

PREFACE

THIS BOOK HAS BEEN A LONG TIME IN PREPARATION. My interest in the Old Testament prophets began when I was very young. I remember sitting at my grandmother's kitchen table listening to her tell me about the mighty Elijah, who made a strong impression on my young mind. Later, I took a course on the Hebrew prophets in college, but only began a serious study of them in seminary and graduate school in the 1960s and early '70s. On a year away from North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, I took courses on Amos, Hosea, and Jeremiah from William Holladay at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut. Returning home, I sat once again on Sunday mornings and evenings listening to the prophetic preaching of Douglas Cedarleaf, minister of the North Park Covenant Church, my church home. Cedarleaf, when not expounding the parables of Jesus, for which he is also remembered, was preaching powerfully on the dominant themes of the day: the ecumenical movement, civil rights, and issues relating to war and peace. One Sunday evening, he gave a modern rendition of Amos's oracles to the nations (Amos 1–2), which was riveting. His sermon the Sunday morning following the death of President John F. Kennedy, in which he alluded to David's words following the death of Abner, "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?" (2 Sam 3:38), is one I shall never forget. Someone passed him a note midway in the sermon saying that Kennedy's alleged assassin had now been murdered, and he relayed this to the crowded church. We dispersed after the service in near silence. Linda and I had become engaged the night before, and we were unable to tell anyone.

My graduate work began under James Muilenburg, who knew the prophets, taught the prophets, and preached the prophets like no other. In these years, from 1967 to 1974, I divided my time between studying in San Anselmo and in Berkeley, also working in San Francisco, where I drove a mail car for the Bank of America. In Berkeley, graduate seminars and language study were supplemented by daily happenings on the

street and the campus of the University of California. One day, I myself entered the fray, taking on a fiery anarchist in front of Sproul Hall during the noontime melee. Driving my bank car to Oakland enabled me to see the drama at the Oakland Induction Center, where the busses of young men I had been following across the Bay Bridge were being delivered to the Center for war duty in Vietnam. I witnessed there the throngs of screaming protesters and a virtual army of police—including California Highway Patrolmen—who kept people at bay so the busses could get to the Center. These were turbulent years, and it was anybody's guess where the disruptions would take us. Similar things were happening elsewhere in the country, but Berkeley is where it all started, and where the social unrest was particularly intense. I confess to wondering at times whether this was how a civil war began. Here on the streets of the Bay Area of California, before my very eyes, I was witnessing incidents strangely similar to those I was reading about on the pages of Holy Writ, with some of the more strident individuals claiming to be prophets in their cries against the war, against the university, and against authority of just about any sort. I would have to delve more deeply into my study of the Hebrew prophets, finding out who these individuals really were and assess more carefully the troubled world in which they lived. This I did, focusing on arguably the greatest of the biblical prophets: Jeremiah ben Hilkiyah of Anathoth.

The chapters of this book were first presented to the adult Sunday School class at the Trinity Covenant Church in Lexington, Massachusetts. The invitation to teach this class, during January to March of 1976, was extended by my good friend Dr. Donald Wells, pastor of the church. To him, David Bohy, and members of the class I am grateful for a memorable experience. I have given these lectures many times since in churches and in university and seminary classrooms. The lead chapter, "To Be a Prophet . . .," was delivered in its present form to students at Fudan University in Shanghai, in April 2008, then again in September of that year to students at Ansgar Theological Seminary and Agder University in Kristiansand, and the Lutheran Mission School in Stavanger, Norway.

Interpretations of biblical texts draw upon the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, Anchor Bible Jeremiah, or are otherwise my own.

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