The Truth of Messages from Beyond: Modern UFO Cults and Oracular Prophecy in Herodotus

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ABSTRACT: Current scholarship on the topic of 'failed prophecy', both in social psychology and Classics, seeks to explain how groups continue to believe in prophetic truth even after 'failures'. In this paper, I critically examine the current research to show that this etic (outsider) approach collapses a meaningful distinction between prophetic signs and their interpretations. Going in a different direction, I use evidence for the continuity of belief in prophetic truth from Herodotus' *Histories* and studies on new religious and millennial movements to develop an emic (insider) understanding of what prophecy and prophetic truth are among believers. In so doing, I demonstrate a consonance in thinking about prophecy between ancient and modern groups of believers and distinguish three types of prophetic truth in which such groups may come to believe: fulfilled truth, expectational truth and conditional truth. I conclude by arguing that it is only ever a specific expectation, framed by a particular (usually literal and conventional) interpretation of a prophecy – not the prophecy itself – that may be understood as proven false. This clearer delineation of prophetic sign and prophetic meaning have benefits for interpreting Herodotus' *Histories* and for understanding those who believe in prophecy today.

KEYWORDS: oracles, divination, prophecy, Herodotus, social psychology, cognitive dissonance, new religious movements, millennial movements

INTRODUCTION

Scholars in Classics are too comfortable in their thinking that prophecies do not come true. Pierre Bonnechere expresses the common reasoning well when he writes, 'As for erroneous predictions, unless one actually believes in Apollo, one must admit a real percentage of error.'[1] Since in a modern, post-Enlightenment view, no intellectually respectable person actually believes in Apollo, let alone the rest of the Greek pantheon, this much seems common sense. The fascinating question for modern scholars, then, is how belief in the truth of oracular prophecy was maintained in communities that must have experienced the disappointment of this 'real percentage of error'. Most studies on the subject of 'failed prophecy' are devoted to parsing the types of thinking by which the Greeks reconciled this reality with their belief.[2] In instances where oracles were 'falsified', they have pointed out that consultants may come to believe that they had misinterpreted them. Oracles could, after all, appear vague or, on closer inspection, only seem to approve an action as opposed to promising success. Some vague oracles seemed to be ambiguous, and so they could be reinterpreted as being fulfilled in unanticipated outcomes. Others were not so specific as to indicate a particular

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[1] Bonnechere 2007: 147.
[2] Harrison 2000: 122–57; Bonnechere 2007: 147; Flower 2008: 107–8; Maurizio 2013.

time for success, and so consultants could continue to expect their fulfilment later. Variations in divinatory abilities and malfeasance on the part of priest(esse)s and delegates could also be called upon to excuse erroneous predictions.

The consensus, though, is that these explanations amount to 'strategies' or 'loopholes' to 'explain away' inaccuracies and, thus, allow people to continue believing in their demonstrably false prophecies.[3] Thomas Harrison puts the case thus:

> [I]t is important to emphasize that the various turns of argument by which belief in the fulfilment of oracles and other forms of divination is maintained do not constitute a consciously developed system but rather a set of *ad hoc* strategies for answering the questions that a belief in divination inevitably threw up. Divination, in the words of Liebeschütz, was 'to a considerable extent … protected by the vagueness of its theoretical principles'. Any attempt to excavate the network of such principles will tend to lend them an artificial impression of coherence.[4]

The idea here is that an unsystematic and largely unconscious set of rationalizations was always at hand for believers to insulate their belief in the power of divination from 'empirical refutation'.[5] Esther Eidinow's recent study has proposed the need for more nuance and challenged us not to see 'structural blocks to falsification' here – these are ways in which 'facts and theories lose their potential for coming into direct opposition'.[6] Rather, she wants us to see the effects of individual and social cognitive processes. However, the pervasive and persuasive assumption in all the scholarship is that there are such clearly identifiable and inevitable contradictions between prophecies and reality that one may speak etically of objective 'non-fulfilment', 'failure' or 'disconfirmation'. The etic objectivity of these modern studies has been set in opposition to the emic subjectivity of ancient beliefs. While those beliefs are made understandable to most modern minds in this way, they are, often incidentally, rendered stupid, irrational or just plain wrong.

To be sure, these studies have added significantly to our knowledge of divination in the ancient world, but it is worth interrogating this modern sense of objectivity. The notion that prophecy can fail is fundamentally at odds with the perspective of those ancients who believed that their oracles were true, even where modern researchers have concluded that they had actually failed. Clearly, then, the ancient perspective is different from that generally adopted by those who study it today. Thus, examining how the Greeks found their oracles to be true adds to our knowledge of what prophecy was to the people who believed in it.

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[3] Flower 2008: 108; Maurizio 2013: 68.
[4] Harrison 2000: 155–6, quoting J.H.W.G. Liebeschütz's *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (1979): 24.
[5] Harrison 2000: 140.
[6] Eidinow 2023: 100, quoting John Skorupski's *Symbol and Theory* (1976): 5.

