

INTRODUCTION

IN THE MODERN DAY, PARTICULARLY DURING THE American civil rights movement and the Vietnam War crisis of the 1960s and 1970s, there was much talk in the church, academy, and public sector about prophets and messages said to be “prophetic.” Certain individuals were called modern-day prophets, others were said to be delivering prophetic messages, and still others were called upon to be prophetic when they were not, by those who thought they should be. The times were unsettled; the post–World War II peace had vanished, and the old had not yet given way to the new.

At the end of the turbulent 1960s, an article appeared in *Interpretation* by W. Sibley Towner entitled, “On Calling People ‘Prophets’ in 1970.”¹ Mentioned here as individuals called prophets by some were William Stringfellow, Martin Luther King Jr., William Sloan Coffin Jr., Pope John XXIII, Billy Graham, Jeane Dixon, “the unkempt prophets of Berkeley,” and others. Martin Luther King, leader of the civil rights movement, was thought by his own father to be a prophet. William Sloan Coffin, at the historic Riverside Church in New York City, was said to be carrying on the prophetic preaching of his predecessor, Harry Emerson Fosdick. Closer to home, my own pastor at the North Park Covenant Church in Chicago, Douglas Cedarleaf, was not named a prophet per se, but it was widely agreed both inside and outside the church fellowship that his preaching in support of the ecumenical movement, civil rights, issues of war and peace, and opening up the North Park neighborhood to people of all races was “prophetic.” In most of these examples, being a prophet or speaking prophetically did not consist of divining the future, although the future was very much in the minds of these individuals; it was addressing pressing issues of the day, or “forthtelling,” as it was called.

Towner in his article said that prophetic messages consisted of four great themes:²

1. an appeal for equity and a call for justice for the politically weak, powerless, and economically outcast (cf. 2 Sam 12:1-7; Amos 8:4-7; Jer 22:13-16);
2. an indictment of corruption in circles of power, wherever it is seen, and at whatever cost might be required (cf. Hos 7:4-7);
3. a call for purification of the religious establishment (cf. Amos 5:21; Hos 4:4-6);
4. a note of hope for redemption, peace, and obedient living (Hos 3:14-15; Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 37:24-28; Isa 35:8-10)

In a telegram sent December 20, 1972, to Billy Graham, Henry W. Andersen, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Illinois, and chairman of Chicagoland Key '73, made this appeal to the world-famous preacher:

Dear Dr. Graham:

I have sent telegrams to President Nixon deploring the unlimited bombing the United States is unleashing on Vietnam. My voice before the President is nothing, but you have access to him that no other minister of God has. If you deplore the bombing also, I beg you to raise your voice as a prophet, like Nathan of old, in protest to the President, imploring him to stop the bombing immediately.

Andersen did not receive an answer, so Ernest T. Campbell, minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, read to the assembled throng in this historic church on the Sunday after Christmas an open letter to Billy Graham, asking why Graham had not responded. In it, he said among other things: "The President needs a Micaiah not a Zedekiah, a prophet not a mere house chaplain." Graham answered Campbell and others who had communicated with him, and the telegram, open letter, and Graham's answer were published a couple months later.³ In Graham's answer, he said concerning his own ministry:

I am convinced that God has called me to be a New Testament evangelist—not an Old Testament prophet! While some may interpret an evangelist to be primarily a social reformer or political activist, I do not!⁴

End of discussion. Billy Graham did not see himself as an Old Testament prophet.

The present book is not about modern prophets or modern prophecy so-called, although I have more than passing interest in both topics. It is about a remarkable number of select individuals in ancient Israel, Jeremiah first and foremost, and what made them prophets in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. It lifts up what they said when speaking passionately to kings, the nation's leaders, peoples of foreign nations, and the common folk in ancient Israel. I have held my own analysis of the prophetic messages to a minimum, preferring instead to select from their own words the messages for which they have been remembered. The first portion of the book looks also at various measures given in the Bible for authenticity, that is, tests employed in ancient Israel for determining true prophets from false prophets. The second portion of the book examines how the prophets crafted messages and formed arguments giving their words the power they had, and how the spoken word was supplemented by signs and symbolic action.

For any serious discussion about prophets and prophecy to be carried on in the present day—and there continues to be a need for such at the beginning of the twenty-first century—the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament must be known and understood. These are the individuals who define both the prophetic office and the prophetic message. I shared this conviction one day with a friend who said he had no interest in the biblical prophets. They lived in a world far removed from ours and had no relevance for today. My friend thought he could form his own views on prophets and prophecy by reading Daniel, Revelation, and modern best-sellers such as Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth*.

In the ancient Near Eastern world were also individuals who boasted of having a vocation similar to Israel's prophets, but they have left no mark and are little more than a curiosity, being studied primarily for purposes of comparing and contrasting to the prophets of Israel. It was the towering figures of Samuel, Elijah, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and a select number of others, named and unnamed in the Old Testament, who made a lasting impression, and we need to find out more about who they were, what they were about, and what it was they said. This book seeks to help the reader make these discoveries.