In this section, I describe the various terms used for prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Like in the ancient Near Eastern material, there are a number of different titles that are used to refer to prophetic roles. As discussed in the introduction, the study of ancient prophecy faces the difficulty that the term ‘prophet’ is often used both as a translation of the relevant terms in the ancient languages (which need not always refer to the social role ‘prophet’) but it is also used also to describe a socio-religious role. 1

As in the previous chapters, I distinguish between people who are given a professional prophetic title and those who happen to prophesy. In recent studies on Hebrew prophecy, the existence of so-called ‘lay-prophecy’ has been questioned. 2 However, the texts show evidence of prophets, such as Amos, who may well not have been perceived by their contemporaries as prophets in the professional sense, but who prophesied. It is for those people that I will use the term ‘lay-prophet’. 3

13.1 *The נָבִי* (nābī’)

James Barr is justly famous for his insistence that etymological information does not provide firm evidence for the meaning of any word. 4 Only

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3 Chronicles knows of five lay-prophets: Amasai, the chief of the captains (1 Chr 12: 19), Azariah, the son of Oded (2 Chr 15: 1), Jahaziel, son of the Levite Zechariah (2 Chr 20: 14), Zechariah, son of Jehoiada the priest (2 Chr 24: 20) and the pharaoh Neco (2 Chr 35). As shown by Schniedewind (1995: 74–126), inspiration formulae are used for them as they do not bear a prophetic title and thus the divine authority of their message needs affirmation.
4 Barr (1968). Schniedewind (1995: 32–33 esp. n.7) doubts the usefulness of etymological data for determining the function of the various kinds of prophets in the Hebrew Bible. His dislike for etymological studies seems to include a dislike of the names of the authors of the debate in *Biblische Notizen* in the 1980s: in real life his ‘H. Mueller’ is Hans-Peter Müller and ‘G. Manfred’ is Manfred Görg. Walter Müller is not mentioned at all. The relevant articles are: Görg (1982, 1983, 1985 and 1986), Müller (1985) and Müller (1986).
context can achieve that. While that is undoubtedly the case, there are
good reasons to discuss the etymology of the Hebrew term נביא: etymol-
ogy can tell us about the history of a word and its connections to related
words in other languages. More importantly, however, it is necessary to
re-assess some of the claims made about the etymological data for נביא.
Particularly, texts from Ebla and Emar have been construed as providing
evidence for prophecy in those places. I will first discuss the morphology
and etymology of נביא and then usage of the word in epigraphic Hebrew
and the Hebrew Bible.

13.1.1 The Etymology of נביא

The word נביא (nābī') is a qātīl-pattern of the root נב.5 Proto-Semitic
qatil appears in the qātīl-pattern in Hebrew and is normally passive.6
Fleming has argued that in the case of נביא, however, this form should
be understood as possessing an active sense.7 As shown by Huehnergard,
this is highly unlikely, as the qātīl-pattern almost always denotes a passive
(or ‘patiens’) sense.8 We shall return to Fleming’s comparative evidence
below.

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5 This root is the form in which it appears in Biblical Hebrew. In comparative Semitics,
the root is normally given as √nby, √nbi, or most commonly √nb'. However, the last radical
was most likely the vowel /i/, cf. Müller (1984b: 143–144). While this is accepted today,
other derivations were suggested in the past, cf. Walker (1961) and Görg (1982, 1983,
1985, and 1986) who suggested derivations from Egyptian. Walker linked נביא to Egyptian
n-b i-3-w, which can be translated as ‘(God-)honoured one’. The sound changes involved,
however, make this derivation unlikely, cf. Barr (1968: 102). Görg suggested another term,
nb3, which is found in medical texts and means ‘to rave, to be excited’, cf. Erman/Grapow
Deines/Westendorf (1961–62: I, p. 455). Neither suggestion has been accepted, as the
etymological connections to cognates in other Semitic languages promise better results.
Many years before, Gesenius (1839: 838a) had suggested deriving נביא from the root √nb’
('to bubble up'). Kuenen (1877: 42–45) also seems to derive from this root, but does not
mention it. Jeffers (1996: 82) quotes Kuenen and ‘reconstructs’ a root √nby with the
meaning ‘to bubble up’. This derivation is unlikely as it would require an מ (‘) to change
into an נ (‘), Jeremias (1976: 7) and Müller (1984b: 147).

6 Fox (2003: 192–193). For a critical discussion of the methodological problems in the
reconstruction of proto-languages cf. Edzard (1998). The qātīl-pattern is often referred
to as the qātīl-pattern by Hebraists to indicate the plene spelling. Since the circumflex
tends to represent a contracted vowel, I have represented the long /i/ with the more
common /ī/.


8 Huehnergard (1999) and Fox (2003: 192–193). In an article on terms for temple per-
sonnel, Fleming (2004: 61–64) replies to Huehnergard’s arguments. However, he remains
wedded to the idea that lú.meš/na-bi-i must denote prophets.