In this paper, I argue that recent scholarship on ancient oracles collapses a meaningful distinction between belief in a prophecy and belief in an interpretation of that prophecy. It is an elision that is borrowed from social psychology research on prophetic disconfirmation and has profound consequences for interpreting the ancient evidence. First, by analysing the background studies in social psychology, I show that this research often contains a tacit assumption that prophecy is only interpreted correctly when it is done literally and conventionally as bearing upon observable phenomena. While this is a valid, etic way to assess prophetic beliefs, the evidence indicates that believers in prophecy may possess a broader hermeneutic and trust in the reality of non-observable phenomena. Thus, they often come to think that their prophecies were actually fulfilled, might still be fulfilled or could have been fulfilled under different circumstances. For this reason, I suggest that a more emic perspective on prophecy offers something beyond just another way to understand the evidence. It illuminates what oracles and prophecies are to those who believe in them and in what ways they may be considered true. Secondly, by comparing stories from new religious and millennial movements to oracular tales from Herodotus' *Histories*, I define and illustrate three different types of prophetic truth: fulfilled truth, expectational truth and conditional truth. The basic consonance in beliefs about prophetic truth between the groups of believers in the modern world and those in the world of the *Histories* assures us that Herodotus' depiction is a realistic one. Finally, I conclude that the different types of prophetic truth identified by believers prove that a prophetic sign is a very different thing from an interpretation of a prophetic sign.

The background

Interest in 'failed prophecy' is rarely found outside of the field of social psychology. It was here that Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter were working when they wrote *When Prophecy Fails* in 1956. In this classic book, they first laid out the theory of cognitive dissonance to test their hypotheses about what believers do when their prophecies are 'disconfirmed'.[7] In summary, their theory holds that there exists a tension between cognitions and reality. When a person experiences stress because of a disjuncture between the two (cognitive dissonance), they will seek to reduce the disparity in some way and bring cognitions and reality back into tolerable tension.

Using this theory, Festinger, Riecken and Schachter sought to explain their observations about certain prophetic movements (early Christianity, Montanism, Sabbatai Zevi and the Millerites).[8] As they understood matters, there is a paradox in the survival of these groups after 'objective disconfirmation' of their prophecies. Believers did not completely discard their beliefs as expected. Instead, they eliminated cognitive dissonance by ignoring challenging realities or reduced it by revising their beliefs in prophecy with 'rationalizations' (explanations, revisions

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[7] Festinger 1957 develops the theory.
[8] Festinger et al. 1956: 6–25.

or reinterpretations) or by proselytizing (i.e. persuading others of the validity of their beliefs).[9]

Determining the conditions under which proselytizing would be a predictable response to 'disconfirmed prophecy' was the central focus of *When Prophecy Fails*. Festinger, Riecken and Schachter argued that 'increased fervor' could be expected under five conditions: 1) the belief is deeply held and relevant to behaviour; 2) the person holding the belief is committed to it by important actions that are difficult to undo; 3) the belief must be specific enough that events can prove the belief unequivocally false; 4) undeniable evidence of disconfirmation must be identifiable and perceived by the believer; and 5) the believer has social support from other believers.[10]

They tested their hypothesis by infiltrating a group they called 'the Seekers'.[11] This group believed, among other things, that 'Marian Keech' of 'Lake City' (really Dorothy Martin of Chicago) was contacted by extraterrestrial beings of higher spiritual power, called the Guardians. One of the main contacts among the Guardians was named Sananda and believed to be a manifestation of Jesus Christ. According to 'Keech', Sananda communicated that on 21 December 1954 a great flood that would destroy much of the western hemisphere. Additionally, 'Keech' was informed that members of her group were to be rescued from the cataclysm by spacemen in flying saucers. The 'prophecy' seemed very specific, and the most devoted members believed in it ardently enough that they quit their jobs and took other significant measures. The winter solstice came and went. When no deluge materialized, the group, which had been very reluctant to share their beliefs with outsiders, began a flurry of public activity. They even used the media attention they received to claim, by way of another message from Sananda, that the light of their vigil had spread broadly enough to spare the planet its impending doom. If their theory was correct, the researchers had witnessed first-hand how a group dealt with extreme cognitive dissonance, and their predicted increase in proselytizing was confirmed.

Subsequent experimental studies in social psychology have generally supported the fundamentals of cognitive dissonance theory, though not without controversy.[12] Outside of the laboratory, however, social psychologists did not find the same results among new religious and millennial movements with prophetic beliefs as Festinger, Riecken and Schachter did among 'the Seekers'. The problem, in their view, was that Festinger, Riecken and Schachter had placed too much importance on proselytizing as a reaction to 'prophetic disconfirmation' and had been overly confident in their ability objectively to identify the moment at which cognitive dissonance would be experienced.[13]

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[9] Festinger et al. 1956: 26–8.
[10] Festinger et al. 1956: 3–4.
[11] Even among its first reviewers, the study was criticized on ethical grounds, and it seems very possible that the observers, who formed as much as a third of the group at various critical times, could have skewed the results by their very presence. See Johnson 2011: 11.
[12] Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019.
[13] See Stone 2011: 47–8 and Hood 2011: 28–9.

