

# Alessandro Palazzo and Anna Rodolfi, Prophecy and Prophets in the Middle Ages

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*Prophecy and Prophets in the Middle Ages* edited by Alessandro Palazzo and Anna Rodolfi

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Scholars of medieval and early modern science have long been indebted to the editors of *Micrologus* and the *Micrologus Library* for a series of volumes that broaden the boundaries of the field and deepen our understanding of its contexts. This latest contribution to the *Micrologus Library* offers a wide view of medieval thinking about prophecy. As Palazzo and Rodolfi point out in their introduction to this collection of essays, while numerous scholars have written about prophecies and their various uses by medieval people, there has been far less attention given to philosophical and theological teachings about prophecy. A notable recent exception in English is Brian FitzGerald's excellent *Inspiration and Authority in the Middle Ages: Prophets and Their Critics from Scholasticism to Humanism* [2017], which examines ideas about prophecy and prophetic authority articulated by a number of authors from the 12th through the early 14th centuries. The chapters in Palazzo and Rodolfi's volume—most of which began life as papers at a conference in 2019 on *Il profeta e la profezia tra IX e XV secolo*—expand this investigation, treating discussions of prophecy from the 9th through the 14th centuries in Islamic and Jewish traditions as well as in the European Christian context. This breadth of coverage enables the reader to grasp not simply the influence of key Islamic thinkers on scholastic theologians' discussions of prophecy but also the sheer variety of understandings of the word *prophetia*, as well as of prophecy's relationship to other forms and means of knowing.

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The volume begins with four essays examining prophecy in Islamic and Jewish thought, starting in the ninth century when Islamic thinkers strove to harmonize *falsafa* (Greek philosophy) with religious teachings, especially regarding the central role of the prophet in Islam, both as messenger of God's truth and as enlightened lawgiver and religious guide.

Cecilia Martini Bonadero's essay on prophecy in the works of al-Farabi provides an ideal entrée to this exploration, demonstrating the ways in which al-Farabi worked to explain revelation and prophecy in philosophical terms through the actions of the agent intellect and the imagination, even though, as Bonadero stresses, al-Farabi was not systematic or always consistent in his treatment of prophecy. Bonadero also notes that al-Farabi's philosophical interpretation of revelation allowed him to link the prophet to a type of philosopher-king figure, whose highly developed knowledge and wisdom renders him able to receive in his imagination (a corporeal faculty) impressions from the agent intellect. The prophet then uses the imagination as a creative faculty to create images and persuasive comparisons for the common people in order to explain higher concepts to them (concepts sometimes received *via* revelation), thus combining a political role and a religious one in guiding the people of the virtuous city to the good life.

Amos Bertolacci's examination of Avicenna presents instead a thinker who offered a systematic approach to prophecy, one in which prophecy serves as a bridge of sorts between metaphysics and practical philosophy. Avicenna set forth a metaphysical proof of the existence of prophecy in his *Book of the Cure/Healing*, in which his discussions of the topic appear in sections devoted to psychology, metaphysics, and practical philosophy. As Bertolacci demonstrates, these three treatments, although separate, are nonetheless interlinked. Thus, for example, in the sections analyzing prophecy through the lens of psychology, Avicenna delineated three "types" or "properties" of prophecy: imaginative (that is, the role of the imaginative faculty in receiving prophecies), operative (that is, the prophet's ability to perform miracles), and intellectual (that is, the connection of the prophet's intellect with the active intellect or agent intellect, which Avicenna equated with the 10th heavenly intelligence). Similarly, in the section on metaphysics, Avicenna described prophets as having the most perfect souls and highest virtue, qualities that make them more able to partake in the three types or properties listed above; here, he connected prophecy with revelations made by angels. And in turning to practical philosophy, Avicenna insisted upon the necessity of a prophet/legislator who works miracles in order to ensure that ordinary people listen to his divinely revealed legislation about human affairs.

