priests are meant to be *the*

¹⁰³ Cf. O’Brien, *Priest and Levite*, 85–112.

teachers of תורה, licensed human purveyors of his divine instruction. The imagery is venerable, alluding to Moses's parting blessing to that ancestor: "He teaches your laws (יִזְרוּ מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ) to Jacob, your תורה to Israel; he places incense (קִטְוֶה) before you, perfect offerings on your altar (וְכָלֵל עַל־מִזְבְּחֶךָ)" (Deut 33:10). The mixture of the terms "priest" (כהן) and "Levi" (לוי) should certainly not be taken to indicate that Malachi antedates the pentateuchal P source, which distinguishes these offices.¹⁰⁴ Rather, as Tiemeyer notes, the book describes the priesthood in terms of its patriarchal ancestor in order "to denote the clergy in an abstract sense—an ideal picture of how the clergy should be."¹⁰⁵

Unfortunately, the priests whom Malachi addresses have fallen woefully short of their ancestral vocation.¹⁰⁶ This makes sense against the backdrop of what we have already discussed. If their broken attitude toward the cult has made them sloppy officiants, it is only natural that it should also make them sloppy teachers. As Tiemeyer explains, Malachi makes the integrity of a priest's תורה dependent upon his own integrity: he must be "a person who is living his life in complete accord with God's will and in harmony with his own teaching; he lives as he teaches and when these things are combined they are redemptive for the rest of the people."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ On the contrary, the presentation of the priests in the book strongly suggests lexical dependence on P; cf. O'Brien, *Priest and Levite*, 85–112.

¹⁰⁵ Tiemeyer, *Priestly Rites*, 129; cf. O'Brien, *Priest and Levite*, 27–48; and Schaper, "Priests in the Book of Malachi," 180. Once again, I see little reason to follow Schart in separating out these references to Levi as a redactionally superimposed "Levi-layer"; see idem, "Cult and Priest," 226. It follows perfectly naturally from the foregoing critique.

¹⁰⁶ As Michael Fishbane has shown, this is allusively expressed through a subtle inversion of another venerable pentateuchal text associated with the priests: the Priestly Blessing (Num 6:24–26); see idem, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (1985; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 332–34.

¹⁰⁷ Tiemeyer, *Priestly Rites*, 131. Remarkably, this prophetic passage would later become the basis for a rabbinic discussion of the connection between halakhic authority and personal integrity: "There was a rabbi who had developed a questionable reputation. Rabbi Judah said, 'What is there to do? Excommunicate him? But the rabbis need him! Neglect to excommunicate him? But this would desecrate the name of heaven!' He asked Rabba bar bar Ḥana, 'Have you heard anything regarding such an issue?' The latter responded, 'Why is it written, "For a priest's

The contemporary priests have thrown this ideal alignment completely out of whack. In their cynicism, they have failed to treat תורה—presumably both as a body of covenantal material and as a process of rendering it legible—with the gravity that it deserves.¹⁰⁸ Their failure constitutes a crisis of authority. Their conduct undermines the substantive basis of their authority—the license to purvey תורה faithfully—without thereby stripping them of its attendant institutional power; the people apparently still regard them as valid cultic functionaries and leaders. In this way, their crooked teaching of תורה is not just impotent; it *actively misleads* the people.¹⁰⁹ The result is that their own corruption risks corrupting תורה itself.

If the integrity of YHWH’s תורה is to be salvaged, the conceptual gap “between the *office* and its present *incumbents*,” in Schaper’s words, must be exposed.¹¹⁰ When the ostensibly authoritative priests fail to teach תורה, a different, supervening manifestation of תורה is needed that will subvert their now-false pretense to authority. In this way, subversive prophecy itself becomes an expression of תורה; inasmuch as it endeavors to restore these sloppy teachers to the תורת אמת of their august ancestors, it *assumes the authoritative mantle* of that תורה.

lips guard knowledge and [people] inquire תורה from his mouth; he is indeed a messenger of YHWH of Hosts” (Mal 2:7)? If the rabbi is similar to a messenger of YHWH, they should seek Torah from his mouth—but if he is not, they should not seek Torah from his mouth.’ So Rabbi Judah excommunicated him” (b. Mo‘ed Qat. 17a).

¹⁰⁸ I take the phrase וְנִשְׂאִים פְּנִים בְּתוֹרָה (Mal 2:9) to connote a commendable stance of respect toward תורה rather than a negative stance of legal partiality. On this reading, שְׂמֵרִים אֶת־דְּרָכַי וְנִשְׂאִים פְּנִים בְּתוֹרָה is a synonymous parallelism, *all* of which is negated by אֵינְכֶם in a distributive manner. For detailed discussion in support of this reading, see Tiemeyer, *Priestly Rites*, 132–35.

¹⁰⁹ The passage itself provides wide latitude as to how this תורה may be interpreted. However, in light of the preceding condemnation of unfit sacrifices, several medieval Jewish commentators suggested that the priests “have tripped up many by means of תורה” specifically by accepting their unacceptable offerings; see, e.g., Eliezer of Beaugency on Mal 2:8; and Kimhi on Mal 2:1.

¹¹⁰ Schaper, “Priests in the Book of Malachi,” 186.

