

## ***FOUNDATION AND PROPHECY***

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Interdisciplinary studies are the norm for groundbreaking modern scholarship. Many scholarly books published in the last several decades do not conform neatly to their proposed discipline or genre. An historical work might blend sociology, politics, and psychology to reflect on past crises and apply them in analysis of the present; a sociological work might examine the underpinnings of political and religious movements in American life today, or a religious study of science fiction literature may draw on eschatological narratives from the thematic and commentative content of an episode of *Star Trek*. Inherent to scholarliness is the need to connect ideas to partially reveal the truth of the human condition, constantly measuring pieces of the human puzzle against each other to see if they fit snugly and further illuminate the picture. Isaac Asimov's pivotal work of speculative fiction, *Foundation*, imagines the ultimate interdisciplinary field of psychohistory, a far-future scholarly venture which has completely assembled the human puzzle: sociology, technology, politics, mob psychology, history, and religion all wrapped up and quantified through mathematics. Through the power of science, psychohistorian Hari Seldon is equipped with a nigh-prophetic ability to predict the future—the downfall—of the Galactic Empire.

I will exercise some caution in labelling Hari Seldon a prophet. Leading 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish theologian-rabbi Abraham Heschel warns against this kind of hasty analysis, saying “the ability to compare, an outstanding function of the mind, is more easily developed than the ability to differentiate. Qual-

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ities that things have in common are outstanding; the uniqueness of each thing is frequently imperceptible.”<sup>1</sup> It might be inappropriate to conflate prophecy and technology in this fictional context; however, to examine Asimov’s character through a prophetic lens can yield specific criticism toward modern society and modern religious thought, not to mention further illuminating the classic work of science fiction that is *Foundation*.

One purposeful approach in modelling Hari Seldon as prophet would be to reconcile his psychohistory with modern Christian spiritual practice, connecting, perhaps, the observation of social trends and political awareness with a Christian moral responsibility for the less fortunate and the human cost of geopolitical machinations. One might conduct surface-level research into the definitions and roles of prophets, drawing the kind of parallels Heschel would be so critical of, associating anachronistic concepts and characters without thought or restraint. These approaches, and those like them, are constrained by the unreality of speculative fiction; the scholar often reads selectively for an intended moral or political message, rather than remaining open to what might be revelatory in science fiction for the reader’s real life and context.<sup>2</sup> Characters in later chapters of the *Foundation* saga may label Hari Seldon a prophet, or a mere magician shrouded in the depths of the Foundation’s past. I seek to understand the significance of the prophetic using *Foundation*’s treatment of psychohistory as a

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Heschel, “Prophets Throughout the World,” in *The Prophets*, II, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1962), 229. Of course, Heschel here refers to various comparisons between the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the prophet-like figures of the non-Abrahamic world. He notes that the prophets of Israel distinguished between true and false “prophets” in their times, using the word liberally but not without modification. See 230-231.

<sup>2</sup> A study of Science Fiction as Apocalyptic Literature would be a fantastic undertaking.

mirror for modern expressions on prophetic literature, particularly Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination*. Namely, the prophetic centers around honest criticism and radical hope in shaping a world—fictional or real—for the better.

### EXAMINING THE PROPHETIC

In his work, *God's Servants, the Prophets*, Bryan D. Bibb identifies five definitions of the prophets: the "Ecstatic Revealer" reveals the truth while in a trance of some sort; the "Messianic Predictor" reveals the coming of the Messiah; the "Religious Genius" understands and interprets Israel's religious past; and the "Political Functionary" serves the kings, primarily in a predictive militaristic sense.<sup>3</sup> For Bibb, however, the fifth role, "Messenger," is most important—these are the prophets who claim specific knowledge, who use the phrase "thus says the LORD," often to announce God's judgments or otherwise predict what is to come.<sup>4</sup> The prophet "shall serve as a mouth" for God, traditionally restated as prophets being the "mouthpiece" of God.<sup>5</sup> Bibb is (perhaps understandably) at odds with William Blake, who ascribes the following to the prophet Isaiah in his book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: "I saw no God nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover'd the Infinite in everything, and as I was then persuaded and remained confirm'd that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences, but wrote."<sup>6</sup> According to Abraham Heschel, Blake was "inclined to deny the prophets...the

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<sup>3</sup> Bryan D. Bibb, *God's Servants, The Prophets*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 2014), 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Bibb, *God's Servants, The Prophets*, 2, 19. Bibb calls the phrase "thus says the LORD," "the most important phrase in all of the prophetic literature."