Marco Signori's chapter on al-Gazali nicely demonstrates the philosopher's efforts to reconcile *falsafa* and prophecy in his *Intentions* or *Doctrines of the Philosophers*. As Signori notes, while this work was ostensibly a "translation" of Avicenna's encyclopedic *Book of Science*, al-Gazali here produced something distinctly his own. In *Doctrines of the Philosophers*, al-Gazali treated prophecy philosophically, as had his source, but he also presented his ideas in terms of, and with the language of, Quranic revelation. According to Signori, al-Gazali effectively showed the harmony of *falsafa* and the prophecy of the Quran, not so much by changing Avicenna's ideas as by his choice of language, employing a "lexicon of revelation" that included multiple quotations from the Quran and the *hadith*. As Signori points out, al-Gazali's work also had a great influence in the West, as it was translated into both Latin and Hebrew.

Concluding the section "Islamic and Jewish Traditions", Marienza Benedetto's chapter on Maimonides demonstrates that the Jewish thinker presented different messages about prophecy for different audiences. Thus, in his commentary on the Torah, Maimonides distinguished sharply between true prophecy (of which Moses represents the only perfect example) and false forms of divination, all of which he linked to idolatry. But in *The Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides delineated a hierarchy of sorts: true prophecy, at the top of the hierarchy, involves both the rational faculty and the imaginative faculty and requires that both faculties be highly developed. In true prophecy, an individual with a worthy intellectual and imaginative faculty receives a great quantity of emanation from God *via* the active intellect. A dreamer or diviner receives a lesser emanation, which is received solely by the imaginative faculty, so that he or she can speak the truth, but is not a true prophet. In Maimonides's arithmetical language in the *Guide*, divination represents only  $\frac{1}{60}$ th of prophecy.

The remainder of the volume is taken up by a larger section on the Christian tradition in a series of chapters that extend in range chronologically from late Antiquity through the 14th century, thus encompassing discussions of prophecy from before as well as after translations from the Arabic brought Islamic prophetology to scholastic theologians.

Beginning the set, Renato de Filippis' essay on prophets and truth in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages examines some key Christian thinkers as they grappled with the following questions: Are there still prophets in Christianity? Who is a prophet and what is his role (as opposed to that of the church hierarchy)? What about false prophets? As de Filippis shows, the answers to these questions were not consistent among early medieval

writers. Augustine established one important tradition, that of the prophet as one who understands spiritual truths (as opposed to one who simply experiences a vision) and who communicates what he has understood, a role that can include interpreting sacred scripture. An alternative definition was articulated by Gregory the Great, for whom prophecy reveals what is hidden or secret, not necessarily just the future, for even the past can be the subject of prophecy. Furthermore, and in contrast to Augustine's theory, for Gregory, the prophet may not completely understand the message that he receives; he is much more a passive conduit for God's voice and thus may fail if he misunderstands the prophecy. Isidore of Seville offered an explanation borrowing from both Augustine and Gregory: prophets see the future and also bring hidden things to light. In keeping with the Gregorian definition of the prophet as a passive receptacle, Isidore also noted that even a bad man can prophesy. According to de Filippis, the uncertain definition of prophecy raised the issue of how one was to distinguish true from false prophecy. One solution was Augustine's insistence that prophets would adopt a special rhetoric (*altera eloquentia*), like scripture, perfectly suited to the message. Citing an 11th-century collection of visions, de Filippis suggests that such language may well have been the determining factor in distinguishing true from false prophecy in the early Middle Ages.

Maria Valeria Ingegno's chapter explores the early 12th-century logician and theologian Gilbert of Poitiers' commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:1–40, in which Paul discusses the gifts of speaking in tongues and of prophecy. Gilbert's analysis distinguished sharply between speaking in tongues and prophecy, with the former related to *spiritus* and the latter related to *mens*. As in the Pauline text, for Gilbert, prophecy implies understanding (whereas speaking in tongues may not) and is superior. Prophecy, accordingly, leads to exegesis of a vision or of scripture and ultimately to preaching or teaching. The gift of tongues, however, is useful for conversion—as a sign to the non-believers—whereas prophecy is continually needed as a means of teaching the church. According to Ingegno, Gilbert's analysis of 1 Corinthians here takes on an anti-heretical and anti-philosophical stance, evident in Gilbert's attack against women preaching or acting as exegetes, an implicit reference to women's roles as preachers among heretical sects.

