

# *Buber on False Prophets and Nationalism*<sup>1</sup>

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*Martin Buber's essay "False Prophets" (1940) was written in Hebrew in Jerusalem two years after he fled Nazi Germany and assumed a professorship at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The essay offers a political analysis of the dramatic confrontation between the prophets Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28). It speaks about the dangers of nationalism in Jeremiah's biblical Jerusalem and in Buber's own modern Jerusalem, eight years before the proclamation of the State of Israel. Who is the real lover of the homeland, Buber asks, the patriot who cares not about human beings, or the concerned individual who is willing to compromise in order to avoid destruction and save lives? When does nationalism become malignant? What is the difference between a true prophet and a false one?*

**Key words:** Martin Buber; "false prophets"; true prophets; nationalism; Israel

Martin Buber's "False Prophets" is a powerful and well-crafted little essay.<sup>2</sup> It was written in Hebrew in Jerusalem in 1940, two years after Buber fled Nazi Germany, settled in the Land of Israel, and assumed a professorship in sociology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The essay speaks about politics, patriotism, and the dangers of nationalism. In the foreground is the ancient Jerusalem of Jeremiah ben Hilkiyah and Hananiah ben Azzur. In the background is Buber's own Jerusalem—capital of Mandatory Palestine, eight years before the proclamation of the State of Israel. In reading this essay about the dangers of nationalism, it must not be forgotten that the man who wrote it had just escaped from the most horrible nationalism of all time.

As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, with nationalism on the rise in the west and in the east, it is timely to revisit Buber's essay.

## 1 True and False Prophets

Before we begin our discussion of Buber's essay "False Prophets," some words should perhaps be said about the term "false prophet." The term "false prophet" does not appear in the Bible. In the Bible, all prophets, whether true or false, are called "prophets." Thus, Jeremiah, speaking the words of God, says, "I have heard what the prophets have said that prophesy lies in My name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed" (Jeremiah 23:25). Jeremiah here calls the prophets who have prophesied lies "prophets." It follows that there are prophets who speak the truth in God's name and there are others who speak lies in His name. Both are called "prophets." The term "false prophet" appears in the Mishnah: "A false prophet [...] may not be tried [...] except by a court of seventy-one" (*Sanbedrin* 1:5).

How can one distinguish between prophets who speak the truth and those who speak lies? Spinoza has well observed that false prophets, no less than true ones, may perform miracles. In support of his observation, he cites Deuteronomy 13:2-4: "If there arise in the midst of thee a prophet [...], and he give thee a sign or wonder, and the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spoke unto thee saying 'Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them,' thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet [...], for the Lord your God putteth you to proof" (Spinoza 1925: 96).<sup>3</sup> Thus, according to these verses from the Bible, there may be prophets who perform miracles and preach that we should serve other gods. Miracles provide no criterion for distinguishing between true and false prophecy.

It would seem that the only way one can distinguish between true and false prophets is by examining their messages. This brings us to the underlying question in Buber's essay: How can one distinguish the message of a true prophet from that of a false one?

## 2 Hananiah's Confrontation of Jeremiah

Buber's essay "False Prophets" is in essence an analysis of Jeremiah 28. In this chapter, the prophet Jeremiah is confronted by the prophet Hananiah. To prevent death and desolation, Jeremiah, speaking in the name of God, had instructed the people to subjugate themselves to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and to dramatize this he put a yoke on his own neck (Jeremiah 27:2-17). Hananiah then appeared in the Temple, standing next to Jeremiah, and prophesied against him: "Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon" (Jeremiah 28:2). Hananiah concluded by taking the yoke from off Jeremiah's neck and breaking it, and Jeremiah quietly "went his way" (Jeremiah, vv. 10-11).

Buber is astonished:

I am always shaken when I come to this passage, and always learn from it anew. Of all the prophets, Jeremiah is the only one who knew he was elected to his office at the very hour of his birth [Jeremiah 1:5] [...] He felt that the hand of God had touched his mouth [Jeremiah v. 9] [...]. It was in response to God's command that [he] had laid the bar, which Hananiah broke, on his own neck as a sign that in this historical juncture it was God's will that the nations be subject to Nebuchadnezzar [...] Yet, in spite of all this, he was silent when the bar was broken and went his way (Buber 1948: 113).