The book of Malachi effects this transfer in a number of ways. It describes the condemnation of the priests as a “commandment” (מצוה), a virtual synonym for תורה in deuteronomic literature (cf., e.g., Deut 30:11).¹¹¹ In response to the priests’ corruption of תורה in the more restricted sense of individual rulings, the prophet brings תורה in the more abstract sense of YHWH’s true covenantal teaching. Although some commentators have expressed uncertainty about the syntax of להיות as applied to this commandment (Mal 2:4), I agree with Tiemeyer that “the purpose of the condemnation . . . is not to sever the relationship between God and the priests, but instead to cause the priests to repent and reform.”¹¹² Significantly, YHWH says that he “dispatched” (שלח) this commandment. As we saw in chapter 2, שלח is well attested in the technical sense of commissioning and sending a prophet. By contrast, this is the only biblical example of the verb taking מצוה as an object. This usage therefore underscores the identity of this מצוה/תורה with the prophet’s subversive speech. YHWH “dispatches” it inasmuch as he dispatches the prophet who conveys it. Finally, it is crucial that the priest’s legitimate teaching makes him a “messenger (מלאך) of YHWH”—the only such characterization of a priest in the Hebrew Bible.¹¹³ It hardly seems coincidental that this remarkable identification occurs in a book whose unnamed prophetic speaker is also called a מלאך—“Malachi,” “my messenger” (Mal 1:1; 3:1). An intentional contrast seems likely to me. When the priest teaches the people תורה legitimately, he is the only messenger YHWH needs. When he fails to do so, however, it falls to a different, prophetic messenger to teach *him* תורה—a subversive, restorative one.

¹¹¹ On deuteronomic resonances in Malachi, see, e.g., Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy*, 211–12; Chapman, *Law and the Prophets*, 140–43; and O’Brien, *Priest and Levite*, 85–112.

¹¹² Tiemeyer, *Priestly Rites*, 130.

¹¹³ Cf. *ibid.*, 132.

The role of the word תורה in Isa 1:10–17 might seem rather modest by comparison. After all, it appears there only once, in a rhetorically powerful but stylistically unremarkable call to attention: “Hear the word of YHWH, you chieftains of Sodom; listen to the תורה of our God, you people of Gomorrah” (Isa 1:10). However, the fact that this call introduces an indictment of the cult is notable because such indictments do not generally use the word תורה—despite the fact that, as we saw in our earlier discussion of Mic 6:6–8, scholars often characterize them as prophetic inversions of the “priestly תורה” Gattung. The term does not even appear in the famous temple sermon in Jeremiah 7, where it might naturally be expected due to the pronounced deuteronomic coloring of the passage. It is therefore worth probing what Isaiah 1 is trying to say by using the word תורה to describe its critique of cultic impropriety.

In Bernhard Duhm’s classic paradigm for the compositional history of the book of Isaiah, the first chapter of the book is the overture of First Isaiah—i.e., the material that can most reasonably be traced to the eighth-century Judahite prophet, Isaiah son of Amoz.¹¹⁴ Indeed, much of the content and language of this chapter recalls the three other prophetic books named for eighth-century prophets; this includes Isa 1:10–17, which, as noted, has obvious affinities with Am 5:21–27.¹¹⁵ An eighth-century date would make it highly anachronistic to understand תורה in the developed, authoritative, quasi-canonical sense that we detected in Malachi. Accordingly, many commentators have understood it in one of the more restricted senses surveyed above. Wildberger called it “a priestly torah [that] has been substantially modified by the prophet.”¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ See Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jesaja*, HKAT 3/1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1892).

¹¹⁵ For an overview of the similarities, see Lafferty, *Prophetic Critique*, 81–83. For arguments that the passage dates to the eighth century, see, e.g., Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 184–85; Lafferty, *Prophetic Critique*, 66–67; and Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 38–39.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

By contrast, Joseph Jensen argued in an oft-cited study that “*tôrâ* in this passage is best understood in the wisdom sense.”¹¹⁷

However, the matter is not so simple. Williamson has noted that Isaiah 1 “may be said to provide in a nutshell the problems posed by the book as a whole” with respect to compositional history.¹¹⁸ On the one hand, the chapter is an elegant and resounding example of prophetic poetry. On the other hand, its combination of various oracular subgenres yields a modularity that has long prompted something of a form-critical feeding frenzy. Moreover, some of its components seem best situated to an era of Judahite prosperity (e.g., Isa 1:10–17), others seem to assume at least the beginnings of the Neo-Assyrian onslaught (e.g., Isa 1:5–9), and at least one seems most reminiscent of postexilic literature (Isa 1:27–31). In an influential study, Georg Fohrer proposed a framework in which all of these tensions might find coherence: Isaiah 1 is a late arrangement of preexistent deposits of Isaianic material, redactionally composed for the purpose of opening and encapsulating the book.¹¹⁹

Many of the scholars who have built upon Fohrer’s compelling basic thesis have identified the conclusion of the chapter (Isa 1:27–31) as the key to historically anchoring this compositional activity.¹²⁰ These verses have strong lexical and thematic affinities with the two

¹¹⁷ Joseph Jensen, *The Use of tôrâ by Isaiah: His Debate with the Wisdom Tradition*, CBQMS 3 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1973), 69.

¹¹⁸ H. G. M. Williamson, “Synchronic and Diachronic in Isaian Perspective,” in *Synchronic or Diachronic? A Debate on Method in Old Testament Exegesis*, ed. Johannes C. de Moor, *OtSt* 34 (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 214.

¹¹⁹ Georg Fohrer, “Jesaja 1 als Zusammenfassung der Verkündigung Jesajas,” *ZAW* 74 (1962): 251–68; cf. the earlier studies in Leon J. Liebreich, “The Compilation of the Book of Isaiah,” *JQR* 46 (1956): 259–77; and idem, “The Compilation of the Book of Isaiah (Continued),” *JQR* 47 (1956): 114–38.