Anna Rodolfi's essay examines some of the conundrums involved in the scholastic analysis of prophecy through interpretations of the example of Caiaphas [John 11:49–52]. In advising “it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not” [John 11:50, KJV], Caiaphas maliciously intended his words to lead to Christ's death,

but he also unwittingly predicted the redemption, an act for which John explicitly uses the word “prophesied”. Was Caiaphas a prophet? Did he speak truth? Was he inspired by the Holy Spirit? These are questions that 13th-century scholastics such as Hugh of St. Cher, Albertus Magnus, and Alexander of Hales parsed in various ways. What scholastics’ exegesis of Caiaphas’ utterance shared, according to Rodolfi, was a consensus that to prophesy was not necessarily the same thing as to be a prophet (one being an *actus* and the other a *habitus*). In Thomas Aquinas’ hands, this understanding represented an implicit answer to Islamic and Jewish prophethood’s insistence on the moral goodness and perfection of the prophet. According to Thomas, the prophet is an instrument in the hands of God, and prophecy is an *actus*, not a *habitus*; the prophet does not need to reach a union with God that perfects him, but he does need to have a mind that is not impeded by an excessive preoccupation with exterior things, which renders the intellect less receptive to divine messages. In short, scholastic theologians affirmed the divine character of the message received in prophecy, while acknowledging the imperfection of the prophet.

Alessandro Palazzo’s chapter deals with the relationship between divine prescience and prophecy in Meister Eckhart’s commentary on the Gospel of John [John 1:48]. As Palazzo demonstrates, Eckhart was an anomaly among scholastic theologians writing about prophecy, in that he neither addressed the standard questions discussed by most scholastics nor partook in the customary scholastic explanations of prophecy. Instead, Eckhart put forth a metaphysical account of prophecy that blurred the line between natural precognition and divinely inspired knowledge. For Eckhart, biblical prophecy, dreams, divination, and presages are all examples of one and the same thing: foreknowledge. Human foreknowledge, or *praesagium*, according to Eckhart, results from a metaphysical cause, a Neoplatonic emanation transmitted to all creatures and received by them according to their abilities. Ultimately, Eckhart’s view of all foreknowledge as rooted in emanation from the First Cause makes it impossible to distinguish biblical prophecy from natural means of foreknowledge or natural prophecy, meaning that he did not view divination or astrology in the same negative light as other scholastics. For all those reasons, according to Palazzo, Eckhart is often left out of scholars’ treatments of the history of prophecy.

Turning from divinely inspired to human forms of prediction, Francesca Bonini’s chapter investigates the meanings of prognostication (*pronosticatio*) in a plague tractate written by the Augustinian hermit Augustine of Trent in 1340. This was a response to an epidemic mentioned by Giovanni Villani,

of which Augustine offered both an astrological and a medical analysis. Augustine's treatise uses the term "pronosticatio" in both cases, for example, in his claim that similar constellations will allow physicians to predict similar epidemics in the future and his outline of four ways in which one might predict illness and death. Two of these involve astrological techniques, and two are related to Hippocratic medicine, with its emphasis on prognosis, and to the evidently quite real problem of premature burial. In addition to presenting both medical and astrological means of *pronosticatio*, Augustine also took pains to demonstrate that astrological medicine is compatible with Christianity, an indication for Bonini of the author's intended dual audience, composed of both fellow clerics and physicians.

Riccardo Fedriga and Roberto Limonta return the focus to university-trained thinkers in an exploration of the influence of William of Ockham's treatment of prophecy and future contingents. As the authors note, modern scholars have widely assumed that Ockham created a new standard view of the topic (at least in Oxford) in the 14th century. But that assumption turns out to be not entirely the case. After laying out Ockham's views on prophecy, the authors examine two other Oxford thinkers of the first half of the 14th century, Walter Chatton and Richard Kilvington, both of whom preferred not to effect a complete break with earlier prophetology. Ockham's innovation was to move away from an analysis of prophecy in terms of the various faculties of the soul and into a linguistic analysis of prophetic statements based on his theory of knowledge. Hence, Ockham argued that all prophecies (as statements) are conditional, in that they predict the actual occurrence of an event that will take place if a contingent combination of causes occurs. By contrast, Walter Chatton identified prophecy as the cognitive act of assent to a prophetic statement. Before the actual fulfillment of any prophetic statement, the prophet's assent to that statement is neither true nor false, according to Chatton. Divine authority, however, guarantees the correspondence between the statement and the *res* predicted before that correspondence becomes actual. That is, God leads the prophet's mind to assent to future states of affairs that are beyond human cognition, things that he knows but that humans cannot. Prophecies for Chatton are thus not a species of future contingent statements. Richard Kilvington, by contrast, offered a voluntaristic reading of prophecy in which prophecy does remain conditional. For Kilvington, prophecy, or rather *eloquio prophetarum*, does not fix the future or create necessity. When Christ prophesied that Peter would deny him, for example, Peter could have done otherwise *de potentia absoluta* (through God's absolute power). Thus, Kilvington moved away