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 4:16, NRSV.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Abraham Heschel, "Explanations of Prophetic Inspiration," in *The Prophets*, II, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers,

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experience of the divine,” instead classifying their writings as “inventive” and merely “derived from their vivid apprehension of the principle of righteousness.”<sup>7</sup> Heschel aligns instead with Bibb’s Messenger role, pointing out that Blake attached “little, if any, importance...to the prophets’ own insistence on having received ‘the word of [the LORD]’ and on having been called by Him.”<sup>8</sup>

Walter Brueggemann’s *The Prophetic Imagination* elegantly holds the tension between Blake’s divergent analysis and Bibb/Heschel’s more traditional one. I will explore several themes of this text as a means of further defining the prophetic and the modern approach thereto, with some assistance from Bibb and others. Brueggemann is more comfortable with the notion of individual agency on the part of the prophets than Heschel appears. He considers “imagination as a way of knowing,” emphasizing the ways in which speech and text create “alternate worlds” for rhetorical and theological use.<sup>9</sup>

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Inc., 1962), 191-192. Heschel’s dialogue with Blake puts the opposing forces of prophetic understanding in tension wonderfully and is therefore worthy of imitation—and further reading and research..

<sup>7</sup> Heschel, “Prophetic Inspiration,” 192.

<sup>8</sup> Heschel, “Prophetic Inspiration,” 192. Here, to make my rhetorical point, I substitute “the LORD” for God in reference to Bibb’s emphasis thereon.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Brueggemann, Preface to *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), x. This particular nod to imagination comes in response to Phyllis Trible’s *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, which Brueggemann credits as a starting point for the use of imagination as a means of seeking out the existing theological history for modern ideas if not expanding the biblical narrative to apply to contemporary values. Don’t hasten to admonish the disrespect to biblical interpretive tradition! Brueggemann is crediting Trible’s book as a starting point, and I am using this specific imaginative language to partly reconcile Blake and Heschel.

Brueggemann justifies this: “The prophetic is truth that is beyond the explicable...[it] *must* be imaginary because it is urgently beyond the ordinary and the reasonable.”<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann is not necessarily saying that the words of the prophets were conjured by them alone (i.e., not from God at all) but is acknowledging that for the prophets (or other writers) to have penned these words at all was an act of imagination, the daring to believe that their words might make a difference and create the “alternative world” they speak of.<sup>11</sup> As Bibb clarifies, they “were themselves creative geniuses who critically changed their communities and brought their own personalities, perspectives, and insights to the process.”<sup>12</sup>

An alternative world, broadly speaking, is any which is recognizably different from our own. Just as the world of a comic book or dystopian novel might be initially foreign to our understanding, biblical idioms, worldviews, and customs can require significant study to reconcile the alternative worlds of the Bible with our own—and a similar education would prove repeatedly necessary in the prophetic reconciliation of the Old Testament Hebrews to God. Bibb offers three principles for the historical interpretation of Old Testament texts which are analogous to the understanding of a science fictional context: one must always identify the historical context of the passage, place oneself in the shoes the author,<sup>13</sup> and understand texts as

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<sup>10</sup> Brueggemann, Preface to *The Prophetic Imagination*, xv. Italics added for emphasis. The idea of imagination, the “placing oneself in the shoes of the author/prophet” that I reference in the next paragraph, is a foundational principle of Jesuit spiritual formation practices.

<sup>11</sup> Is this starting to sound familiar?

<sup>12</sup> Bibb, *God’s Servants, The Prophets*, 19. Creation itself is an ode to imagination—and therefore, our imaginations must be God-ordained.

<sup>13</sup> Identifying with the author lends itself to understanding intent, audience, personality, experiential knowledge, etc.

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part of an ongoing conversation<sup>14</sup> in the specific time of the author.”<sup>15</sup> These tools, which help the reader to understand the alternative worlds of the biblical prophets, will help us interpret the world-building of Isaac Asimov.