¹²⁰ For an overview, see Jacob Stromberg, *An Introduction to the Study of Isaiah*, T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 51–53. For comprehensive treatments, see, e.g., David M. Carr, “Reading Isaiah from Beginning (Isaiah 1) to End (Isaiah 65–66): Multiple Modern Possibilities,” in *New Visions of Isaiah*, eds. Roy F. Melugin and Marvin A. Sweeney, *JSOTSup* 214 (1996; repr., Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 188–218; Stromberg, *Isaiah after Exile*, 147–60; Anthony J. Tomasino, “Isaiah 1.1–2.4 and 63–

Trito-Isaianic chapters at the end of the book (Isaiah 65–66), which appear to reflect postexilic schismatic tensions leaning well in the direction of apocalyptic and sectarianism.¹²¹ The phrases associated with this incipient sectarianism do not otherwise appear in First Isaiah, which, despite its harsh rhetoric, remains broadly concerned with the entire remnant.¹²² Accordingly, Isa 1:27–31 testifies to the likelihood that Third Isaiah played a role in shaping this opening composition. In fact, because the chapter connects so elegantly with Isaiah 65–66 to form a balanced frame for the book as a whole, I would suggest (as others have as well) that the *entire* compositional process behind Isaiah 1 is best understood as part of Trito-Isaianic redactional activity. While many of its individual components might well trace from the eighth century (including Isa 1:10–17), the *composition* is a product of the fifth century—historically close to Malachi.¹²³

If this is the case, then it *must* impact how we understand תורה in Isa 1:10. Whatever more limited sense (oracular, sapiential, etc.) the term might have carried in a theoretical eighth-century precursor to Isa 1:10–17, the fifth-century scribe who actually placed the passage in its present context would have been historically and culturally situated so as to invest it interpretively with the same expansive, incipiently canonical sense that we find in Mal 2:4–9. Williamson actually goes further, arguing on the basis of the resumption of the Sodom and

66, and the Composition of the Isaianic Corpus,” *JSOT* 18 (1993): 81–98; and Williamson, “Synchronic and Diachronic,” 211–26.

¹²¹ See, e.g., Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1–39*, 187–88; and Hanson, *Dawn of Apocalyptic*, 134–86.

¹²² On the lexical dimension specifically, see Stromberg, *Isaiah after Exile*, 150–51.

¹²³ Cf. Marvin A. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–4 and the Post-Exilic Understanding of the Isaianic Tradition*, BZAW 171 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 123. For an overview of the case for dating Third Isaiah to the fifth century, see Blenkinsopp, *History of Prophecy*, 216–22. On the similarities between the prophetic critiques of cultic impropriety in Third Isaiah and Malachi, see Tiemeyer, *Priestly Rites*. Finally, on the importance of distinguishing between the original sense of a given literary subcomponent and its redactionally reoriented sense in the later compositional whole, see Williamson, *Book Called Isaiah*, 80.

Gomorrah motif that “it is not the eighth-century Isaiah, but the late chapter’s compiler who has penned these words” in the first place.¹²⁴ Either way, it is clear that Isaiah 1 *as a postexilic composition* brings the full weight of תורה as YHWH’s authoritative instruction to bear on its indictment of the mistaken belief that cultic fidelity may substitute for the obligations to uphold societal justice. As Marvin A. Sweeney puts it, “‘The Torah of YHWH’ in this instance does not pertain to correct sacrificial procedure, but to the underlying purpose that the sacrifice serves.”¹²⁵ By identifying the demand for cultic integrity as תורה, Isaiah 1 makes explicit precisely what Malachi implies: in certain extraordinary situations, the prophetic subversion of presumptive cultic authority is itself תורה—is itself the true authority.

In both the opening and closing sections of the Latter Prophets, the use of the term תורה establishes that although subversive prophetic speech is delivered by an outsider, it is actually internal to YHWH’s true demands. In certain exigent situations, such as widespread social decay or acute clerical corruption, subversive prophecy is in fact *the* most authentic representative of those demands. It goes without saying that this has the important effect of legitimating this subversive speech. However, the transference in the opposite direction is more surprising and, I would like to suggest, in some ways more consequential: subversive prophetic speech expands תורה itself. In a remarkable essay defending the biblical and Jewish concepts of תורה against certain Christian charges of dead legalism, Shemaryahu Talmon wrote,

Within the context of Judaism *Torah* expresses a comprehensive reality in life. *Torah* aims at the formation of this all-embracing reality. *Torah* is instruction, lore and advice; it is concerned with the entire spectrum of human life as viewed by the individual and as

¹²⁴ Williamson, *Isaiah 1–27*, 1:86. It should be noted that this creates a possible tension with the theory of Trito-Isaianic redaction, as the word תורה is conspicuously absent from Isaiah 56–66.

¹²⁵ Marvin A. Sweeney, “The Book of Isaiah as Prophetic Torah,” in *New Visions of Isaiah*, eds. Roy F. Melugin and Marvin A. Sweeney, JSOTSup 214 (1996; repr., Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 59.

viewed by society. ... *Torah* is more than Law, and according to the biblical view Law was not to be understood as a self-contained whole made up of mere ritual rules and precepts, but rather as a network of guidelines which together permeate the life of the Jew including what we would describe as his “spiritual life.” ... *Torah* and Law, as understood in the Hebrew Bible and in Judaism, are the all-embracing bulwarks which preserve the connection between God and man, between man and man, between the center of society and its periphery.¹²⁶

By assimilating to תורה the very subversion of its own false manifestations, Isaiah 1 and Malachi mobilize the prophetic corpus toward the realization of this vitality.¹²⁷ Only something so boundless could serve as the superordinate authority to which Israel’s fiercest critics of inauthentic authority appealed.

4.3.3. A Redactional Frame for Subversive Prophetic Speech

We saw earlier that the synchronic literary impact of the *Euthyphro* and the *Phaedo* on the *Apology* coheres with Plato’s interest in constructing philosophy through the positive example that Socrates models in his own conduct. As such, I argued that we may ascribe some measure of artistic purpose to how this complex of dialogues refigures philosophy in relation to subversive Socratic speech. We may ask a similar question about Isaiah 1 and Malachi: Does their refiguration of תורה in relation to subversive prophetic speech reflect a specific redactional effort to provide guidance for how to understand the prophetic corpus as a whole? This overarching question resolves into three more specific ones. First, is there empirical evidence for this sort of framing as a scribal strategy? Second, are there enough other connections (both literary and historical) between the passages to suggest intentional coordination? Third and finally, does an

¹²⁶ Shemaryahu Talmon, “Torah as a Concept and Vital Principle in the Hebrew Bible,” *GOTR* 24 (1979): 280–81, 288.