from Ockham's analysis but did not entirely disregard it. In Kilvington's voluntaristic reading, any revelation established *de potentia ordinata* (through God's ordained power) can be changed by God *de potentia absoluta*.

Finally, Michele Lodone offers a sensitive study of Henry of Langenstein's critique in 1392 of the widely circulated *Libellus*, penned in 1386 by one calling himself Telesphorus of Cosenza. (A helpful appendix lists 69 manuscripts of this work.) Lodone inscribes Telesphorus' compilation of previous prophecies and Langenstein's critique of it within a context of rising theological scrutiny of actual prophecies, especially during the Great Western Schism, through the concern about the discernment of spirits. Henry of Langenstein's treatise against Telesphorus dates to 1392, after he had to flee Paris for Vienna because of his refusal to adhere to the Avignon pope Clement VII, and in it Langenstein highlighted the especially grave danger of false prophets during the Schism. According to Langenstein's critique, true prophets verify their words with miracles and by their saintly virtue, but Telesphorus incorporated the words of several prophetic figures who were in fact superstitious or lacking in authority. Among them figured Joachim of Fiore, who preached merely "from human industry" and not in a true spirit of prophecy. Other presumed prophecies were worded in language so vague that anyone could claim that the prophecy had been fulfilled or remained unfulfilled. Langenstein also worried that prophecies can become self-fulfilling, such as Telesphorus' prediction that lay rulers will despoil the clergy and the church, which Langenstein viewed as an invitation to plunder. Lodone, in highlighting the rational character of Langenstein's objections to Telesphorus, credits the Viennese theologian with producing a critical theory of prophecy.

The editors leave it largely to the readers to draw connections between the various chapters of this volume, and one might wish for a more synthetic introduction that suggests some broader themes. (One imagines such conversations occurring during closing remarks or over dinners and coffee at the conference in 2019.) Reading through the whole set it becomes clear, for example, that Christian scholastic theologians' encounters with Islamic and Jewish teachings on the psychological mechanisms of prophecy were both formative and deeply troubling, in part because they depended upon the notion of a sole agent intellect, a proposition that would be condemned in Paris in 1277.<sup>1</sup> But these sorts of tensions are only adumbrated here, as in

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., Propositions 117 ("That the intellect is numerically one for all, for although it may be separated from this or that body, it is not separated from every body")



Anna Rodolfi's discussion of Thomas Aquinas [183–186]. And while the papers are arranged chronologically, it would have been helpful to have some sort of an overarching view of the history of prophetology, such as suggested in the introductions to the contributions by Riccardo Fedriga and Roberto Limonta and by Michele Lodone, or by the juxtaposition of the essays on 9th–12th-century Islamic and Jewish theories of prophecy with Renato de Filippis' succeeding chapter on prophecy and prophets in late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages (covering thinkers who predate the incorporation of Greco-Arabic philosophical psychology into understandings of prophecy). For the convenience of readers, an English-language abstract is included with each article, and most of the essays have been translated into English from the original languages, albeit with occasional infelicities of phrasing. Still, in keeping with these works' origins in an academic conference, they are written for specialists, and hence the book will be most useful to graduate students and researchers in the field. For that audience, the book represents a valuable contribution to the scholarship on medieval prophecy. While readers may be tempted to turn to just those chapters in their own areas of expertise, the broad sweep presented here demonstrates, as the editors indeed hoped, the value of turning one's scholarly gaze from prophecies proper to theories of prophecy, as well as the wide range of meanings and interpretations attached to the word in the medieval period.

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and 118 (“That the agent intellect is a certain separated substance superior to the possible intellect, and that it is separated from the body according to its substance, power, and operation and is not the form of the human body”) [Hyman and Walsh 1967: 547].