Why did the great prophet of Anathoth walk away? He knew perfectly well that his prophecy was true, so why did he keep silent when Hananiah publicly mocked him? Buber's answer is clear:

He went in order to listen for God's word. Why did he go? Obviously, because in spite of everything there were still things he did not know. Hananiah had spoken like a man who "knows it all" [...] but there were still things Jeremiah did not know. God had indeed spoken to him only an hour before. But this was another hour. History is a dynamic process, and history means that one hour is never like the one that has gone before. God operates in history, and God is not a machine which, once it has been wound up, keeps on running until it runs down. He is a living God [...]. God has truth, but He does not have a system (Buber 1948: 113-14).

At one hour, God may command us to subjugate ourselves to the king of Babylon, but at another moment he may command us to rebel against him. God has truth, but he is neither an idealistic philosopher with a system, nor a political ideologue with unchanging answers. This is an important point for Buber. Divine commandments are given in a particular context and for a particular hour, and are not necessarily valid in other contexts or for other hours. Buber rejected the binding nature of the traditional 613 commandments of Judaism, since they were given to the people of Israel in a different context and for a different hour, and he did not feel that they were addressed to him *hic et nunc*. Since God is a living God, each individual must himself or herself listen for God's word, and one must listen again and again at each new juncture. Buber's existentialist concept of history is thus radically anti-Hegelian: history is undetermined and unpredictable.

Buber compares Jeremiah to Socrates:

There were things Jeremiah did not know, and knew that he did not know. Socrates has told something similar about himself [*Apology* 21d]. But Jeremiah differed from Socrates in that he realized that from time to time he could learn something new. Socrates too—so he tells us—occasionally heard the voice of Spirit (*daimonion*) [*Apology*, 31c-d, 40a], but it always told him only what he was not to do. The voice which instructed Jeremiah told him what he was to do and say. If one hears

Hananiah's voice, and cannot hear the voice of God, perhaps because "the still small voice" [I Kings 19:12] can be drowned out by that of the Hananiahs, it is best to go one's way and to listen (Buber 1948: 114).

Jeremiah, according to Buber, shared Socrates' agnosticism, but unlike him he heard from his spiritual voice not only negative commands but also positive ones. It was, we now learn, necessary for Jeremiah to walk away from Hananiah because it is hard to hear the voice of God when one is standing next to a vociferous false prophet. God's is a "still small voice" and one must make a genuine effort to listen.

In Buber's eyes, Hananiah, the false prophet, was more deceived than deceiving. Since he thought he knew it all, he was unable to listen:

Hananiah [...] did not know the truth because he "knew it all" [...] He said that God had spoken and that He would break the yoke of the king of Babylon. How did he know? He did not say that God had spoken to him. He, the false prophet, did not lie [...]. He told what truth he knew [...]. But [...] he never understood what it meant to go one's way and listen. He has [...] been called a caricature of Isaiah [...]. [H]e parrots Isaiah [...]. Isaiah proclaimed God's will to break the yoke of Asshur from off the necks of His people [Isaiah 10:27]. From this Hananiah concluded that God had promised to break the yoke of Babylon, for the situation seemed the same. But the situation was *not* the same (Buber 1948: 114-115).

Hananiah, according to Buber's narrative, did not lie, did not fabricate a new prophecy, and did not try to deceive others. He parroted the true prophecy of Isaiah, which however had been revealed in a different context and for a different hour. Hananiah could not have known that, since he did not know how to listen. He was a caricature of a prophet. He spoke like one, but did not listen like one.

Buber's description of Hananiah as a plagiarist is worthy of attention. He was not the first to accuse the false prophets of plagiarism. Jeremiah had protested, in the name of God, against the false prophets who steal true prophecies: "Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that steal My words [*megganneve devaray*] one from another" (Jeremiah 23:30). In one Talmudic text, Hananiah is described by the Greek word *logokleptes* (*meggannev devarim* = a stealer of words), that is, a plagiarist (JT *Sanhedrin* 11:7, 30b).<sup>4</sup> Following Buber's analysis, I think one would be justified in saying that politicians or prophets who plagiarize are more dangerous than scientists or poets who plagiarize. The latter are writing *sub species aeternitatis*, and what is true in one hour is true in the next. The former are addressing an ever-changing human reality, and advice that may be propitious in one hour could be disastrous in the next. Buber hints at two types of politicians: those who think for themselves and those who parrot others. These two types of politicians parallel two types of prophets: those who know how to listen for the Word, and those who do not.