Later studies on new religious and millennial movements showed that proselytizing was not a predictable or common reaction to 'disconfirmation' of prophecy, even under the conditions that *When Prophecy Fails* had specified.[14] This weakness in the theory prompted researchers to investigate other kinds of reactions under the same set of conditions and to interrogate the social dynamics and thought-worlds in these groups to account for their survival. There is now, for example, broad agreement that timely internal social support provided by both leadership and other members is vital for group survival.[15] On the other hand, some have emphasized the robustness of a group's existing doctrine, worship and ethics, and have pointed out that these groups believe in far more than just a set of prophecies.[16] In-group world-views may come fortified not only by other beliefs and practices that can be re-emphasized after 'disconfirmation', but also by complex symbolic and reasoning systems that can be called upon to 'rationalize' 'prophetic failure'. By concerning themselves with what and how these groups think, researchers have demonstrated in many instances that believers appear not to recognize the 'disconfirmation' that social psychologists do. Rather, in some instances, members of these groups actually believe their prophecies to have been fulfilled.[17] This difference between the emic perspective of believing groups and the etic perspective of researchers has had important and underappreciated consequences.

A close look at Joseph Zygmunt's analysis of prophecy among Jehovah's Witnesses reveals two key factors in considering the problem of 'prophetic failure':

> First, the prophecies were phrased in a manner that made them only partially open to disconfirmation. As already indicated, they were derived from the broader belief system and had both supernatural and empirical reference. Insofar as they pertained to prospective events of a supernatural character, the group's faith in its own belief system provided a basis for the claim of fulfillment, and the selective perception of 'objective' events, under the influence of the belief system, furnished supportive 'empirical' evidence. In this sense and to this extent, the prophecies could not 'fail'.[18]

There are, then, two important considerations when dealing with prophecy from the point of view of social psychology: 1) the qualities of prophecy itself and 2) the belief system that supports prophecy and makes it intelligible among believers.

1) The issue with the qualities of the prophecy impinges on the third criterion of Festinger, Riecken and Schachter: the prophecy must be specific enough

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[14] Hardyck and Braden 1962; Balch et al. 1983; Balch et al. 1997; Dawson 1999. Studies on the Jehovah's Witnesses highlight the fact that disconfirmation actually disrupted proselytization for a period, despite the fact that it was already a significant charism of their religious lives. See Zygmunt 1970 and Schmalz 1994. Weiser 1974, though, supports the proselytizing response.

[15] See especially Balch et al. 1983; Dawson 2011; Dawson and Whitsel 2011.

[16] Zygmunt 1972; Melton 1985; Singelenberg 1989; Johnson 2011.

[17] Zygmunt 1972; Foster 1993; Melton 1985: 21–5.

[18] Zygmunt 1972: 944.

that it may be said to have been objectively 'disconfirmed'. As some scholars have pointed out, though, prophecies can be vague and ambiguous enough that reinterpretation is possible in cases of 'prophetic failure'.[19] The problem of prophetic vagueness and ambiguity, though, is far more extensive than current studies have appreciated. Even the seemingly most straightforward prediction can be interpreted in multiple ways. Robert Carroll provides an example of a prediction that he believes to be easily verified or falsified: 'It will rain tomorrow.' Obviously, if we are to take its meaning conventionally and literally, the statement will be true if one goes outside tomorrow and observes the familiar effects of rainfall. No doubt this is why Carroll thought its verification or falsification to be so easy. However, nothing *compels* one to understand the meaning of the prediction either conventionally or literally. Much depends, for instance, on the meaning of the verb 'rain'. The claim could be considered predictive under the circumstances of local atmospheric precipitation (naturally falling water), driving through a car wash (artificially falling water) or even 'making it rain' at the club (money falling like water). There is also the problem that 'rain' is not so specific as to determine a quantity. So, even if understood literally and as indicating a natural phenomenon, both a Presbyterian sprinkle and genuine Baptist downpour might be said to fulfil the prediction.

Further, it is only by convention that we may understand the prediction to pertain to any specific location or time. We may suppose that it pertains to the location of the speaker and to the day after it was made. But since this prediction is, in fact, written in a book, we could believe that the prediction pertains to wherever Carroll lived and whenever he wrote the words, or wherever the reader is and whenever that person reads them. Hermeneutical experimentation with this example illustrates that language is an imperfect and inexact tool. This imprecision means – and this is key – that crafting an objectively falsifiable prediction is impossible without a convention of understanding that allows it to be objectively falsifiable. This more realistic appreciation of language directly challenges the presumed objectivity claimed in modern studies of what is called 'failed prophecy'.

