

Article

The Validation and Assessment of Prophets in Jewish Polemic, Philosophy and Messianism

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Abstract

The thrust of this article is to examine three key manifestations of the criteria for identifying and evaluating the status of a prophet in Jewish polemic. The first is a survey and analysis of the use by medieval Jewish and Christian polemicists of the Deuteronomic verses, setting forth these criteria with the objective of demonstrating or disproving the messianic status of Jesus. The second is the Jewish affirmation of the primacy of Mosaic prophecy, with its implications for the doctrine that the Torah will never be superseded. Here there are consequences for polemic with both Christians and Muslims. This discussion will lead us to examine the Jewish affirmation that Moses is unique as the sole prophet of Torah with primary attention to a problem that has elicited much discussion among scholars of medieval Jewish philosophy. How is it that Gersonides (1288–1344), who denied that God knows particulars, including specific human beings, was able to affirm without qualification that no prophet other than Moses would be able to achieve the status of Torah prophet? In this context, we shall be impelled to raise questions about the parameters of Gersonides' basic position regarding divine responsiveness or non-responsiveness to human stimuli and the degree to which exegetical and theological pressures might have led him to deviate from it. In light of his uncompromising position affirming the uniqueness of Moses as a Torah prophet, we shall also have to address his atypical and apparently problematic understanding of what is arguably the most important Biblical passage in the medieval Jewish-Christian debate. Christians maintained that the so-called suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is the Messiah and that the description there accords perfectly with his redemptive mission. Most medieval Jews, especially in Christian Europe, responded to the Christian reading by identifying the servant as the prophet, another prophet, or, most commonly, the Jewish collective. Maimonides, who lived in a Muslim environment, does use the terminology of Isaiah 52:13 in describing the Messiah; Gersonides who lived among Christians, not only does the same but, unlike Maimonides, asserts that he will be a prophet superior to Moses. Nonetheless, despite this apparently disconcerting acceptance of a position congenial to a Christian understanding, he manages to define the nature of that superiority in a manner fully consistent with the affirmation that Moses is the only possible Torah prophet and even to present it as a reason for the non-Jewish nations to abandon their faiths. In light of his uncompromising position affirming the uniqueness of Moses as a Torah prophet, we shall also have to address his surprising and apparently problematic understanding of what is arguably the most important Biblical passage in the medieval Jewish-Christian debate. Christians maintained that the so-called suffering servant in Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is the Messiah and that the description there accords perfectly with his redemptive mission. Most medieval Jews responded to the Christian reading by identifying the servant as the prophet, another prophet, or, most commonly, the Jewish collective. Not only does Gersonides see the servant as the Messiah; he asserts that he will be a prophet superior to Moses. But despite this apparently disconcerting acceptance



Academic Editor: Golda Akhiezer

Received: 28 April 2026

Revised: 3 July 2026

Accepted: 7 July 2026

Published: 13 July 2026

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of a position congenial to a Christian understanding, he manages to define the nature of that superiority in a manner fully consistent with the affirmation that Moses is the only possible Torah prophet and even to present it as a reason for the non-Jewish nations to abandon their faiths. Finally, we move to a contemporary development where the criteria for prophecy are invoked in a polemical context, this time that of an intrafaith polemic. Here the purported prophetic status of a messianic figure becomes a central element of the primary evidence that he is the Messiah. The belief of many, almost certainly most, Lubavitch hasidim affirms the messianic identity of the deceased Rebbe. This belief has generated an internal Jewish polemic with echoes of a key element in the historic Jewish–Christian debate. All Jewish believers in a Messianic figure, especially after Maimonides declared that the Messiah will be second only to Moses as a prophet, ascribed prophetic status to their Messiah. However, that status was not a key factor in the evidence that they cited to prove that he was in fact the Messiah. Shabbetai Zevi’s Messiahship was validated by prophecy, but the prophecy was not that of the Messiah himself. Rather, it was an explicit revelation to Nathan of Gaza, whose prophetic credentials were verified through other means, that named Shabbetai Zevi as the redeemer. Lubavitch messianists, on the other hand, have made the Rebbe’s prophetic standing the fundamental component of the proof that he is the Messiah and of the argument that Jewish law requires one to believe this. In their view, he identified himself as a prophet, issued prophecies during the Gulf War that were fulfilled, and affirmed in his capacity as a prophet that he is the Messiah. Since it is a religious obligation (a *mitzvah*) to accept the words of a prophet, the conclusion that he must be recognized as the Messiah follows inexorably.