Having clarified the necessity of imagination and context in examining the prophets, Walter Brueggemann’s chapter, “The Alternative Community of Moses,” then narrows the lens through which he approaches the prophetic: Brueggemann undertakes analyses of various prophets of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the New Testament’s Jesus, using an understanding of the prophetic as the combination of criticism and energized hope.<sup>16</sup> In the same way that alternative realities are spoken into existence when prophets present the word of the LORD to their listeners, Brueggemann identifies the newly created covenantal community of Moses as an alternative community, one rooted in a free-moving, all-powerful God.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> These conversations are not always fully evident in individual passages, but undergird the narrative and provide the emotional, social, political, and economic backdrops for prophetic works.

<sup>15</sup> Bibb, *God’s Servants, The Prophets*, 14-15. Indeed, some passages are not traceable to the time of the original writer but are reflective of “later prophetic activity that has been incorporated back into the original tradition,” according to Bibb. These passages require even more diligent examination.

<sup>16</sup> Brueggemann, “The Alternative Community of Moses,” *The Prophetic Imagination*, 1-20.

<sup>17</sup> Brueggemann, “The Alternative Community of Moses,” 2-7. Here Brueggemann admittedly and clearly nods to Liberation Theology (as should be expected when discussing Exodus), but the emphasis on Moses as creating a community, not just a covenant, was new to me. An ‘alternative community’ has the connotation of being set apart, subversive, and strange to the dominant culture. Today, Christianity has been the dominant culture for several hundreds of years, but with the dominant culture of straight, cisgender, white, Christian men on the decline compared to the combined weight of dozens of historically oppressed groups, there is an increased need for the traditionally dominant group to be receptive to

This community shares a common history and identity, an uncommon (common) God, and a clear sense of the boundaries of their ethnic identity. The Hebrews are God's Chosen, unique in the experience of direct relationship with God as they wandered in the desert. No longer is God far-off and impossible to please or know; instead, God leads them in a pillar of flame to his Promised Land. Most significantly for the purposes of this paper, the Hebrews share an affinity for the prophetic, one pioneered by Moses, who Brueggemann credits with the foundations of the Hebrew prophetic tradition due to his radicalism and the urgency of his message.<sup>18</sup>

The prophetic relies on criticism and energy to equip God's people to form a new, alternative reality as God imagines it and express it through the prophet. Brueggemann uses an artful metaphor of contemporary American politics to explain the necessity of both energy and hope in creating an American alternative reality—and in the prophetic as a whole—by giving credit to both political sides.<sup>19</sup> The progressive side, Brueggemann posits, are wonderful critics, skilled at dismantling the dominant culture in the ways it remains stagnant and oppressively so—but struggle to provide energizing, hopeful alternatives to present systems that quantify their ideals in the eyes of conservatives. Conservatives, on the other hand, are wonderfully hopeful and energized due to their faith

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the kinds of questions Brueggemann here raises and meditates on. What does it mean to be liberated from the dominant mindset which has been the reality of the white man in America for three hundred years? Is there freedom in that? I would certainly say there is freedom in embracing love for the neighbor, for the Other, and that a narrow mindset is a stifling thing. Certainly, these are questions the prophets—and science fiction, for that matter—can help us begin to answer as a culture if we are willing to listen.

<sup>18</sup> Brueggemann, "The Alternative Community of Moses," 5-6.

<sup>19</sup> Brueggemann, "The Alternative Community of Moses," 4-5.

What follows is a synopsis, the full version of which can be found on the indicated pages.

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in their country's past—and its future—but struggle to acknowledge the ways that systems become outdated with time; they are more critical of proposed changes than of the systems they perpetuate. Only with both energetic hopefulness and honest criticism can an alternative reality be imagined, let alone embodied—a country further perfected and on the right track toward a more complete, inclusive future.