2) Regarding the consideration of in-group belief systems, believers in prophecy also have modes and methods of interpretation that can make their prophecies intelligible. In other words, the people to whom the prophecies are meaningful in the first place tend to have the means to discover that meaning even in changed circumstances. Scholarship on new religious and millennial movements has often referred to this kind of thinking pejoratively as 'rationalizations', 'face-saving strategies' or 'cognitive errors' and has created a typology to differentiate them.[20] Thus, when faced with an event that cannot literally and conventionally confirm their expectations for a prophecy, some groups come to believe that the expected event really did happen, in an unexpected way at a different level of reality (i.e. 'spiritualization'). Believers may suppose that they have simply misinterpreted the message from beyond or made a miscalculation relating to it (i.e. 'human error'). Sometimes they come to believe that the would-be agents

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[19] Zygmunt 1970: 264; Carroll 1979: 112–17; Palmer and Finn 1992: 407.
[20] Zygmunt 1972: 259–65; Weiser 1974: 22–6; Melton 1985: 21–7; Foster 1993; Dawson 1999: 64–9; Jimenez Murguia 2011: 110–12.

of the expected event decided not to act after all (i.e. 'test of faith'). Other times, groups may possess an idiosyncratic system of thought that appears to insulate their prophecies from 'failure' altogether.[21] What comes into focus is a classic problem of emic and etic definitions. While some researchers observe and study what they typically call 'prophetic failure' (etic), members of new religious and millennial movements continue to believe that their prophecies have been fulfilled, could have been fulfilled if the right conditions had been met or are still waiting for fulfilment (emic). For them, their prophecies are messages that contain something true, even if that truth is unexpected, difficult to interpret or conditional.

As I have argued, however, prophecies are never 'falsifiable' in the strictest sense of the term, apart from a specific interpretation that makes them meaningful to someone. Further, researchers have shown that those who believe in prophecies use a much broader hermeneutic system than modern researchers do in understanding that prophetic meaning. The objectivist and etic perspective of researchers has, therefore, only grasped one side of a two-sided problem. The current focus in scholarship, both in social psychology and Classics, has been on using a notion of 'prophetic failure' to understand how groups continue to believe in prophecy. I propose to use evidence for the continuity of belief in prophecy to develop a better understanding of what prophecy is among believers. Adopting this emic perspective will help to form a more complete understanding of the phenomenon.

THREE TYPES OF PROPHETIC TRUTH

Among believers, there appears to be a prevailing assumption that prophecy is by its nature true. False prophecy, therefore, is effectively an utterance that is not prophetic.[22] We can observe this from how groups of believers deal with prophecy. This truth comes in different forms, and I distinguish three types: 1) fulfilled truth, 2) expectational truth and 3) conditional truth.

1) Fulfilled truth is what group members may come to believe when a prophecy seems to them to map onto their experiences. Typically, this kind of truth is understood from an unexpected interpretation of the prophecy. The story of The Shrine of Fundamental Truth is an excellent example of a group that discovers this kind of truth. Its leader received a series of messages from the 'holy spirit' that indicated a great and destructive earthquake would happen 'before or after' (!) 8:00 a.m. on 18 June 1974. Naturally, believers took the precautions that would be expected of people who had understood the prophecy literally and conventionally: pamphleteering, stockpiling of supplies and selling off possessions they expected to lose. No earthquake happened on the predicted day.

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[21] Tumminia 2005: 39–45.
[22] There were certain oracles that could be thought of as untrue, even by people within the culture, but in the *Histories*, this thought is rare. Herodotus only tells one story in which certain Egyptian oracles are explicitly presented as not speaking the truth in failing to convict Amasis of theft (2.174.1–2). Croesus' test of oracles (1.46–9) might seem to offer a glimpse at how oracles could be proven false, but see my interpretation in Crosby 2022. For an explanation of the oracles called κίβδηλοι, literally 'alloyed' (Hdt. 1.66.3, 1.75.2, 5.91.2), see Harrison 2000: 152 n. 109.

Active members in the group at the time of the researcher's reporting, though, believed that God had brought the earthquake to bear on their leader's body. The leader, in fact, had attempted suicide some time shortly after 8:00 a.m. that day by cutting his abdomen. The leader explained that, as he lay bleeding before the altar, 'I thought that I had managed to get out of my body at last, and I was greatly surprised to find that my body had changed itself into the islands of Japan and that a fire had broken out at its center. Then I knew that God had transferred the cataclysm to my own body.'[23] Obviously, this interpretation of the prophecy is very different from the one that was first accepted by the group. Nevertheless, this reinterpretation was performed to recognize that the prophecy unexpectedly but truly prefigured this suicide attempt as a cataclysm.[24]