Keywords: prophecy; messianism; polemic; moses; Gersonides; Lubavitch

1. Medieval Polemic and the Scriptural Criteria for Identifying a Prophet

The task of identifying a true prophet and rejecting a false one plays a significant role in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and the challenge is of maximal importance when the individual in question is purportedly the supreme prophet. For Jews, two biblical passages that provide criteria for both affirmation and rejection of candidates for prophecy stand at the center of efforts to meet this challenge.

Deuteronomy 13:2–6 affirms that a purported prophet who urges his audience to worship another god should be rejected and put to death even if he provided a sign or portent (*ot o mofet*) that came true. Deuteronomy 18:15–22 promises that God will raise up a prophet like Moses who must be obeyed. The passage goes on to provide a criterion for identifying a false prophet, to wit, the issuing of a prophetic declaration that does not come true. The application of these criteria, despite their apparent clarity, was far from straightforward.

This article will address several examples through the ages of the polemical dimensions of this issue in Jewish texts with particular reference to belief in the supremacy of Mosaic prophecy and the relevance of that belief to the Messiah and messianic figures.

Let us turn first to the Deuteronomic passages themselves. As noted, Deuteronomy 18 describes the promised prophet as being like Moses. This could simply mean that with Moses’ passing, the Israelites will not be left bereft of prophetic guidance similar to what he provided, and that is how Jews generally understood the divine promise. There is not only no compelling reason to understand the prophet as a single figure equivalent to Moses; the criteria provided for determining the genuineness of a prophet strongly suggest that the verses are speaking of a wider prophetic phenomenon.

Nonetheless, Christians were not prepared to treat the phrase “like me” spoken by Moses (verse 15) or “like you” spoken by God (verse 18) in so imprecise a fashion. Thus, God promised a future prophet who would share the characteristics of Moses, and the salient one, they said, is that he would be a lawgiver—a *nomothetes* (Berger 1979, p. 262). The passage in Deuteronomy was already applied to Jesus in Acts, but at that stage it is not clear how central a role is played by the precise analogy to Moses. The relevant verses read: “Heaven must receive him [i.e., Jesus] until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from the people’” (3:22–23). Once the prophet in question was identified with Jesus in Acts, its Christological application in numerous later works was inevitable, and Jews were impelled to react to it.

The Jewish response took the following approach. Once one insists upon pressing the analogy between the prophet of Deuteronomy and Moses, then that analogy cannot stop with the inference that the prophet must be a lawgiver. Jacob ben Reuben’s *Wars of the Lord*, the first polemical work against Christianity written by a European Jew, formulates the key issue explicitly. If Christians do not intend to press the analogy with Moses to the fullest extent and insist instead that this prophet, unlike Moses, is God, then the question becomes how God can say, “I will place my words in his mouth.” We would have a deity who is subordinate to another deity. On the other hand, if the analogy is meant to be all-encompassing, then the prophet in question cannot be divine (ben Reuben 1963, p. 60). As the author of the later *Nizzahon Vetus* put it, “Just as [Moses was] a prophet and not a god . . . so [the figure in Deuteronomy] will be a prophet and not a god; just as [Moses was] born of a father and mother, so he will be born of a father and mother” (Berger 1979, p. 74).

Prooftexts from the Hebrew Bible are far less important in Islam than in Christianity, but it is nonetheless not surprising that Muslims too cited the Deuteronomic passage as a reference to the final prophet. Muhammad was arguably a better candidate than Jesus since Christians did not normally describe their messianic prophet as a *nomothetes*, while the analogy between Moses and Muhammad, who was seen as both the supreme prophet and ultimate lawgiver, was not only closer but also not subject to the refutation that pointed to the Christian belief in Jesus’ divinity (Berger 1979, p. 262).