This metaphor captures the two needs of a prophet: being intensely, exactingly critical of the current dominant social system while instilling hope for a better future. Religious transformations, to Brueggemann, are fundamentally social, stemming from a weariness of inert, perpetual conflict: “dominant cultures are wearied cultures, nearly unable to be seriously energized to new promises from God.”<sup>20</sup> Whether Moses rejecting enslavement under the Egyptian Pharaoh; Elijah rejecting and disproving the power of other, more popular gods; Amos rejecting social systems of wealth inequality in Israel; or Hari Seldon rejecting the sprawling and stagnated Galactic Empire, the prophetic voice requires a criticism of dominant culture and an energizing hope for a better, imagined future.

### **FOUNDATION'S FORM OF PROPHECY**

There are a great many similarities between the prophets of the Hebrew Bible and the setting, actions, and words of the character Hari Seldon in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation*. Asimov's narrative, originally published as a sequence of short stories and later as the trilogy *Foundation*, *Foundation and Empire*, and *The Second Foundation* (along with a variety of side stories, prequels, and sequels), centers around the history of the titular Foundation, an organization whose trajectory was carefully planned by its founder, Hari Seldon, to hasten the

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<sup>20</sup> Brueggemann, “The Alternative Community of Moses,” 4. Originally “the dominant culture is a wearied culture,” altered for greater blend with the sentence prior.



recovery of the galaxy after the unavoidable fall of a Galactic Empire. As one character explains, “the future course of the Foundation was plotted according to the science of psychohistory...and conditions arranged so as to bring about a series of crises that will force us most rapidly along the route to future Empire. Each crisis, each *Seldon* crisis, marks an epoch in our history.”<sup>21</sup> These “Seldon crises” are turning points in which concurrent threats, both domestic and foreign, so endanger present ways of life at the Foundation that eventually, given enough time, the Foundation is forced down one route of action that ultimately proves the most beneficial, with the Foundation more powerful and equipped to extend its reach. As the narrative unfolds, the reader observes as successive leaders, largely through a discipline of inaction, allow events to take the course predicted by Hari Seldon—a course that is forced upon them by circumstance. The Foundation does not lack in enemies, but the true enemy is the Empire that succumbed to absolute intellectual, technological, and sociopolitical stagnation under the strain of pushing paperwork for 25 million planets inhabited by humans.<sup>22</sup>

On page 19 of Asimov’s book, a detailed description of psychohistory is printed as excerpted from the “Encyclopedia Galactica.”<sup>23</sup> It outlines three main points of introduction

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<sup>21</sup> Isaac Asimov, *Foundation*, Revised edition, (New York: Bantam Spectra Books, 1991), 215.

<sup>22</sup> Asimov, *Foundation*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> This “Encyclopedia Galactica” was the original stated intent of Seldon’s Foundation: to compile and print a comprehensive encyclopedia of galactic knowledge to preserve information before the fall of the Empire, thereby shortening its effects. Among the first crises faced by the Foundation revealed the Encyclopedia to be a mere ruse on Seldon’s part to disguise the true nature of his Foundation. The description of psychohistory on page 19 is necessarily short so that the Foundation’s members might not be equipped to unduly influence the course of events Seldon has laid out—preserving the “random” factor.

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to the field of psychohistory for the reader: psychohistory is a “branch of mathematics which deals with the reactions of human conglomerates to fixed social and economic stimuli” which requires that the “conglomerate” is sufficiently large for statistical analysis, and that “the human conglomerate be itself unaware of psychohistoric analysis in order that its actions be truly random.”<sup>24</sup> The reader will see Hari Seldon himself using these “fixed social and economic stimuli” to calculate the statistical probability of the Empire’s collapse, to illustrate through complex mathematics what can be more easily said with words by the young mathematician Gaal Dornick:

As Trantor<sup>25</sup> becomes more specialized, it becomes more vulnerable, less able to defend itself. Further, as it becomes more and more the administrative center of the Empire, it becomes a greater prize. As the Imperial succession becomes more and more uncertain, and the feuds among the great families more rampant, social responsibility disappears.<sup>26</sup>

This is the first problem of the galaxy at the time of the Galactic Empire’s fall, and the first criticism levelled by Hari Seldon in his role of prophet. The second criticism is part of the first Seldon crisis, and is expounded by the character Salvor Hardin to (largely unsuccessfully) convince his fellow Foundation members:

...you haven’t *tried* [to escape from our dilemma]. You haven’t tried once. You refused to admit that there was a menace at all! Then

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<sup>24</sup> Asimov, *Foundation*, 4. Thus why the definition was ‘necessarily short’ as I said and used “nonmathematical concepts” as the entry also explicitly indicates.