In Herodotus, fulfilled truth is found in nearly all his stories about oracles. While some oracles are fulfilled in the ways that consultants anticipate, interpretation can become complicated and more creative when attempting to recognize the truth of oracles in unanticipated outcomes. The most familiar example comes from the story of Croesus' oracles about 'destroying a great empire' (μεγάλην ἀρχήν μιν καταλύσειν, 1.53.3). Thinking that these oracles predicted the fall of the Persian Empire, Croesus attacked. In the event, though, he fulfilled the oracles by 'ending his own great empire' (καταπαύσαντα τὴν ἑωυτοῦ μεγάλην ἀρχήν, 1.86.1). Similarly, when the Spartans asked the Delphic oracle for Arcadia, the Pythia said that they would 'measure out a beautiful plain with a cord' (καλὸν πεδίον σχοίνῳ διαμετρήσασθαι, 1.66.2). Believing that Delphi had prophesied their victory, the Spartans went into battle with chains to enslave the Tegaeans. However, they lost the battle and ended up 'measuring out the plain of the Tegaeans with a cord' (σχοίνῳ διαμετρησάμενοι τὸ πεδίον τὸ Τεγεητέων, 1.66.4) as slaves working the land. Finally, the Delphic oracle told Cleomenes that he would 'capture Argos' (Ἄργος αἱρήσειν, 6.76.1). He therefore launched an expedition against the Argives, but then he learnt that he had burned a grove sacred to Argus, the former king and eponym of the *polis* of Argos. Cleomenes understood from this incident that the oracle had been fulfilled: 'Oracular Apollo, you have deceived me greatly indeed saying that I would destroy Argos (Ἄργος αἱρήσειν). I conjecture that my oracle is fulfilled (ἐξήκειν)' (6.80).[25] He then marched his army back to Sparta. At the risk of running roughshod over the narrative complexities here, the consultants in all these stories (and the historian) discover a truth in the oracles that was unexpected when they first interpreted them. Nevertheless, the truth of each oracle is confirmed by how its words correspond to the consultant's experiences of events.

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[23] Sanada 1979: 227. Sanada makes it clear that there were several other interpretations of the whole affair that members took up at various times but that this was the one that was widely accepted.

[24] The idea that God had transferred the cataclysm from Japan to the leader's body indicates that the prophecy did, in fact, prefigure the devastation of Japan at one time. However, when God transferred the damage from Japan to a human body, the truth of the prophecy itself seems to have been understood as changing with the transfer. In this example, we notice shades of a 'test of faith'.

[25] See also Hdt. 6.82.1.

2) Expectational truth is identifiable when believers' hopes for fulfilment go unmet and are postponed but remain largely unchanged. Usually, the postponement of prophetic expectation is deemed necessary because of human error (i.e. misinterpretation or miscalculation). A group called the Church of the True Word provides an example. Using the book of Revelation prophetically, they believed that a third of the population of the planet would be wiped out in a nuclear holocaust. In anticipation, many believers left their jobs and homes, built bomb shelters and stockpiled resources to survive the disaster. On 4 July 1960, a prophet received the message, 'The Egyptians are coming; get ye to the safe places.' The believers descended into their shelters and stayed there for forty-two days. When they emerged into a largely unchanged world, they celebrated their fellowship and the strengthening of their faith. The group later explained that they had misunderstood the prophecy. Jane Hardyck and Marcia Braden reported:

> They had discovered by looking back over all of their messages that it had never been stated that the attack was imminent; they had simply misunderstood God's purposes. Really, God had just been using them to warn a world that was asleep, while at the same time, He was testing their faith. They had passed the test and thus proved themselves even more worthy to be among God's elect. We further discovered that they all continued to believe that an attack would come soon.[26]

Thus, when the expected event did not happen, the group continued to believe that their literal and conventional expectations of the prophecy would be met at some point in time. In their eyes, the only problem was that they had made assumptions about the timing of the nuclear holocaust that the prophecy did not support.

This view of prophetic truth is also found in Herodotus' oracular tales. When the Thebans were seeking revenge against the Athenians, the Delphic oracle told them that revenge would not be 'from themselves' and 'to ask their nearest' (ἀπὸ σφέων μὲν αὐτῶν ... τῶν ἄγχιστα δέεσθαι, 5.79.1). After conjecturing that Apollo meant the Aeginetans by 'their nearest', the Thebans asked them for their help and were given the sacred images of the Aeacidae (5.80.2). They took these images into battle with the Athenians, obviously expecting that the Aeacidae would exact revenge for them, but they lost the battle (5.81.1). Disappointed in their belief, the Thebans returned the Aeacidae and asked the Aeginetans for men instead. This decision subtly acknowledges that they had misinterpreted the oracle. Although the Thebans persisted in believing that they were told to ask the Aeginetans, they determined that the Aeginetans would indeed help avenge them later in time – by attacking the Athenians while they were engaged against the Thebans elsewhere. The Thebans' insistence that this oracle indicated truth prompted them to reinterpret it in such a way that they could postpone their original expectation for the fulfilment of their promised revenge.

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[26] Hardyck and Braden 1962: 139.

3) Finally, there is a conditional type of prophetic truth, one that is contingent on certain provisions being accomplished by all involved (humans and other beings). Believers may find this kind of truth in prophecies that they think were true at the moment of their pronouncement but did not stay true with the passage of time. In other words, they may come to believe that the circumstances that once necessitated the prophesied outcome have changed. Sometimes prophecies are contingent on the will of the divine, supernatural or superhuman beings that transmit them and are responsible for bringing them to fulfilment. Naturally, the more competition there is between the interests of these higher beings and the greater the difference between their powers and any stronger resisting forces, the more likely a prophecy will have only conditional truth.[27] The leader of the Pana-Wave Laboratory, Yuko Chino, provides an example. She claimed to have received several prophecies from extraterrestrials. The first was that the close proximity of the planet Nibiru to Earth on 15 May 2003 would cause a shift in the magnetic poles that would trigger massive earthquakes and tsunamis.[28] No such thing happened that day. Salvador Jimenez Murguia records, though, that members 'began to rationalize' the prophecy. In their understanding, they had been given a divine reprieve. The date had been changed because, as one believer put it, 'the gods and our chairman did not wish for the end of the world'.[29] The part of the thinking here to which I want to draw attention is the belief that the prophecy would have been fulfilled at the time and in the way expected, but the beings with the power to make it happen were reluctant to act.[30]