The Jewish rejection of Muhammad’s prophethood invoked his abrogation of elements of biblical law and was reinforced by the cultivation of an attitude of disdain for the man described as *pasul*—disqualified—rather than *rasul* (messenger)¹. Outside the Muslim world, the *Nizzahon Vetus* adopted a Christian story asserting that Muhammad was killed in a drunken stupor and then dragged through a garbage dump by pigs—a story no doubt rooted in a hostile effort to explain the Muslim prohibitions of alcohol and pork—and an Ashkenazic liturgical poem refers as a matter of course to those who believe in a prophet who never prophesied (Goldschmidt 1965, p. 182). Since the tale in the *Nizzahon Vetus* refers to Muhammad as “their god,” the author would no doubt also have rejected him with the argument directed against an allegedly divine prophet (Berger 1979, p. 217).

Abrogation of the law leads us to the more formal Jewish criteria for accepting or rejecting a prophet. The classic formulation is in Maimonides’ code, where he insists that a prophet must be an evidently superior figure both morally and intellectually in order to qualify for consideration. Providing a striking sign or a substantial series of accurate predictions establishes such a person as a prophet provided that he does not preach the abrogation of the Torah or even the permanent abolition of a single commandment. In this context, Maimonides affirms the uniqueness of Moses, whose prophetic status we accept

not because of a sign but because his mission was authenticated by the revelation at Sinai that we saw with our own eyes.

In his discussion, Maimonides makes specific reference to our verses in Deuteronomy. It is a basic principle, he says, that adding or detracting from the Torah of Moses disqualifies a prophet. “Why, then,” he continues, “does it say in the Torah, ‘I will raise up a prophet for them among their brethren like you?’” This prophet, he responds, “does not come to create a religion but rather to command the observance of its dicta and warn the people not to violate it.”²

In his earlier Commentary to the Mishnah, Maimonides had gone beyond the affirmation of the uniqueness of Mosaic prophecy and established it as one of the thirteen fundamental doctrines of Judaism that could be denied only at the cost of one’s standing as a legitimate member of the Jewish collective and even one’s portion in the world to come.³ Haym Soloveichik has argued that on the merits, it is far from clear that this assessment of Mosaic prophecy deserves such an exalted status. In the Christian world today, he wrote, someone who would say that he ranks Obadiah, who made it into the Bible with a single-chapter prophecy, as a greater prophet than Moses would be seen as an eccentric, not as a heretic. (We are presumably to assume that this eccentric would find a way to square his position with the biblical verses that Moses was the greatest of prophets.) Why, then, did Maimonides classify this as a fundamental belief? The answer is that in a Muslim society, where the supremacy of Muhammad’s prophecy played such a central role, the supreme status of Moses’ prophecy had to be classified as a fundamental tenet of the faith (Soloveitchik 2008, pp. 242–43).

There may well be some validity in this contention. Nonetheless, for a philosophically oriented thinker like Maimonides, the special character of Mosaic prophecy was integrally connected to the standing of the Torah, and I am inclined to think that the doctrine in question would have been seen as central even in the absence of Christianity and Islam. It is difficult to test this hypothesis, but what is clear is that the philosophical analysis of Mosaic prophecy was central to Jewish philosophers under both Islam and Christianity.

2. The Uniqueness of Moses as Torah Prophet in Jewish Philosophy and Polemic: The Challenging Case of Gersonides

One such thinker whose treatment of this subject has elicited substantial scholarly discussion and puzzlement is the fourteenth-century philosopher and exegete Gersonides. The analysis that follows is an effort to contribute to this philosophical discourse in its own right. In our context, the ultimate point is to underscore the lengths to which a Jewish thinker would go in order to preserve the unique supremacy of Moses as the only Torah prophet.

To lay the groundwork for this discussion, I need to outline with ruthless brevity the unusual position that Gersonides took with respect to divine knowledge, prophecy, and miracles. In his view, God does not know particulars. The same is true of the Active Intellect, which is the agent of prophecy and miracles. Scholars are fond of quoting an image first proposed by Norbert Samuelson describing Gersonides’ Active Intellect, which knows only the ordered reality of the universe, as a transmitter. Prophets have reached a level that enables them to pick up the transmission (Samuelson 1970, pp. 13–14, n. 33). Once they have done this, they can apply their knowledge to particular situations, enabling them to predict future events and sometimes even effect miracles.