¹²⁷ Cf. Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon*, 151–52.

effort to promote and to calibrate תורה cohere with the profile of postexilic biblical redaction? In this section, I address these questions in turn and argue that there are at least tentative bases to answer each in the affirmative. It is therefore historically plausible that at some stage, Isaiah 1 and Malachi were redactionally arranged to frame the prophetic corpus in terms of תורה and subversive prophetic speech.

Reading these passages as a joint effort to say something definitive about what comes between them depends upon an assumption that beginnings and endings play outsized roles in second-order reflection on textual meaning. While this is perhaps true of, say, contemporary monographs, is it anachronistic when applied to ancient literature? To be sure, as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, redaction-critical scholarship on the prophets has increasingly found evidence of editorial intervention directly into the heart of earlier texts.¹²⁸ However, it remains the case that material constraints likely made the front and back ends of texts among the easiest (and therefore most preferred) places for editorial transformation.¹²⁹

Sara J. Milstein has recently shown that in both biblical and Mesopotamian scribal culture, such transformation specifically on the front end—what she calls “revision through introduction”—was a ubiquitous strategy for reconceiving received texts. She explains,

These additions could be brief or substantial. While in some cases the new addition aligned with the received work, in other cases it played a transformative role and set the stage for a completely fresh encounter with the tradition. Even the most radical acts of revision, however, did not seem to require a complete overhaul of the received work. Because the addition was at the front, the logic of the older work could be recast through a new lens. ... In some cases, especially those in which the new introduction flows seamlessly into the received material, readers tend to project the logic of the introduction onto the rest of the work, even when the latter preserves a radically different perspective. In other cases, even when the secondary nature of the introduction is incontrovertible, the new introduction continues to color interpretations of the text that follows or even the

¹²⁸ See, e.g., Williamson, *Book Called Isaiah*.

¹²⁹ See, e.g., van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, esp. 143–72.

tradition as a whole. First impressions carry weight. As such, attention to revision through introduction allows us to engage afresh with the tradition as a moving target, one that projects the illusion of a monolithic viewpoint but that instead manifested different sets of logic in different contexts. It enables us to perceive the text or the series of available versions as a *conversation* across time, with each voice embodying a singular perspective.¹³⁰

My argument about Isaiah 1 and Malachi is consistent with this editorial strategy. Opening with an Isaianic composition structured around subversive speech sets the terms for engagement with what follows. On the one hand, it calls specific attention to subsequent subversive prophetic speech, such as Amos's declaration, "I hate, I abhor your festivals." On the other hand, it does so *as תורה* in a manner that these passages would not independently convey. Malachi retrospectively reinforces both points on the other end. In this way, Isaiah 1 and Malachi constitute an ambitious scribal effort at revision through introduction—or, in this case, revision through introduction *and* conclusion. Their "illusion of a monolithic viewpoint" is a notion of *תורה* encompassing prophetic critique that targets the usual manifestations of *תורה*.

Empirical evidence that the outermost sections of texts *can* represent redactional recontextualization does not, of course, automatically confirm that Isaiah 1 and Malachi do so themselves. However, the sorts of literary data that we have discussed in this chapter cohere well with the possibility. Both texts have incipiently canonical purviews: while Isaiah 1 encapsulates the Isaianic tradition more broadly, the colophon in Mal 3:22–24 integrates the book with one (or more) of a number of larger literary blocks. These broad hermeneutical horizons fit well with the dynamics of redactional recontextualization. Moreover, the two texts share—in addition to subversive speech and *תורה*, of course—a significant concentration of themes, images, and

¹³⁰ Sara J. Milstein, *Tracking the Master Scribe: Revision through Introduction in Biblical and Mesopotamian Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2–4.

terminology that further tie them to each other: parental language, especially as applied to YHWH (Isa 1:2b–4; Mal 1:6; 2:10; 3:7, 17, 23–24); physiological and medical metaphors (Isa 1:5–6; Mal 3:20a); abundance as reward (Isa 1:19; Mal 3:10–11); smelting (צִרְרִי) and lye (בַּר/בְּרִית) as a means of purifying an elect subgroup (Isa 1:25; Mal 3:2–3); and fire as a means of destroying YHWH’s enemies (Isa 1:28–31; Mal 3:18–21). In light of the “density” principle for the identification of allusion, such numerous connections further suggest a native link between these passages as a framing unit.¹³¹

The historical dimension is more complicated. The fact that, as we have seen, there is strong basis to date both texts to the early postexilic period might seem to strengthen the argument that they represent a coordinated frame. However, this would entail positing a fifth-century date for something at least closely resembling the Masoretic ordering of the prophetic books. Now, such a position need not be dismissed as mere theological conservatism. In his work on scribal culture, van der Toorn—hardly a Childsian—argues on the basis of Mal 3:22–24 that “the Masoretic manuscripts of the Minor Prophets,” at least, “preserve the original order.”¹³² Moreover, I think that certain skepticism toward canonical sequencing is overblown. For instance, Barton has argued that the very idea of textual “order” is an anachronistic retrojection of our assumption of the codex, completely inappropriate to the technology of scrolls.¹³³ Does he

¹³¹ On this principle, see, e.g., Jeffery M. Leonard, “Identifying Inner-Biblical Allusions: Psalm 78 as a Test Case,” *JBL* 127 (2008): 246, 254–55; and Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66*, *Contraversions: Jews and Other Differences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 35.