### 3 Hananiah the Patriot

Buber now describes Hananiah as a patriot:

Hananiah was a forthright patriot, and he was convinced that being patriotic meant being like him. He was convinced that Jeremiah had no love whatever for his country, for if he had, how could he have expected his people to bend their necks to the yoke? But Jeremiah had a concrete concern for what was taking place. "Wherefore should this city become desolate?" [Jeremiah 27:17]. Hananiah had no such concern. Instead, he had his patriotism which does not allow such concerns to come up. What he called his homeland was a political concept. Jeremiah's homeland was a land inhabited by human beings [...]. His God did not wish it to perish. He wished to preserve it by putting those human beings under the yoke (Buber 1948: 116).

The false prophet is identified here with the patriot, who is dogmatic, closed-minded, intolerant, and insensitive. In portraying the false prophet or patriot, Buber, writing in 1940, doubtless had in mind realpolitical Zionists, who wanted to proclaim unilaterally a Jewish state in Palestine, even if it meant war with the Arabs. Buber, however, campaigned for peace with the Palestinian Arabs, and was a member of Brit Shalom (“Covenant of Peace,” founded in 1925) and later Ihud (“Unity,” i.e., Jewish-Arab Unity, founded in 1942), political parties that advocated a bi-national polity in Palestine. He clearly empathizes with the true prophet, Jeremiah. Who is the real lover of the homeland, he implicitly asks, the patriot who cares not about human beings, or the concerned individual who is willing to compromise in order to avoid destruction and save lives? Hananiah or Jeremiah? The patriots or Buber?<sup>5</sup>

Four years after he wrote “False Prophets,” Buber wrote a short dialogue in which a Patriot and a Traitor discussed the 1942 Biltmore Program, which had urged that Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth:

Patriot: Tell me why you oppose the Biltmore Program? ...

Traitor: Why do people talk so much about the Gibeonites?

Patriot: The Gibeonites?

Traitor: Yes, the hewers of wood and the drawers of water [see Joshua 9:3-27]. ...

Patriot: Do you really believe that the people who formulated the Biltmore Program intend to reduce part of the population to the status of second-class citizens?

Traitor: Of course you don't intend to deny them anything but collective political equality. But if two nations live in the same state and one rules the other [...] the other will naturally be reduced to the status of second-class citizens [...] one way or another.

Patriot: I argue politics with you and you respond with a lecture on morality.

Traitor: You argue about short-term politics and I speak to you of long-term politics. Short-term politics does not go well with morality, while long-term politics merges with morality at certain crucial junctures. ...

Patriot: [Do you agree] that the Biltmore Program can be implemented? ...

Traitor: No. [Those who have power, i.e., Britain, the United States, and other nations] will decide on partition. ...

Patriot: But we will refuse partition.

Traitor: [T]he decisive majority will accept it even as they say they refuse it.

Patriot: Do you know what you are?

Traitor: Yes, I know—a traitor (Mendes-Flohr 1983: 160-64, trans. Deborah Goldman).

Buber's short dialogue illustrates his concern about “patriotism” among Jews in 1940s Palestine. It should be noted, however, that the Patriot in Buber's dialogue is not a doctrinaire right-winger. He is a centrist. He recoils from the suggestion that the Arabs be reduced to second-class citizens. His remarks seem to represent the majority opinion among Jews in Palestine at the time. He sounds more like Ben-Gurion than like Hananiah. It must be recalled, moreover, that the stated motivation of the Biltmore Program was not only nationalistic, but also moral. In the midst of World War II, it sought to save the lives of Jews trying to escape from Nazi persecution.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4 Two Types of Nationalism

Since his speech on “Nationalism” at the twelfth Zionist Congress in Carlsbad in 1921, Buber had been profoundly worried about the dangers of nationalism both among the nations and among Jews. In some contexts, he sought to distinguish between healthy nationalism and diseased nationalism. In other contexts, he sought to distinguish between Zionism and European nationalisms. In still other contexts, he sought to distinguish between “Hebrew humanism” and Jewish nationalism (or “patriotism”). Healthy nationalism, he

held, is a people's awareness of a true deficiency, e.g., a lack of liberty, solidarity, or territory, and their legitimate effort to remedy it. Diseased nationalism is egotistic national self-assertion for its own sake (Buber 1948: 218-20). Zionism is the ideology of a nation that is also a faith community. European nationalisms are the ideologies of nations (Buber 1948: 222-23). Hebrew humanism is a national program based on the words of the prophet: "Zion shall be redeemed *with justice*" (Isaiah 1:27) and *only* with justice. Jewish nationalism is a program based on the desire of Jews to be "like unto all the nations" (I Samuel 8:20).<sup>7</sup>