<sup>25</sup> The Galactic Empire’s capital.

<sup>26</sup> Asimov, *Foundation*, 22.

you reposed an absolutely blind faith in the Emperor! Now you've shifted it to Hari Seldon. Throughout you have invariably relied on authority or on the past—never on yourselves...It amounts to a diseased attitude—a conditioned reflex that shunts aside the independence of your minds whenever it is a question of opposing authority. There seems no doubt in your mind that the Emperor is more powerful than you are, or Hari Seldon wiser. And that's wrong...Don't you see? It's Galaxy-wide. It's a worship of the past. It's a deterioration—a *stagnation!*<sup>27</sup>

Between these two ideas, intellectual stagnation and the sprawl of an increasingly powerful but equally vulnerable capital, the Empire is doomed—and Hari Seldon plots the future of the Foundation to outperform these problems. While the rest of the galaxy loses the technological understanding of atomic power plants, the Foundation is innovating atomic generators that can fit on a belt buckle. While the rest of the galaxy reverts to a feudal, war-torn state, the Foundation capitalizes on the oversteps of its neighbors to secure its future and protect its ultimate purpose—to shorten this period of chaos. Never is it appropriate for the mayor of Foundation's small city-world or any other individual to act purely on gumption when dealing with a Seldon crisis—it is only appropriate to allow the forces of history to push the Foundation into the corner where they have but one option to ensure their survival. In the above example Salvor Hardin assumes control and pits the Foundation's neighboring kingdoms against each other to protect the Foundation's neutrality.<sup>28</sup> Later, the same man co-opts and

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<sup>27</sup> Asimov, *Foundation*, 87-88. See note 28.

<sup>28</sup> The first Seldon crisis in Part II, wherein Hardin overthrows the Encyclopedists (who remain bullishly true to Seldon's stated and

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centralizes the Foundation's religious apparatus (used to spread technology to the neighboring kingdoms) to cement control of those worlds.<sup>29</sup> Later still, an independent trader artfully manipulates more reticent kingdoms to accept the sale of Foundation technology despite religious objections.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the Foundation ultimately transitions from religious control of technology to pure trade as a source of strength and revenue for the Foundation.<sup>31</sup> The Seldon crises are never solved by the actions of one person but through a natural means of the galaxy's complex machinations.

#### **SELDON: THE PROPHET**

What Seldon crises amount to is faith that these machinations have been accurately predicted to the point that the path forward becomes clear by necessity—that Hari Seldon could prepare the way of his descendants without their needing knowledge of psychohistory. Hari Seldon fills a prophetic role for the Foundation, capitalizing on the “broad sweeps of economics and sociology” to deliver his people from the land of darkness into the metaphorical ‘lands flowing with milk and

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false original purpose for the Foundation) to assume control of the Foundation, to its great benefit. This is a largely domestic crisis.

<sup>29</sup> The second Seldon crisis in Part III. The Foundation has been training “priests” in the rudimentary running of power plants and other technological jobs while passing off the training as religious, in service of the “Galactic Spirit”—a concept the leadership all know to be complete hogwash—but it gets the job done. Traders begin selling atomic gadgets—“atomics”—to neighboring kingdoms.

<sup>30</sup> The third Seldon crisis in Part IV. Nations outside the Foundation's ring of control are conscious of the Foundation's religious danger and seek to avoid its influence by refusing trade or even use of atomics.