In 1977, Menachem Kellner published an article in *Speculum* addressing a challenging question that Gersonides himself had raised (Kellner 1977). Since the prophetic process is naturalistic and God Himself does not know who a particular prophet is, what is to prevent a prophet subsequent to Moses from reaching the latter’s exalted level and becoming a

Torah prophet? Moreover, since the environment of the second “Moses” would be different from that of the first, the second Torah would presumably differ from the first.

Gersonides’ own response in his commentary to Deuteronomy was that Moses’ Torah prophecy, unlike typical naturalistic prophecy, was miraculous and hence not to be repeated. Since miraculous prophecy appears inconsistent with Gersonides’ fundamental philosophical approach, Kellner regards this position as “amazing,” as “the only place where Gersonides is forced to retreat from his consistent and thoroughgoing rationalism.” Three possibilities, he continues, can be proffered to account for this inconsistency: Gersonides may not have realized that he was being inconsistent, his position in the commentary may be intended for the masses, or that position may be his true view not made explicit in his philosophical work. Kellner points to serious problems with the last two options and, in desperation, opts for the first, which, since Gersonides himself broached the problem, in fact borders on the impossible.

On the one hand, this justly influential article is marked by striking lacunae. Kellner writes, “Gersonides discusses the special nature of Mosaic prophecy in three places” and goes on to specify that those places are his philosophical work *The Wars of the Lord*, Book 2, chapters 6 and 8, and his commentary to Deuteronomy 34. In fact, however, Gersonides discussed this subject at some length in several other places in his commentary, including the most obvious one—the passage in Numbers 12 where the Torah specifies differences between the prophecy of Moses and that of other prophets. On the other hand, later scholars who were aware of the additional passages as well as of Kellner’s article did not find those passages very helpful in answering his question. Reactions range from avoiding a direct effort to deal with it, confessing that a resolution is elusive, and suggesting a response.

Thus, Robert Eisen confessed that the impossibility of a subsequent Torah prophet is “most difficult to explain” (Eisen 1995, p. 82).

Seymour Feldman posed Kellner’s question as follows: “Since God and the Agent Intellect do not possess knowledge of individuals as such, how is it that Moses is picked out as the one who promulgates the Torah?” And “can we be certain that in the future there will be no one who qualifies as Moses did?”

Feldman provided a response:

“The answer to this question is no different from Gersonides’ general account of miracles. There is no picking out of an individual as worthy of a miracle. Rather, there is in the universal plan for human history a proviso stipulating that if some individual satisfies certain conditions, a perfect law will be revealed through that person. Moses satisfied these conditions, and so he gave the Torah . . . The miracle of Sinai came about because the conditions required for the giving of the Torah were de facto satisfied at that time and place by a person named ‘Moses, the son of Amram.’”

Moreover, once that perfect law has been revealed, there is no need for a subsequent revelation (Feldman 2010, pp. 164–65).

Thus, Moses accessed a perfect law and formulated it in a narrative context meaningful to his audience; this process is precluded in the future.

When I first read Kellner’s article, its incomplete data base impelled me to peruse much of Gersonides’ corpus of commentaries to see if there might be a solution to the puzzle that he posed, but I never published the tentative suggestion that emerged, which is much like Feldman’s but adds a somewhat more daring element. When I revisited my notes in the context of this article and read much of the secondary literature produced in the last forty years, I discovered to what I confess was my disappointment that two of the passages most relevant to that suggestion had been noticed by Howard Kreisel in his

excellent book on prophecy in medieval Jewish philosophy. He does not, however, deploy them in the manner that I will propose.

Kreisel asserts that “Gersonides’ notion of miraculous prophecy” is a good example of his “push[ing] his problematic view of individual providence to even greater extremes.” In the course of his discussion, he notes Gersonides’ assertion that the seventy elders in Numbers 11, who had one prophetic experience, were exceptional individuals but not really worthy of prophecy.