## 5 False Prophecy and Illusions

Buber next compares the distinction between true and false prophets to that between realistic and delusional politicians:

Hananiah considered himself a great politician, for he thought that in an hour of danger he had succeeded in strengthening the people's resistance. [W]hat he actually strengthened was an illusion, which when it collapsed would cause the collapse of the people's strength. Jeremiah [...] wanted to protect Israel from just that [...] The true prophets are the true politicians of reality, for they proclaim their political tidings from the viewpoint of the complete historical reality [...] The false prophets [are] the politicians who foster illusions [...] (Buber 1948: 116).

Hananiah thought his message was realistic, but it was delusional. It was Jeremiah, the true prophet, whose message was realistic, if unpopular. The false prophet tells the people what they want to hear, while the true prophet tells them what they must hear. In Buber's view, the difference between true and false prophecy is that between politics based on reality and politics based on illusion—or "long-term politics" vs. "short-term politics." It is also the difference between politics concerned with human beings and politics concerned with ideas. At bottom, it is the difference between the politics of I-Thou and that of I-It. In other words, it is the difference between a politics in which one encounters the other as a *subject* and a politics in which one encounters others as *objects*. Buber was often told by other Zionists that his Zionism, which insisted on dialogue and cooperation with the Arabs, was naïve and based on illusions. Buber in effect replies here that his critics are the ones who are delusional: their Zionism is a false prophecy, while the Zionism championed by himself and his friends is the true vision.

Having spoken about patriotism and politics, Buber now widens his scope, and makes a comment about the historic Jewish vocation:

The false prophets, with their politics of illusion [...], prevented individuals in authority from recognizing [...] their great task, from resolving to take it upon themselves in actuality, and from educating the people to accomplish it. They popularized only the promise contained in Isaiah's tidings, passing over the conditions under which it would be valid, for every prophecy of salvation is conditional. They turned a definite promise to an Israel who fulfils its vocation into an absolute promise of eternal security (Buber 1948: 117).

The false prophets, Buber explains, are not only bad politicians, but they *prevent* the realization of the noble historical vocation of the Jewish people. The true prophets conditioned their promises on Israel's fulfillment of its vocation, whereas the false prophets issued absolute and unconditional promises, based on illusions.

## 6 The God Success

Buber concludes his essay thus:

False prophets [...] adore the god “Success.” They themselves are in constant need of success [...].... The craving for success governs their hearts [...]. That is what Jeremiah called “the deceit of their own heart” [Jeremiah 14:14; 23:26] [...]. The true prophets know the little bloated idol which goes by the name of “Success” [...]. They know that ten successes that are nothing but successes can amount to a downfall, while ten failures, if the spirit stands firm, can amount to victory.

We have no Jeremiah at this cruel hour [...]. But at every street corner you are likely to run into Hananiah [...]. Look him straight in the eye [...] Perhaps the next time he dreams his dream, he will remember how you looked at him, and recoil; and when he again tells his dream in the voice of prophecy, perhaps he will trip over a phrase and pause. No more than an instant, but such instants of incipient reflection are very precious (Buber 1948: 118).<sup>8</sup>

Buber does not claim to be a Jeremiah, and does not consider any of his contemporaries to be one. He does not imagine that he can defeat the Hananiahs, who are found at every street corner. His goal is much more modest—to try to get the false prophets to reflect even for just one moment.