¹³² van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 253. His definition of “original” in this context seems specifically to concern the place of Malachi at the time of its entrance into the corpus preserved in MT as the Twelve. For a more expansive argument for canon-oriented scribal activity in the Persian period, see Menahem Haran, “Book-Scrolls at the Beginning of the Second Temple Period: The Transition from Papyrus to Skins,” *HUCA* 54 (1983): 111–22.

¹³³ Barton, *Oracles of God*, 82–91.

really think that Exodus did not follow Genesis until they were bound in a codex?¹³⁴ That being said, the tremendous diversity in the sequences attested across the ancient versions and canonical indices—even *within* the Twelve—does necessitate some caution if one is to avoid either abject anachronism or resignation to a purely synchronic, normatively canonical hermeneutic.

In view of this situation, I propose the following range of possibilities. Maximally, Isaiah 1 and Malachi were both composed in the early Second Temple period, in social settings close enough so as to account for their striking similarities in theme, language, and outlook. Within this selfsame context, the scribal circle that composed them also redactionally orchestrated them so as to bracket an emerging collection of prophetic writings. To whatever extent that collection might have changed between that kernel and its Masoretic descendant, the latter maintained the ordering of at least the beginning and end of the former. More cautiously, Isaiah 1 and Malachi were once again composed in the early Second Temple period—but not to an explicitly connected compositional end. Only much later, in the Hellenistic period, did the scribes behind the proto-Masoretic prophetic corpus order them so as to constitute a frame, compositionally activating the latent similarities stemming from their common fifth-century origin. Either way, I affirm that (a) Isaiah 1 and Malachi are fifth-century compositions; and (b) their Masoretic positions reflect an earlier effort to frame a version of the larger prophetic corpus.

¹³⁴ I confess that I am being somewhat unfair to Barton here. He does allow for the possibility that *temporal* or *narrative* sequence could have been relevant criteria before the codex. However, even this strikes me as too narrow. In a famous lecture, Sarna argued that the library or archive might have been the original *Sitz im Leben* for the proto-canonical ordering of biblical scrolls; see idem, “Ancient Libraries and the Ordering of the Biblical Books,” in *Studies in Biblical Interpretation*, JPS Scholar of Distinction Series (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000), 53–66; cf. the compendious work on this subject in Haran, *Biblical Collection*; as well as idem, “Book-Scrolls in Israel in Pre-Exilic Times,” *JSJ* 33 (1982): 161–73; and idem, “Book Scrolls at the Beginning.” In such a context, there might have been a meaningful sense in which the prophetic scrolls had a traditional order even if they were not textualized as such. Barton responds, “Even if we do understand there to have been some customs about the storage of biblical scrolls, however, we are obviously not in the same world of thought as ‘holistic’ readings of the canon, in which the arrangements of the books has an effect on the meaning analogous to the way the shape of a single work contributes to its interpretation.” Barton, *Oracles of God*, 84. Suffice it to say that I think the word “obviously” in this sentence is vastly overstated.

This leaves the final question: whether we are justified in seeing the configuration of subversive prophecy in relation to תורה as an orienting goal of this process, whenever it might have been accomplished. Fortunately, this issue is far more straightforward. On the early end of our historical range of possibility, the Hebrew Bible itself testifies to increasing focus on תורה as an abstract theological concept in the exilic and postexilic periods—likely due in some part to deuteronomistic influence.¹³⁵ On the late end, Alexander Rofé has shown compellingly that תורה exerted architectonic influence on the shape of the proto-Masoretic canon in the Hellenistic period: by redactionally inserting the term תורה in Josh 1:7–8 and placing a תורה-oriented psalm at the opening of the Writings, Jewish scribes created a canon that compositionally testified to (indeed, facilitated) the preeminence of תורה as an organizing religious principle.¹³⁶ The notion that a scribe coordinated Isaiah 1 and Malachi so as to calibrate תורה by means of an emergent prophetic corpus is thus perfectly consistent with Second Temple period scribal interests.

Appreciating the configurative function of Isaiah 1 and Malachi in relation to תורה shows that to whatever extent there is a tension between law and prophecy, cult and critique, it is a tension that the canon *orchestrates* as an expression of תורה itself. This productively transforms the possibilities for our understanding of the terms on which ancient scribes scripturally

¹³⁵ See, e.g., Timo Veijola, “The Deuteronomistic Roots of Judaism,” in *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume; Studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, Qumran, and Post-Biblical Judaism*, eds. Chaim Cohen, Avi Hurvitz, and Shalom M. Paul (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 459–78.

¹³⁶ Alexander Rofé, “The Piety of the Torah-Disciples at the Winding-Up of the Hebrew Bible: Josh 1:8; Ps 1:2; Isa 59:21,” in *Bibel in Jüdischer und Christlicher Tradition: Festschrift für Johann Maier zum 60. Geburtstag*, eds. Helmut Merklein, Karlheinz Müller, and Günter Stemberger (Frankfurt am Main: Anton Hain, 1993), 78–85. I am less convinced by Rofé’s argument for the role of Isa 59:21, in which the term תורה does not explicitly appear (as, indeed, it does not at any point in Third Isaiah). For a more theological discussion of the canonical significance of Psalm 1 in relation to תורה, see Benjamin D. Sommer, “Psalm 1 and the Canonical Shaping of Jewish Scripture,” in *Jewish Bible Theology: Perspectives and Case Studies*, ed. Isaac Kalimi (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 199–221.

authorized prophetic critiques of authority. No longer do we need to picture stuffy clerical bureaucrats constrained by past textual ascriptions of prestige, shifting nervously in their seats as they tried to figure out how to incorporate the prophets' subversive speech so as to pay lip service to it while also safely domesticating it. Rather, we may now imagine bold literary artists and theologians who *actively dared* to promote subversive prophetic speech because they saw in it a thunderous testimony to the indomitable power of the religious ideal to which all their efforts were oriented.¹³⁷ In the words of a group of later sages who also affirmed the expansive authority of God's teaching by bringing unexpected arenas under its mantle: "It is Torah; I must learn it (תורה היא וללמוד אני צריך)" (b. Ber. 62a).