Several pages later, Kreisel points to Gersonides’ surprising assertion in his commentary to Joshua that prophecy—or at least prophecy that would affect the Jewish collective—was withheld from Joshua, who was decidedly worthy of it, as long as Moses was alive because there was no need for his prophecy in the presence of a superior prophet. Both of these assertions are exceedingly difficult to explain in the context of Gersonides’ philosophical convictions, and Kreisel simply cites them as evidence of relatively traditional views that do not readily cohere with those convictions (Kreisel 2001, pp. 404–8).

Nevertheless, the very brief remark about the seventy elders in Gersonides’ commentary on Numbers may provide a key to understanding how miraculous prophecy works. The elders were “worthy of lofty status (*re’uyim le-ma’alah*)” but not quite that of prophecy. In response to Moses’ complaint that he was being asked to bear the burden of leading this large nation by himself, God “promised that He would miraculously generate a prophetic overflow in a manner that would enable them to participate with Moses in leading the people.”⁴ The elders themselves were not miraculously elevated. The divine overflow, or, if you wish, transmission was miraculously enhanced.

It appears, then, that the intensity of the overflow, or signal, from the Active Intellect can be affected by contact with a prophet—or at least a prophet of Moses’s stature—under circumstances when that enhancement or diminution is necessary. The Active Intellect itself need not know the identity of the prophet or the specific circumstances, but it is programmed as part of the order of the universe to respond to the prophet’s needs or presence. Thus, the elders prophesied because Moses’ needs that were conveyed to the Active Intellect led to a new or stronger divine overflow, and Joshua was denied prophecy because Moses’ presence rendered it unnecessary.

Understanding the miraculous nature of Moses’ Torah prophecy may similarly be facilitated by assuming that the order of the universe known to the Active Intellect required that when contact was established with a prophet of the requisite stature at a time when there was a need for the Torah, the overflow would be enhanced to make Torah prophecy possible. If this is correct, then the model of the transmitter that is unresponsive to any stimulus may well require revision.

I should add that we find other comments in the commentary that are extremely difficult to square with Gersonides’ philosophical radicalism and do not smoothly accord with the position of most scholars that his commentary fully meets the daunting challenge of interpreting the Bible almost verse by verse in a manner that is fully congruent with the affirmation that God does not know individual human beings.

To take an example from a narrative that we have just noted, we find the following remark in one of Gersonides’ “useful lessons” (*to’aliyyot*, or *to’alot*) in the section of his commentary on Numbers dealing with the account that leads to the appointment of the elders. “The ninth useful lesson is to publicize the fact that God may He be exalted knows people’s thoughts.”⁵ It is no small challenge to divine what Gersonides’ own thoughts were when he wrote this.

The key point emerging from this discussion for our purposes is that Gersonides was so intent on doing everything possible to guarantee the uniqueness of Moses’ Torah prophecy and hence the eternity of an unchanging revelation that he either made that uniqueness

part of the fundamental ordering of the universe or applied a rarely invoked willingness to affirm the responsiveness of the divine transmission to a prophet, a responsiveness that stands in tension with his straightforward philosophical convictions.

This position becomes all the more interesting in light of an atypical stance that he assumes regarding another aspect of Moses' stature. At the end of Deuteronomy (34.10), we are told that "there has never yet risen in Israel a prophet like Moses." As several scholars have pointed out, Gersonides emphasizes the phrase "in Israel" as an indication that a superior prophet will arise whose activities will be played out not within Israel alone but on a world stage, namely the Messiah.⁶ This superiority will be expressed through the effecting of miracles, of which the most impressive will be the resurrection of the dead. It is upon seeing this miracle that the nations will say, "Our fathers inherited falsehood (Jeremiah 16:19)."⁷ Thus, Moses will in the final analysis not be the supreme prophet in every respect, but the achievements of that prophet will lead the nations to recognize the validity of the Jewish faith. Moses remains the unique Torah prophet.

The assertion that in some respects the Messiah will be a greater prophet than Moses bears an unusual polemical resonance. At first glance, this is precisely what a Jew should avoid saying in a Christian society. For Gersonides, however, it underscores the fact that Jesus, who did not effect a miracle comparable to the resurrection, was and is not the Messiah.