## 7 A Missing Postscript: What Happened to Hananiah?

Buber’s essay ends when Jeremiah quietly “went his way” (Jeremiah 23:11). However, the biblical narrative does not end there. It continues rather dramatically:

Then the word of the Lord came unto Jeremiah, after Hananiah the prophet had broken the bar from off [his] neck [...], saying: Go and tell Hananiah [...]. Thus saith the Lord: thou hast broken the bars of wood but thou shalt make in their stead bars of iron! For thus saith the Lord [...]. I have put a yoke of iron upon the neck of all these nations that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon [...]. Then said the prophet Jeremiah unto Hananiah the prophet: Hear now, Hananiah! The Lord hath not sent thee, but thou makest this people to trust in a lie. Therefore, thus saith the Lord: Behold, I will send thee away from off the face of the earth. This year thou shalt die [...]. So Hananiah the prophet died the same year in the seventh month (Jeremiah, vv. 12-17).

According to the biblical narrative, Jeremiah heard anew the Word of God and returned to Hananiah. No longer docile, he prophesied boldly about “bars of iron,” denounced Hananiah for having caused the people “to trust in a lie,” and announced his imminent death—which, we are told, took place as predicted. With the exception of one sentence in the first paragraph of the essay, Buber does not say a word about these extraordinary events. His contempt for Hananiah is so great that he is not interested in telling his story or in gloating over his downfall. It is from Jeremiah that we can learn. Hananiah is inconsequential. You can find his like “at every street corner.”

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this paper was originally presented in Jerusalem in August 2012 at a symposium cosponsored by the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of

- Monotheistic Religions (CISMOR), Doshisha University, Kyoto. A Japanese translation appeared in *Interpretations of Traditions: Maimonides, Spinoza, Buber, Levinas, and After*, ed. Ada Taggar-Cohen (Kyoto: Doshisha University, 2012), 6-11.
- <sup>2</sup> “False Prophets,” trans. Olga Marx, in Buber, *Israel and the World* (New York: Schocken, 1948), 113-18; reprinted in Buber, *On the Bible*, ed. N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1982), 166-71. In quotations below, I have sometimes modified the translation. The Hebrew original may be found in Buber, *Te’udab ve-Yi’ud* (Jerusalem: Zionist Library, 1984), vol. 2, 141-44. It first appeared in *La-Mo’ed*, a pamphlet issued by the editors of *Ba’ayot ha-Yom*, Passover 1940. See Paul R. Mendes-Flohr, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 142-43, 309-10.
- <sup>3</sup> Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch. 6, ed. C. Gebhardt, vol. 3 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925).
- <sup>4</sup> See Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950; reprinted 1994), 17-8.
- <sup>5</sup> The figure of Jeremiah remains actual in Israeli political debate. At a public forum in Israel in 2016, Jeremiah was tried posthumously for treason. The trial was convened by Rabbi Dr. Benny Lau, a popular author and teacher. The prosecutor was Professor Aryeh Eldad, a leading right-wing ideologue and onetime Member of Knesset. The defense attorney was Gideon Levy, a veteran *Haaretz* journalist known for his exposés of injustices suffered by Palestinians under Israeli rule. The judge was Shlomo Shoham, judge emeritus. Shoham’s verdict was that according to the law Jeremiah was guilty of treason—but the court disqualified itself to judge such a courageous visionary, who acted out of love for the people and a selfless desire to save lives. See (in Hebrew): [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8\\_JhxwpZIA&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x8_JhxwpZIA&feature=youtu.be)
- <sup>6</sup> At Mendes-Flohr (1983: 160-61), Mendes-Flohr comments: “The ideological rationale behind the perennial Zionist demand that the Mandatory government allow unlimited Jewish immigration had been to hasten the creation of a Jewish majority in Palestine; now this demand was associated with the supreme moral task of rescuing European Jewry.” The philosopher Nathan Rotenstreich, who agreed with Buber on many political questions, criticized him in 1944 for neglecting “the collective problem of the Jews.” Shaken by this accusation, Buber told Rotenstreich that “he lives the death of every individual in the camps” (Mendes-Flohr 1983: 157-58).
- <sup>7</sup> “And If Not Now, When?” and “Hebrew Humanism,” in Buber (1948: 237, 248-49). See also Buber, “Zion and the Other National Concepts,” in his *On Zion*, trans. Stanley Godman (New York: Schocken, 1973), xvii-xxii; original Hebrew (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1944), 1-6.
- <sup>8</sup> Bloom in Glatzer (1982: xxvii). See Harold Bloom, “Introduction to Buber”, in *On the Bible*, ed. N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1982), ix-xxxi. Bloom’s comparison of Buber and Leo Strauss on false prophecy deserves further discussion, although Buber and Strauss are closer than he suggests.