4.4. Conclusion

Subversive speech plays crucially different roles in the prophetic and Platonic corpora. As we have seen repeatedly, subversive prophetic speech has provoked such scholarly fascination because it is canonically preserved and promoted alongside the very modalities of authority that it targets. The case is utterly different for Plato. There is no tension between subversive Socratic speech and Plato's literary authorization thereof. This is because the dialogues are squarely aligned with the itinerant philosopher against his opponents, whose perspectives are discursively external to the corpus; Plato did not, so to speak, canonize Meletus alongside Socrates.

This distinction maps onto an even more fundamental one: the place of תורה and philosophy in the historical worlds that these authors confronted and in the constructed worlds

¹³⁷ In this way, despite Kratz's separation of biblical scribalism from state and cultic power, his reconstruction of scribes "who stemmed from scribal schools and official bureaucracy but distanced themselves internally and perhaps also externally, setting out on paths of their own instead" nevertheless has affinities with my proposal. I too believe that the shape of the prophetic literature attests basically to an exercise in priestly-scribal *self-critique*. Where I differ from Kratz is that I see evidence still to situate this process *within* the institutional auspices of cultic authority.

that their corpora unfold. In the Second Temple period, תורה was already (and had long been) an eminent concept of authority. Accordingly, the redactors of the prophetic corpus made their subversive protagonists into forces of restoration. In fourth-century Greece, by contrast, the Platonic conception of philosophy was something new. Plato therefore made *his* subversive protagonist into a force of revolution.

These crucial differences notwithstanding, what I have tried to show in this chapter is that the biblical redactors and Plato constructed their divergent ideals by means of a similar strategy. It is easy to imagine an ancient author granting legitimacy to a subversive figure by connecting him or her with a recognized source of authority. What the Latter Prophets and the *Euthyphro-Apology-Phaedo* complex achieve, however, is far more interesting: they mobilize subversive figures toward reinforcing and nuancing a source of authority itself. The biblical redactors and Plato apparently recognized a discursive dynamic that is simultaneously obvious and profound: every critique of an authority structure either presupposes or explicitly marshals an appeal to a superordinate authority structure. It is by literarily redeploying this dynamic that these authors were able to turn the prophets and Socrates, such consummate critics of authority, into roundabout representatives of two of the most authoritative concepts in Western history.

CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION

5.1. Summary and Contribution

I opened this dissertation by asking why the Hebrew Bible tell us about the subversive prophets. This question would not naturally occur to the many contemporary Jews and Christians for whom subversiveness is a central part of what it means to be a prophet in the first place. Heschel, upon whose theological insights we have drawn throughout this study, summed up the point with characteristic potency: “The purpose of prophecy is to conquer callousness, to change the inner man as well as to revolutionize history.”¹ If this is so, then biblical prophecy will always, by its very definition, be subversive—a threat to every institution, presumption, and status quo that would resist such revolution. Remarkably for men who often foretold the future, it was, on this view, their critiques of their own present that would become the most timeless. “The things that horrified the prophets are even now daily occurrences all over the world,” Heschel wrote. “There is not a society to which Amos’ words would not apply.”² For so many contemporary readers of the Bible, it is precisely its wisdom that it includes such voices. Why question it?

However, from a historical perspective, the prophetic critique of authority poses two significant problems. First, how did the gradual scribal assembly of canonical scripture authorize such searing critiques of authority? This is puzzling in light of scholarship that situates Second Temple period scribal activity in close social proximity to cultic and political power—two of the prophets’ most frequent targets. Second, why is subversive speech relatively unattested in the prophetic texts from elsewhere in the ancient Near East (especially Mesopotamia)? This is

¹ Heschel, *Prophets*, 20.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

puzzling given that so many other dimensions of the biblical prophets have been shown to have direct analogues in their extrabiblical counterparts. The two predominant historical-critical approaches to biblical prophecy—what I have called the historical-ideational and sociological-comparative paradigms—have each taken up these problems in their own ways. Their differences notwithstanding, however, both share an impulse to treat subversive prophetic speech as a window onto anterior historical realities.

In this study, I have striven to reorient the discussion toward the native theories of prophecy embedded *within* the literary presentation of subversive prophetic speech. This means asking not *why* these texts tell us about the subversive prophets but rather *what they are trying to tell us by doing so*. They are constructed so as to advance claims about prophecy. A narrowly positivist approach, focused only on recovering the realities of ancient Israelite power dynamics, runs the risk of effacing or trivializing what the texts actually say about these dynamics—thereby losing equally (if differently) historical insight into how the biblical authors and redactors themselves conceptualized their subject matter. Shifting the discussion in this way means conceding that the historical realities of the figures and institutions in the prophetic literature might ultimately be inaccessible. What is gained, I would suggest, is more solid insight into how those who shaped this literature imagined those realities.

I have framed this reorientation in terms of a comparison with Plato's presentation of Socrates for two reasons. Most basically, Socrates represents an underappreciated ancient Mediterranean analogue for subversive prophetic speech. While the Mesopotamian prophetic corpora largely lack the image of an individual challenging various modalities of power as an expression of his commitment to a superordinate power, the Platonic corpus makes this one of Socrates's most characteristic activities. As comparative work in biblical studies swings away

from a strict preoccupation with the rest of the Semitic world and back toward an interest in the Classics as well, scholars should recognize Socrates as a potential ancient analogue to this peculiar feature of biblical prophecy. However, what is equally promising about the comparison with Plato is how scholars' treatment of his subversive Socrates itself offers a model for how a reorientation toward literary construction is still consonant with the goals and standards of historical criticism. Plato scholars have largely come to see Plato's subversive Socrates not as the literary husk around a historical kernel but as the author's creative depiction of a literary character in service to his intellectual project. Scholars of biblical prophecy may approach subversive prophetic speech in the same fashion and with the same goals.