And even this does not capture the full irony of Gersonides' argument. He underscores the greatness of the Messiah by saying that "he will rise, be lifted up, and be exceedingly exalted,"⁸ a characterization taken from the first verse (Isaiah 52:13) of the so-called suffering servant passage, which served as a central, even *the* central Christian proof-text in the Jewish-Christian debate. For Christians, the servant is the Messiah, and the atoning death described was fulfilled to perfection by the life, suffering, and death of Jesus.

Most medieval Jews, especially in Christian environments, rejected the identification of the servant as the Messiah and understood the figure as the prophet, a different prophet, or, most commonly, the Jewish collective. Maimonides, who lived in a Muslim environment, does use the terminology of Isaiah 52:13 in describing the Messiah, asserting that "when the true Messianic king will arise and succeed, become exalted and uplifted, they [the nations] will all return and realize that their ancestors inherited falsehood."⁹

Gersonides, writing in the Christian orbit, endorses this assertion with respect to its apparent identification of the servant as the Messiah as well as its affirmation that his success will persuade the nations to abandon their false beliefs. However, he provides a sharper and more focused argument. In striking contrast to Maimonides, he maintains that this recognition will result from the fact that the Messiah, who will in this respect be a prophet superior to Moses, will perform a spectacular miracle that will lead the nations, very much including Christians, to embrace the truth of Judaism. In sum, Gersonides characterizes the Messiah in terminology taken from a verse that refers to the servant, which supports a key position affirmed by Christians, and he turns this association or identification into a particularly vigorous anti-Christian argument.

3. Prophetic Status and Messianic Status: Intrafaith Polemic and the Case of Lubavitch (or Habad) Messianism

Let us now move to contemporary times. Lubavitch hasidim have established the most successful Jewish messianic movement since Sabbatianism. Strikingly, those who overtly affirm their faith that the Rebbe is the Messiah utilize the messianic understanding of Isaiah 52–53. Thus, when he suffered a stroke, believers pointed to a central verse in that passage. Remarkably, Isaiah 53:5 contains a word (*meholal*) that has been provided with three different translations by three different messianic movements. In each case, the

translation is either perfectly reasonable or at least accords with a plausible first impression, and in each case it serves the movement to perfection. The verse reads, “And he is *meholal* from our sins.” For Christians the word means pierced or wounded (Vulgate *vulneratus*); for Sabbatians, it meant profaned (Scholem 1971, p. 50); and for Lubavitch hasidim after the Rebbe’s stroke—afflicted by illness (Wolpo 1992, *Yechi Hamelech Hamoshiach*, pp. 68–69).

While such prooftexts play a significant role for Lubavitch messianists, their primary argument for the Rebbe’s Messiahship mobilizes what they regard as the compelling evidence that he was a prophet.

Four years after the Rebbe’s passing, six distinguished Lubavitch rabbis issued a rabbinic ruling that came to be signed by well over two hundred others.

Here is the text of that ruling:

In the holy discourse on the Torah reading *Shoftim* [Deuteronomy 16:18–21:9], the Lubavitcher Rebbe established as law that this generation has a prophet and we must listen to him, as codified in Maimonides’ code, *The Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah*, chapter 7.

These are the Rebbe’s holy words:

We must publicize to all people of the generation that we have merited to have God select and appoint someone who is personally incomparably greater than the people of his generation to fulfill the role of “your judges” and “your advisors” (Isaiah 1:26) and be the prophet of the generation . . . until the main prophecy—the prophecy of “immediately to Redemption” and immediately “behold this (i.e., the Messiah) comes” . . .

The Rebbe said in the discourse on the Torah reading *Va-yeira* [Genesis 18–22], 5752 [1992]:

All obstacles and hindrances have been nullified in our days etc. Since this is so, we have not only the reality [or presence] of the Messiah but also his revelation, and now we must only greet our righteous Messiah in actuality . . .

In the discourse on the Torah reading *Mishpatim* [Exodus 21–24], 5752 (1992), the holy Rebbe says:

This is the ruling of the rabbis and teachers of Israel that the time of redemption has arrived, [regarding which Maimonides wrote,] “A king will arise from the house of David . . . who is the presumptive Messiah.”