<sup>31</sup> The final Seldon crisis of this first book.

honey'.<sup>32</sup> These Seldon crises, these turning points, occur at major moments in the history of the Foundation—as is the case for the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>33</sup> Biblical narratives of prophecy capture major turning points in the history of God's People; each prophet appears with a new course correction to a society turning away from God. These prophets, according to Brueggemann, "are not lonely voices against the establishment but are in fact representative voices that give social expression to what may be important" in their communities.<sup>34</sup> This is not, and my intention has never been, to discount the prophets as mouthpieces of God, but to acknowledge that they exist within their contexts and have their own agency and skills. To reiterate, they "were themselves creative geniuses who critically changed their communities and brought their own personalities, perspectives, and insights to the process."<sup>35</sup> The prophets of the Hebrew Bible shepherd their own "Seldon crises" for the People of God, a role Christians believe to be fulfilled by Jesus' death—humanity fundamentally and irrevocably reconciled with God by the action of his son.<sup>36</sup>

The prophetic tradition of *Foundation* is one established by Seldon and carried out by intelligent leaders. According to the Brueggemann characterization above, prophetic ministry creates an alternative to the dominant consciousness through the rejection of this world coupled with the anticipation of the coming.<sup>37</sup> In the words of Walter Brueggemann, "the dominant culture is a wearied culture, nearly unable to be seriously energized to new promises from God."<sup>38</sup> In the same

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<sup>32</sup> Asimov, *Foundation*, 289.

<sup>33</sup> Bibb, *God's Servants, The Prophets*, 15.

<sup>34</sup> Brueggemann, Preface to *The Prophetic Imagination*, x.

<sup>35</sup> Bibb, *God's Servants, The Prophets*, 19.

<sup>36</sup> See John 3:16.

<sup>37</sup> Brueggemann, "The Alternative Community of Moses," 3.

<sup>38</sup> Brueggemann, "The Alternative Community of Moses," 4.

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way, the Foundation is laboring under a weary, lusterless Empire—a culture that has been dominant for so long it has forgotten the meaning and power of prophecy. Thus, the “blind faith in the Emperor” and inability to innovate that Hardin criticizes in the diatribe blocked out above: the Empire’s great need of revitalization has it poised on the brink of thirty thousand years of darkness and the complete loss of technology. Hari Seldon volunteers this knowledge to the authorities and is banished to the outer rim of the Galaxy<sup>39</sup>—and while that suits Seldon’s purposes in planning for the future of the Foundation, the overconfident, complacent, and weakening Empire has signed its own death notice in refusing to bend an ear to prophesy. The Kings of Israel and Judah were seldom receptive to the prophetic; in failing to change their ways, they too penned the death certificates of the Judean and Israelite monarchies not only because they refused to listen to God but also because the actions God wanted them to change were what ultimately undercut their power and legitimacy, leading to a predictable collapse.<sup>40</sup> The God of the Hebrew Bible works as much through inevitable consequences of the world as through direct intervention—if not more of the former.<sup>41</sup>

Through the power of psychohistory, Seldon voices the countercultural truths of Brueggemann’s prophetic to the Galactic Empire of his universe. Isaac Asimov has written an alternative world, an imagined world, and his prophetic character has created a further alternative world within his created

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<sup>39</sup> A fate familiar to the Old Testament prophets, also, who were largely marginalized for their subversive (but accurate) beliefs and predictions.

<sup>40</sup> The parallel with the ideological stagnation in Asimov’s first Seldon Crisis is notable.

<sup>41</sup> God may not need to act in the broad strokes due to the predictability of human nature. Surely an omniscient God has an omnipotent “psychohistory” of his own—and would know just when to act with the greatest impact, sending his mouthpieces and ultimately his son to lead humanity to better ways.

one. Seldon dares to imagine a perfected Second Empire which could pick up the pieces of the first and rebuild, rather than starting from scratch from a point longer than humans have been farming and herding on Earth.<sup>42</sup> Here I return to the William Blake quote from above: “I saw no God nor heard any, in a finite organical perception; but my senses discover’d the Infinite in everything, and as I was then persuaded and remained confirm’d that the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God, I cared not for consequences, but wrote.”<sup>43</sup> Though Heschel is critical, Blake is not entirely out-of-true with Brueggemann and Bibb: Isaiah had his eyes opened to Creation and his response was to write the truth that Creation inspired in him. Bibb has already acknowledged that the prophets were not under the direct control of God but given the freedom to persuade God’s People in the most effective ways they could, by way of their own intellect and passion backed by God’s will.<sup>44</sup> The prophets were acutely aware of their reality and, by way of their intellect and obedience to their call, helped predict or call for a future which (in the Christian tradition) culminated in the birth of Christ. What is Seldon’s psychohistory but an acute awareness of reality that equipped him to shape a future with the least suffering for his people? Cannot *Foundation* be read as a reaffirmation of the prophetic in the world around us?