In another set of prophecies, Yuko Chino set the new date to the spring of 2005 and prophesied that flying saucers would arrive beforehand to rescue believers. On 13 December 2004, however, another memorandum was issued stating that 'All 21 units of the UFO fleet have crashed into the sea, as a result of shortage of food and fuel.'[31] This time, believers came to think that the extraterrestrials had the will and had even attempted to save them as they said they would in the prophecy. The problem was that they were poorly supplied with the provisions necessary to accomplish the task and so, being subject to such failures, perished.

The situation with the ill-fated fleet of flying saucers recalls the Pythia's defence of Apollo to Croesus. The Lydian king complained that Apollo had deceived him despite being the beneficiary of his extravagant gifts. The Pythia responded (1.91.1–3):

Τὴν πεπρωμένην μοῖραν ἀδύνατά ἐστι ἀποφυγεῖν καὶ θεῷ. Κροῖσος δὲ
πέμπτου γονέος ἁμαρτάδα ἐξέπλησε, ὃς ἐὼν δορυφόρος Ἡρακλειδέων
δόλῳ γυναικηΐῳ ἐπισπόμενος ἐφόνευσε τὸν δεσπότην καὶ ἔσχε τὴν

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[27] A study of how prophecy is understood as being fulfilled may have much to teach us about a group's beliefs about the nature of the beings who contact them.
[28] Jimenez Murguia 2011: 104.
[29] Jimenez Murguia 2011: 105.
[30] This example might also be considered one of expectational truth since the expected event was postponed.
[31] Jimenez Murguia 2011: 106.

ἐκείνου τιμὴν οὐδέν οἱ προσήκουσαν. Προθυμεομένου δὲ Λοξίεω
ὅκως ἂν κατὰ τοὺς παῖδας τοῦ Κροίσου γένοιτο τὸ Σαρδίων πάθος
καὶ μὴ κατ' αὐτὸν Κροῖσον, οὐκ οἷός τε ἐγένετο παραγαγεῖν Μοίρας.
Ὅσον δὲ ἐνέδωκαν αὗται, ἤνυσέ τε καὶ ἐχαρίσατό οἱ· τρία γὰρ ἔτεα
ἐπανεβάλετο τὴν Σαρδίων ἅλωσιν· καὶ τοῦτο ἐπιστάσθω Κροῖσος, ὡς
ὕστερον τοῖσι ἔτεσι τούτοισι ἁλοὺς τῆς πεπρωμένης.

It is impossible to avoid the allotted fate, even for a god. Croesus
paid for the error of his fifth-generation ancestor who, as a spearman
obedient to a woman's plot, murdered his master and held that man's
office even though it did not in any way belong to him. Although
Loxias desired that the suffering of Sardis happen in the time of his
children and not that of Croesus himself, he was not able to bypass
the Fates. But however much they conceded, he accomplished and
granted to him. For he postponed the sack of Sardis for three years.
And let Croesus know this: that it was sacked three years later than
was allotted.

The thinking about the gods represented here is reminiscent of that about
extraterrestrials found within the Pana-Wave Laboratory group. Ultimately, Apollo
did not have the power to override the Fates, only to defer what was fated. This
admission, of course, raises the possibility that the gods could promise to help
a consultant but be prevented from doing so by more powerful forces. Thus,
an oracular prophecy might only be conditionally true, more powerful forces
notwithstanding. Although this might seem to be an unsatisfactory excuse to
modern thinking, comparison with the case of the Pana-Wave Laboratory suggests
that believers can discover this kind of truth and think it reasonable.

Sometimes in Herodotus the conditional nature of the prophecy is made
explicit in the wording of the oracle. When the Athenians sought revenge against
the Aeginetans for their 'unheralded war', the Pythia told them that (5.89.2):

ἐπισχόντας ἀπὸ τοῦ Αἰγινητέων ἀδικίου τριήκοντα ἔτεα τῷ ἑνὶ καὶ
τριηκοστῷ Αἰακῷ τέμενος ἀποδέξαντας ἄρχεσθαι τοῦ πρὸς Αἰγινήτας
πολέμου, καί σφι χωρήσειν τὰ βούλονται· ἢν δὲ αὐτίκα ἐπιστρατεύωνται,
πολλὰ μὲν σφεας ἐν τῷ μεταξὺ τοῦ χρόνου πείσεσθαι, πολλὰ δὲ καὶ
ποιήσειν, τέλος μέντοι καταστρέψεσθαι.