Now, my purpose in pursuing this comparison is certainly not to endorse a facile equation of the specific *content* of biblical prophecy and Platonic prophecy—nor, for that matter, between the concerns of biblical and Classical studies. Without going so far as to reify an “Athens and Jerusalem” dichotomy, it is nevertheless important to be clear that these two bodies of literature, understood critically in their ancient contexts, represent drastically divergent understandings of the world. If this dissertation has stressed their similarities at the expense of their differences, it is in part because the differences are already more familiar and intuitive to contemporary biblical scholarship. Yet it is also because these differences do not undermine the more fundamental point of the comparison: there are similar *ways* in which these corpora construct their subversive protagonists—and therefore, by implication, in which they use their subversive protagonists within their broader projects. Over the course of this study, we have seen that the prophets and Socrates both negotiate the cultural power of divination, contend with the need to engage a popular audience, and advance their criticisms by means of appeals to authenticity and integrity. There are differences in the specific ways that they do these things, to say nothing of the ends to

which they do them; prophecy and philosophy, to repeat, are not the same. That being said, in an ancient landscape in which Socrates may well be the closest analogue to the subversive biblical prophets, the fact that their literary curators employ similar strategies in presenting them is noteworthy. Without effacing the differences, I have tried to show that our more developed understanding of how Plato employed these strategies may illuminate how the authors and redactors of the prophetic literature did so.

So, then—what *is* the Hebrew Bible trying to tell us by telling us about the subversive prophets? I believe that this dissertation has provided one possible answer: the Hebrew Bible tells us about the subversive prophets in order to explore and, indeed, simply to convey the complexities of authority. The texts discussed in the three main chapters of this study all represent reflexes of this overarching concern. Micah's negotiation with divinatory efficacy as embodied in Balaam shows that engagement with culturally authoritative discourses is not limited either to straightforward acceptance or rejection. Ezekiel's employment of *משל* shows that the ostensible subjects of YHWH's authority—the people as a whole—wield an unwitting kind of authority borne in what they are willing to listen to and how they are predisposed to understand it. Finally, Isaiah 1 and Malachi work in concert to show that human, institutional representatives of authority are always contingent with respect to the abiding authority of *תורה*—and must always answer to it. It is precisely because the subversive prophets criticize authority that they provided such fertile literary ground for exploring its complex dynamics.

5.2. Directions for Further Inquiry

The prophetic and Socratic subversive speech discussed in this dissertation is presented in texts that are internal to the biblical and Platonic corpora themselves and sympathetic to the

protagonists who give voice to this speech. As I look ahead to developing and augmenting these findings, I would like to expand my analysis to include the reception and rejection of subversive speech. In the pages that follow, I conclude this dissertation with a brief, prospective discussion of one potential avenue for each of these: (1) the possible integration of subversive prophetic and Socratic speech in Jesus's woes against the Pharisees; and (2) the biting satire of subversive prophetic and Socratic speech in the book of Jonah and Aristophanes's *Clouds*.

5.2.1. Inheriting Subversive Speech: Jesus's Rebukes of the Pharisees

As the New Testament would have it, the most famous gadfly in Western history met his end not at the sip of hemlock but upon a cross. Structural similarities between the lives and activities of Jesus and Socrates were obvious enough to attract the attention of some early Christian writers.³ Down to modernity, many have understood Socrates as a kind of pagan prefiguration of Jesus, dying in order to teach an important but imperfect form of monotheism.⁴ Much like the "Athens and Jerusalem" dichotomy, such legacies of tendentious reification have put a damper on historical-critical comparison of the two figures. However, there *have* been some recent efforts to situate the similarities within the context of Hellenistic influence on the Gospel writers. For instance, Greg Sterling has convincingly argued that the Gospel of Luke alludes to the *Apology* and the *Phaedo* in order to situate Jesus's death within a venerable martyrdom tradition.⁵

³ For an overview, see Mark Edwards, "Socrates and the Early Church," in *Socrates from Antiquity to the Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Trapp (2007; repr., Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 127–42.

⁴ See, e.g., Joseph Priestley, *Socrates and Jesus Compared* (London: J. Johnson St. Paul's Church-Yard, 1803).

⁵ Greg Sterling, "Mors Philosophi: The Death of Jesus in Luke," *HTR* 94 (2001): 383–402; cf., though somewhat less compellingly, George van Kooten, "The Last Days of Socrates and Christ: *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo* Read in Counterpoint with John's Gospel," in *Religio-Philosophical Discourses in the Mediterranean World: From Plato, through Jesus, to Late Antiquity*, eds. Anders Klostergaard Petersen and George van Kooten, *Ancient Philosophy & Religion* 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 219–43.

Of course, Jesus also models many of those activities and modes of discourse that characterize the subversive prophets. In fact, as Jewish literature, the Gospels thematize this similarity far more explicitly than any potential connection with Socrates. If Jesus may thus be situated at precisely the node of comparison that has driven this study, it stands to reason that we may read the Gospels as an important phase in the ancient Jewish reception of these manifestations of subversive speech.