#### **SELDON: NOT THE PROPHET (CONCLUSION)**

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<sup>42</sup> It’s almost comparable to God sending a prophet vs. God sending a flood.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Abraham Heschel, “Explanations of Prophetic Inspiration,” 191-192. The Noah and the Flood parallel is clear, when things have deteriorated to the point of needing to start over from scratch. Luckily, this period of darkness has a prophet to guide the people through it.

<sup>44</sup> Bibb, *God’s Servants, The Prophets*, 19.

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In J. Philip Hyatt's 1947 book, *Prophetic Religion*, the author devotes an entire chapter to the prophetic view of the future.<sup>45</sup> He begins with the popular definition of prophet as "prognosticator," or one with the ability to predict the future.<sup>46</sup> Hyatt acknowledges that some of our conceptions of the Old Testament prophets as prognosticators come from decontextualized New Testament references to OT prophecy that were used to tie Jesus to the Jewish religious tradition outlined in the Tanakh.<sup>47</sup> Hyatt further argues that there are many predictions of the prophets that have not been fulfilled, and that attempting to use prophetic works—let alone apocalyptic works—as fodder for future-predicting in the modern era is folly.<sup>48</sup> Rather, the prophets were ethicists, the apocalyptists writers of "tracts for bad times," both invaluable theologically but not written with the modern Christian explicitly in mind.<sup>49</sup> As Hyatt puts it, "[the prophets themselves] would readily admit the possibility of erroneous predictions without admitting that their understanding of the fundamental nature of God and the moral law was likewise in error."<sup>50</sup> The prophets were fallible beings, God-inspired and faithful but human as well. The prophets observed closely the world around them and were convicted to tell the truth about their cultures; in doing they built a prophetic tradition that would culminate in Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup> The prophetic concern for the future spurned the

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<sup>45</sup> J. Philip Hyatt, "The Prophetic View of History: The Future," in *Prophetic Religion* (New York, Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1947), 91-117.

<sup>46</sup> Hyatt, "The Future," 91.

<sup>47</sup> Hyatt, "The Future," 91.

<sup>48</sup> Hyatt, "The Future," 92-93.

<sup>49</sup> Hyatt, "The Future," 92-93.

<sup>50</sup> Hyatt, "The Future," 94-95.

<sup>51</sup> Whether the reader is a person of Christian faith or not, Christ's sect of Judaism that has grown to include two-and-a-half billion humans worldwide and motivated much of the past two millennia of



claims of special powers of the contemporary occult in favor of a God-given revelation of the consequences of the current moral and ethical crises.

Science fiction is powerful genre for its license to reflect what is good and what is broken about our own culture. From the shoes of those prophets of the alternative realities of science fiction, we may observe our own world from the outside—and in a new light. We are all a product of our culture, whether distorted and corrupted by conflict, greed, or inaction. Whatever it is that leads us to be complacent, if we, say, affirm a stagnant political system through inaction, we are just as liable for the suffering of those to follow us as those in power.<sup>52</sup> The call of prophetic ministry—the assumption of the mantle of careful observation and bold truth-speaking that Brueggemann refers to intermittently in his book—is the invitation to dare to imagine a world that is better, whether a world with the technological expertise of the Foundation or a world where people do not live in fear and hatred of each other. If we dare to imagine, to write, and to speak what we come to believe through our own imagining, surely we too may embody the prophetic, if just for a moment. Hari Seldon did not have the backing of God; he was no mouthpiece. He was also imperfect, and ultimately (spoiler alert) fails to protect his First Foundation. Hari Seldon was not a prophet of any God—but he made an impact with the best of them. Perhaps in observing, criticizing, and producing an energized hope in others, we might join the likes of Hari Seldon, Mahatma Ghandi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Thomas Paine, Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, Rosa Parks, and so many others who have embodied defiance in the face of a broken world rooted in an enduring hope for a collective future.

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history. Jesus is indisputably an influential figure, if not the most significant historical figure as I have claimed.

<sup>52</sup> Here the impending and present ecological crisis serves as a good example.

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<sup>53</sup> Included in research process but not cited in paper.

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