Have you ever thought about the meaning of the term “prophet?” Today, we often use the word simply to refer to someone who attempts to tell the future. However, the term has meant much more than that.

Take the use of the verb, “to prophesy,” for example, in the story of Jesus’ trial. After his arrest, some men strike the blindfolded Jesus, taunting him by saying, “Prophesy who hit you!” This is not a request to tell the future, but to reveal knowledge of the people around him.

The meanings of the words “prophet” and “prophecy” have changed through time. In the oldest types of Judaism, the terms differed from later Judaism and Christianity. Then, in the sixth century, Islam provided another meaning.

During the period of the Judahite and Israelite monarchies, before 600 B.C., prophets had a clear role. They spoke primarily to power -- usually against power. They told kings God’s message, a message that usually directed the kings to change their course or to take one they did not wish. Occasionally, prophets had a message for the Israelite people, but that message usually concerned sins of the royal leadership.

Kings frequently did not welcome God’s prophets. King Ahab tried to avoid Elijah, and Micaiah was opposed by false prophets whom the king favored. By contrast, kings such as Hezekiah and Josiah were lauded because they chose to follow the divine instruction of God’s prophets.

The main reason for king-prophet difficulties is that the prophets spoke about current events and informed the kings how they should react to those events -- usually different from what they were already doing. Prophecy was not about the far-off future, but about the here-and-now. Their prophecies were preserved because the words they spoke to the king, God’s words, had come true. To remember those words, the prophets’ followers recorded them.

The last of the Israelite prophets were Haggai and Zechariah, who helped guide the Judahites in their rebuilding Jerusalem and its temple after their return from the Babylonian Exile in 520 B.C.

After that time, Judaism believed that prophecy had ceased. They were left with only the written records of past prophets.

In the last centuries before Christianity, Judaism began to treat these prophetic records differently. They forgot the events to which the prophesies referred. Instead, they imbued the prophecies with new meaning, believing that the messages referred to later times, perhaps even their own.

To understand the prophetic meanings, men arose as interpreters, claiming to reveal the divine knowledge in those writings. The Teacher of Righteousness was one such interpreter. He told the community of Jewish monks living in the desert site at Qumran how they were the true focus of the prophets’ utterances. His interpretations of Haggai, Isaiah and other prophetic books were found in 1947 among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

At the end of the first century, the Christians took a similar approach. The Gospel of Matthew, in particular, viewed Jesus as the fulfillment of numerous prophecies made centuries earlier to the kings. Matthew identified each prophecy for his readers, showing how they pointed to Jesus and his earthly mission.

In the seventh century, Muhammad created a new religion called Islam. As the founder, Muhammad was considered a prophet. In fact, his followers considered him the “seal of the prophets.” That meant that he was the last in the line of God’s prophets -- a line that started with Adam and included Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and Jesus.

Muhammad differed from his prophetic forebears. His prophecy was for his followers, not for government leaders or officials. It provided teachings, theology and practical advice for the founding of the new religion rather than guidance for addressing current events. Like Moses, Muhammad’s prophecy aimed to create a new nation -- one that Muslims believe was founded upon God’s direct guidance.

So, although the terms “prophet” and “prophecy” are used throughout the history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, they frequently point to different kinds of activity, which had different functions within society and produced different outcomes. But, what is shared among the three different functions discussed here is that the prophet brings a divine message direct from God to his or her listeners.