The Rebbe then added the following words to this ruling: until the state and situation of “this is certainly the Messiah.” Moreover, in this discourse the Rebbe hinted in clear fashion that he is the King Messiah.

We [the undersigned hereby] issue a ruling in accordance with the law of our holy Torah—based on the law in Maimonides’ code, *The Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 7:1, 9:2, and 10:1 that the Rebbe King Messiah has the [legal] status of a prophet. Moreover, in his holy discourses he explicitly hints regarding himself that he is a prophet, it is understood from his discourses that he is the King Messiah, and he encouraged the singing of “May our Master, Teacher, and Rabbi the King Messiah live forever.” In addition, he already affirmed future events before all Jews and before the entire world, and his words were fulfilled in their entirety during the Six-Day War, the Gulf War, and much more.

Therefore, we are obligated to adhere to everything he tells us in accordance with the obligation to obey the words of a prophet, including the fact that the Rebbe is the King Messiah and will immediately be revealed to us.

May our Master, Teacher, and Rabbi the King Messiah live forever.

End of ruling.¹⁰

For our purposes, the most noteworthy aspect of this ruling is that the ultimate validation of the Messiah’s status rests on his prophetic status. The hasidim pointed to

the many accomplishments of the Rebbe, which in their view fulfilled the Maimonidean criteria for presumptive Messiah, but when Lubavitch rabbis sought a rigorous proof with legal standing that he is definitely the Messiah, they resorted to the purported evidence for his prophethood.

Maimonides had asserted that the Messiah will be a prophet close to Moses, which means that believers in any messianic candidate regarded that figure as a prophet. But Maimonides did not include this in the section of his code that discusses criteria for identifying the Messiah, and to the best of my knowledge this Lubavitch argument is a new development in the history of Jewish messianism. Shabbetai Zevi had a prophet other than himself who declared and hence validated his Messiahship. In Lubavitch messianism, it is the Rebbe/prophet himself who exercises this function.

This study has addressed a single central theme, to wit, the role of prophecy in inter-faith and intrafaith polemic. This characterization, however, is deceptively simple, since the article focuses on three disparate issues within that theme and deals with four religions or religious movements (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Habad Hasidism), analyzing arguments regarding the prophetic status and messianic or eschatological significance ascribed to Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and the Lubavitcher Rebbe by the adherents of these respective faiths or movements. Setting forth the range of these arguments—Scriptural, philosophical, and legal—is a daunting task, and I can only hope to have left the reader with some increased insight into these challenging exchanges.

Needless to say, this presentation has by no means exhausted the multiple manifestations of the prophetic theme in religious polemic. I hope, however, that the richness and complexity of this discourse as well as its central significance have at least begun to emerge.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: I am grateful to Daniel Rynhold for commenting on the article and providing the location of an important reference.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ See Halkin (1985, pp. 106, 138 (note 108)); See Perlmann (1964, p. 62).
- ² For the full discussion, see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Yesodei ha-Torah*, chapters 7–9.
- ³ See Rosner (1981, chap. 10, pp. 150–55).
- ⁴ *Commentary to Numbers* 11:16–17. See Braner and Cohen (2009/10, pp. 118, 98).
- ⁵ *Commentary to Numbers* 11, *To'ellet* 9. See Braner and Cohen (2009/10, p. 117).
- ⁶ This reading of “in Israel” evokes the Rabbinic assertion that a greater prophet arose among the nations, to wit, Balaam (*Sifrei* to Deut. 34:10). In his commentary to Numbers 22:2, *to'ellet* 2, Gersonides makes explicit reference to this midrash. See Braner and Cohen (2009/10, pp. 322–24).
- ⁷ *Commentary to Deuteronomy* 34:10–12, See Braner and Cohen (2017/18, p. 578).
- ⁸ *Commentary to Deuteronomy* 34:10–12, *to'ellet* 19. See Braner and Cohen (2017/18, p. 584).
- ⁹ *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Melakhim* 11:4.
- ¹⁰ See https://www.hageula.com/geula_moshiach/melech_hamoshiach/23450.htm (accessed on 1 July 2026).

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