[H]aving kept away from the injustice of the Aeginetans for thirty
years, in the thirty-first year, and after assigning a sanctuary for
Aeacus, they should begin the war against the Aeginetans, and that
their wishes will come true; but if they should attack presently, that
they will, on the one hand, suffer many things in the intervening time,
and will, on the other, accomplish many things, and will subjugate
them in the end.[32]

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[32]   See also Hdt. 4.163.2–3.

The Athenians, then, appear to have had a choice about what to do. At first, they attempted to bide their time patiently, but before the thirty years were over had reached the point where they could hold off no longer (5.89.3–90.1). When they launched their attack, they fulfilled the second part of the oracle and could look forward to accomplishing and suffering much in the Persian Wars that followed (6.88–94.1).[33] In light of this fulfilment, the first part of the oracle could come to be understood as possessing a conditional truth, the fulfilment of which was apparently subject to the consultants' free choice.

In other stories, consultants appear to hope (usually in vain) for this sort of prophetic truth when they seek to avoid the negative outcomes that their oracles seem to predict. Arcesilaus tried to avoid what he believed to be his predicted death by staying away from 'sea-girt' Cyrene (4.163.2–164.4). Triton told the Argonauts that when one of their descendants took possession of his tripod, the Greeks would need to establish one hundred cities around his lake (4.179.3). Thus, the Libyans hid the tripod to prevent it being discovered. The Spartans meddled in Athenian affairs on two separate occasions to avoid fulfilling oracles predicting their suffering from growing Athenian power (5.90–1, 8.141–2).

Although Herodotus does not seem to endorse the notion that genuine oracles could be devoid of all truth (see 3.16.6–7), his editorializing can give a sense that the worst kinds of fulfilment might have been avoided. He claims that both Arcesilaus, in the case above (1.71.1), and Croesus, in dealing with his 'great empire', 'missed the point of the oracle[s]' (ἁμαρτὼν τοῦ χρησμοῦ, 4.164.4). Also, Herodotus' note that Polycrates ignored all foreboding oracles and a dream prior to his trip to Magnesia suggests that he might have taken their advice and avoided his prophesied death there (3.124.1–125.3). Elsewhere, Herodotus explains that the Euboeans had an oracle of Bacis that told them to 'Be careful, whenever the barbarian-tongued should throw a papyrus yoke into the sea, to keep the much-bleating goats away from Euboea.' The oracle was fulfilled by Xerxes' bridging of the Hellespont and Themistocles' mass slaughter of the Euboeans' flocks (7.33.1–37.1, 8.19.1–2). However, Herodotus adds, 'Being unready to pay attention to those words that were declared, they were ready all the more to pay attention to their misfortune, both in their present ills then and the ones to come' (Τούτοισι δὴ οὐδὲν τοῖσι ἔπεσι χρησαμένοισι, ἐν τοῖσι τότε παρεοῦσί τε καὶ προσδοκίμοισι κακοῖσι παρῆν σφι συμφορῇ χρᾶσθαι πρὸς τὰ μέγιστα, 8.20.2). In blaming the Euboeans for their own misfortune, the implication seems to be that this specific outcome might have been avoidable. For example, the Euboeans might have fulfilled the oracle differently by removing their animals to safety. In such a case, this oracle would possess a sort of conditional truth: 'If you do not move your flocks from Euboea, they will all die.' In the end, though, Herodotus indicates that the type of prophetic truth found in these oracles was understood in real (not hypothetical) moments of fulfilment: a lost kingdom, death, expanding Athenian power and the slaughter of livestock.

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[33] See Crosby 2021.

Concluding discussion

As I have shown, believers may consider their prophecies to have several different kinds of truth when faced with unanticipated outcomes. They may think that their prophecies are true in a way they had not originally expected, will be true in the expected way at a later point in time or would have been true if other factors had not intervened. These findings suggest that prophetic truth is thought to be a constant even though believers' understanding of it may change according to their experiences. There is, then, an important and rarely noticed distinction to be made between a prophecy and an expectation framed by an interpretation of the prophecy.[34] It is not the prophecy that is falsified; nor, for this reason, can we speak of 'prophetic failure'. Rather, it is always a specific expectation, framed by a particular (usually literal and conventional) interpretation of a prophecy, that even believers will agree to have been disconfirmed under certain circumstances.

The history of the Millerites used by Festinger, Riecken and Schachter in *When Prophecy Fails* can clarify this point. After some years of studying the Bible, William Miller predicted that Jesus Christ's second coming would occur in the year 1843.[35] This prediction was an interpretation of several passages from the Bible that he believed to be prophetic. The second coming is prophesied *inter alia* in Acts 1:11, but Miller calculated the year 1843 from the 2,300 days of cleansing in the sanctuary mentioned in Daniel 8:14. Interpreting prophetic days to mean secular years, he simply added 2,300 years to the supposed date of the prophecy in 457 BC. It may be fair to offer that the events of 1843–4, sometimes called the Great Disappointment, apparently disconfirmed Miller's original interpretation. There is no sense, however, in which the events of those years may be said to have disconfirmed either the prophecy of Christ's return in Acts 1:11 – famously open-ended as this prophecy is – or the prophetic value of Daniel 8:14. All that may be said is that neither of these passages seems to have meant exactly what Miller thought. There is, therefore, an important difference between a prophetic sign (whether a divinely inspired word or interplanetary communication) and an interpretation (a claim about the meaning of a prophetic sign that gives a framework to an expectation, guides action and becomes falsifiable).