The tradition of Jesus's woe speeches against the Pharisees (Matthew 23; Luke 11:37–52) furnishes an especially promising case study for this reception because it presents the core of Jesus's message as a critique of false institutional authority. The echoes of the prophetic critique of cultic and royal authority are overwhelming.⁶ In fact, the passages conclude by directly presenting Jesus as the successor to a line of subversive prophets whom Israel violently rejected (Matt 23:29–37; Luke 11:47–51). We may also detect similarities to Socrates's public condemnation of the Athenian authorities in the *Apology*, especially his confidence in the face of death. Giovanni B. Bazzana and Sarah E. Rollens have both argued that the authors of Q, the hypothetical documentary precursor to these (and other) shared texts between Matthew and Luke, were more intimately involved in the Greco-Roman world than has sometimes been assumed.⁷ The possibility that these authors integrated Socratic motifs into their presentation of Jesus's subversive activity therefore cannot be discounted. Of course, it cannot be *proven* either. At a minimum, however, I would suggest that as texts contemporary to the Jewish encounter

⁶ For a detailed argument that Matthew 23 has particular affinities with deuteronomic literature (including Jeremiah), see David L. Turner, *Israel's Last Prophet: Jesus and the Jewish Leaders in Matthew 23* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

⁷ Giovanni B. Bazzana, *Kingdom of Bureaucracy: The Political Theology of Village Scribes in the Sayings Gospel Q*, BETL 274 (Leuven: Peeters, 2015); and Sarah E. Rollens, *Framing Social Criticism in the Jesus Movement: The Ideological Project in the Sayings Gospel Q*, WUNT 2/374 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

with Plato, these depictions of Jesus's critiques of the Pharisees offer an opportunity for literary comparison of the biblical prophets and Socrates with a later stage in the ancient Mediterranean discourse of subversive speech.

5.2.2. Subverting Subversive Speech: Jonah and the *Clouds*

If many scholars have found that the Latter Prophets pose a problem within the biblical canon as a whole, then many have also found that one prophetic book poses a problem within the prophetic corpus itself: the book of Jonah. This brief book (just 48 verses in total) is the only work in the Latter Prophets to unfold from start to finish as a third-person prose narrative, as opposed to the more direct, oracular style that dominates elsewhere in the corpus. Moreover, it is the only prophetic book to present a foreign nation (the Assyrians of Nineveh) so positively and to lack any direct concern with Israel as a people.⁸ However, perhaps the single most striking feature of the book is its patent levity. Indeed, there is a lively and compelling scholarly tradition of reading Jonah as nothing less than a satire of prophecy itself.⁹

I would suggest that this satire especially targets the image of the prophet as a social critic. While Jonah is perhaps most popularly remembered as the quintessential *reluctant* prophet, the climax of hilarity in the book concerns his zealotry. Following the Assyrians' miraculously eager acceptance of his rebuke and subsequent repentance, he cries out in frustration to YHWH, "This is just why I got up to flee to Tarshish: because I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in kindness—and that you

⁸ Indeed, the ethnonym "Israel" is absent from the book. When Jonah identifies his national origins, he says only, "I am a Hebrew (עִבְרִי אֲנִי)" (Jon 1:9).

⁹ For an overview, see David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-Prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible*, BJS 301 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 93–159.

would [therefore] relent regarding the evil!” (Jon 4:2). One strongly gets the sense that Jonah *wants* to play the part of the subversive prophet; he *wants* to pour out his wrath upon the people—in this case, not YHWH’s own people but a foreign one. Of course, that wrath is truly only YHWH’s to pour out, resulting in the startling image of the prophet rejecting his divine commissioner’s own compassion. In this way, the book of Jonah artfully and biting reverses the subversive prophetic discourse of authenticity: here, it is the prophet himself who is bloated with pretense, unable to respond to YHWH’s genuine demands even when they are staring him in the face. At the same time, the book looks subversively askance at its ancient audience, showing that even the archetypically wicked Assyrians were capable of heeding the prophetic call for repentance better than YHWH’s own people.

While Plato expertly wielded humor as a literary device (think, for instance, of Euthyphro’s ridiculousness), it is considerably more complicated to determine whether he ever intended Socrates himself to be the butt of the joke. However, there is at least one ancient Greek text for which this is the express purpose: Aristophanes’s *Clouds*, which presents Socrates as a pedantic charlatan—the very image of the sort of sophist that Plato has him attack.¹⁰ In fact, in the *Apology*, Socrates famously mentions Aristophanes by name as a major reason for his ill repute (*Ap.* 19c). As with Jonah, the *Clouds* seems especially eager to pillory the protagonist’s subversive behavior. Utterly dismissing the possibility of a sincere, divinely ordained quest for truth, Aristophanes depicts Socrates as a lawless troublemaker for whom “philosophy” is but a way to undermine reason—“to win cases and master the technicalities and make good, empty arguments” (*Nub.* 874–76).

¹⁰ A helpful overview of the *Clouds* and its relevance for the study of Socrates more generally may be found in David Konstan, “Socrates in Aristophanes’ *Clouds*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Socrates*, ed. Donald R. Morrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 75–90.

Like subversive prophetic and Socratic speech themselves, there parodies thereof hold fundamentally different positions within the respective corpora. Jonah is part of the prophetic literature; the *Clouds* is, by contrast, not a Platonic work at all and therefore, of course, not part of his corpus. That being said, Jonah presumably enjoyed independent circulation before its incorporation into the Twelve and, thereby, into the Latter Prophets as a whole.¹¹ Especially given its tight narrative construction, there is good reason to read it as a stand-alone work—even if as a stepping-stone toward ultimately considering its place in the canon.¹² Moreover, scholars now generally situate the authorship of Jonah in the postexilic period on linguistic, literary, and historical grounds. Its authors were therefore presumably familiar with the motif of the subversive prophet, just as Aristophanes was likely in conversation with the early Socratic circles that would eventually include Plato. For these reasons, Jonah and the *Clouds* offer a promising point of comparison for ancient uses of satire in order to subvert the discourses of subversive prophetic and Socratic speech themselves.

¹¹ Cf. Nogalski, *Redactional Processes*, 265–73.

¹² Cf. Diana V. Edelman, “Jonah among the Twelve in the MT: The Triumph of Torah over Prophecy,” in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud*, eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi, BibleWorld (London: Equinox, 2009), 150–67.

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