This distinction is not observed in studies of prophecy within social psychology, which approach the problem from the perspective of 'prophetic failure'. So, when scholars in Classics adopt the same perspective they similarly do not observe this meaningful distinction. The effects of this can be seen in how some recent scholars have discussed the example of Doreius' expedition to Sicily in Herodotus.

For background, Doreius desired to found a Spartan colony. Antichares of Eleon told him that he should found one in Sicily. He explained by citing an oracle

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[34]   Current research almost never mentions this distinction, and when it does, it is not taken seriously. In their study of a Baha'i sect, Balch et al. 1997: 79–80 enumerate explanations that members of the sect used to explain prophetic 'failure'. One of these explanations was that there is a difference between prophecy and prediction. The researchers, though, seem to scoff at this distinction, lumping it together with other 'face-saving strategies'.

[35]   Festinger et al. 1956: 12–23.

of Laius that named 'Heraclean land in Sicily' (Ἡρακλείην γῆν ἐν Σικελίῃ), claiming, therefore, that 'all the land of Eryx belonged to the Heraclidae, since Heracles himself came into possession of it' (τὴν Ἔρυκος χώρην πᾶσαν εἶναι Ἡρακλειδέων, αὐτοῦ Ἡρακλέος κτησαμένου, 5.43). Doreius then went to Delphi and asked the oracle 'whether he will take land to which he heads' (εἰ αἱρέει ἐπ' ἣν στέλλεται χώρην), and the Pythia's pronouncement is simply expressed with a single word that 'he will take it' (αἱρήσειν). Harrison, though, has summarized the episode, saying, 'Doreius, for example, on consulting Delphi as to *whether he should undertake a colony to Eryx* (a plan inspired by some prophecies of Laius), *is simply told that he should* (5.43).'[36] Similarly, Lisa Maurizio writes that 'When Doreius, the younger brother of Kleomenes, leaves Sparta, he receives advice from Antichares of Eleon to take Eryx, the region in western Sicily that belonged to Heracles, and thus to Doreius, his descendant. Doreius consults with Delphi *and is told "to take it."*'[37] In these representations of the story, the Pythia's oracle is understood to reflect Doreius' intent in asking the question and exactly the meaning he took when he continued on to Sicily after stopping for a time in Italy.[38] Even Eidinow's otherwise carefully worded abridgement of Doreius' question and the Pythia's response nevertheless elides the oracle with Doreius' intent in a slightly different way: 'Doreius identifies the territory *to which he is preparing to go*; the priestess responds in kind.'[39] But in point of fact, Doreius does *not* obviously identify the target of his preparation to the Pythia. He might have thought that the relative clause ἐπ' ἣν στέλλεται confined his question to 'the land to which he is going (intentionally)', but his wording cannot exclude 'the land to which he goes (in fact)'. Nor, therefore, can the Pythia's response be understood so simply as an approval of his plan, as Eidinow characterizes it. It is only by such incidental, but meaningful, elisions between the oracle and the meaning Doreius took that these scholars have understood this oracle to have failed. As all three acknowledge, however, Herodotus reports a Sybarite (believer's) version of the story in which the oracle was actually fulfilled by Doreius' receipt of Sybarite land in Italy, his stopping-off point, at the conclusion of a war with the Crotonians.

The findings here have implications for classicists' use of modern research in the sciences and social sciences. These studies may seem to provide an objective viewpoint from which to observe and analyse the evidence of the ancient world. However, when it comes to objects of study that belong properly to emic (subjective) categories – such as what constitutes a prophetic sign, its correct interpretation and its fulfilment – in adopting the etic viewpoint, scholars merely exchange one subjectivity for another. What is needed, in my view, is not necessarily the abandonment of the assistance provided by other disciplines for the study of the ancient past but a greater awareness of the modern types of subjectivity that can leak uninterrogated from other fields into our own. With

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[36]   Harrison 2000: 156 (emphasis added); see also p. 154.
[37]   Maurizio 2013: 67 (emphasis added).
[38]   Importantly, that Doreius took his force to Italy first is presented by Herodotus in his narratorial persona (Hdt. 5.43), not as part of the version of the tale told by the Sybarites.
[39]   Eidinow 2023: 102 (emphasis added).

this understanding should also come a corresponding re-emphasis of the study of ancient perspectives.

To conclude, when social psychologists and classicists refer to 'prophetic failure', what they should mean is not the failure of a prophecy but the disconfirmation of a specific expectation stemming from a literal and conventional interpretation of a prophecy. Drawing this distinction carefully allows us both to maintain the validity of social-psychological research into the cognitions and behaviours of believers in prophecy and, at the same time, to appreciate the place of prophecy in the thought-worlds of believers.

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