

Introduction

What Is Prophetic Politics?

I

EVER SINCE PURITAN PREACHERS PERFECTED the art of prophetic indictment, no people have reveled in the rhetoric of divine judgment more than Americans.¹ In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, many people, both liberal and conservative, saw the terrorist attacks as divine retribution for American sins – they just disagreed about what sins. Nothing is more American than the proclivity to call down divine judgment upon our nation, whether for our treatment of refugees, the poor, or unborn children.

Even Thomas Jefferson could sound like a Hebrew prophet when he lamented slavery: “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever.” The divine retribution that Jefferson prophesied seemed to come to pass in the Civil War. According to Abraham Lincoln, because the whole nation profited from the injustice of slavery, the whole nation would be forced to pay the full price in blood and treasure. In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln prayed for a speedy end to the war, but accepted the harsh necessity of divine punishment:

Yet, if God wills that it [the war] continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be

¹ For a meditation on the moral complexity of prophetic rhetoric in American history, see George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). For an analysis of the culture of prophecy, see John W. O’Malley, *Four Cultures of the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), chap. 1. For a normative theory of prophetic rhetoric, see Cathleen Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

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sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, “the judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

Not everyone has the right of a Jefferson or a Lincoln to prophetic rhetoric. Too often, politicians on their soapboxes, ministers in their pulpits, or professors at their lecterns attempt to assume the authority of the Hebrew prophets by imitating their fiery indictments. The abuse of prophetic rhetoric in America has cheapened and discredited the indispensable role of true prophets in our society. How easy to issue a jeremiad, how hard to be a Jeremiah – who, after all, was thrown into a dungeon and later stoned to death. True prophets today are more likely to be found in jail for civil disobedience than issuing jeremiads on television.

Martin Luther King, Jr. understood well that prophetic rhetoric does not a prophet make. A prophet, he said, must preach not only with his voice but also with his life. Listen to King praise not the rhetoric but the courage of the Hebrew prophets, who were King’s role models:

Looming as ethical giants are those extraordinary of men, the Hebrew prophets ... They were articulate, passionate, and fearless, attacking injustice and corruption whether the guilty be kings or their own unrepentant people. Without physical protection, scornful of risks evoked by their unpopular messages, they went among the people with no shield other than truth ... The Hebrew prophets are needed today because decent people must be imbued with the courage to speak the truth, to realize that silence may temporarily preserve status or security but to live with a lie is a gross affront to God.²

Martin Luther King, Jr. insisted that the role of the prophet is not to speak well but to suffer courageously for righteousness.³ If we even glance at the lives of prophets, whether Nathan, Jeremiah, Jesus,

² King addressed the Synagogue Council of America on December 5, 1965; quoted in Barry L. Schwartz, *The Path of the Prophets: The Ethics-Driven Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), xxx.

³ See Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 188.

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Socrates, Joan of Arc, Thomas More, or Martin Luther King, Jr., we discover that imitating their deeds is vastly more difficult than imitating their words. True prophets risk their lives by speaking their truth to power, as did Moses when he confronted Pharaoh; or rather, they don't merely speak their truth, they live, suffer, and die for the truth. How easy to condemn climate change – how much more difficult to confront the powerful interests behind it. Prophetic rhetoric is not sufficient to make one a prophet – nor is it necessary, as we shall see with Socrates and Thomas More. We need less prophetic rhetoric and more prophetic witness.⁴

II

Socrates, Jesus, Joan of Arc, Thomas More, and Martin Luther King, Jr. – what could an Athenian sage, a biblical messiah, a medieval warrior, a Renaissance statesman, and an American Baptist preacher have in common? While they were alive, we hated them, persecuted them, and killed them; once they were safely in the grave, we felt free to revere and honor them. Then, they were denounced as heretics and traitors; now, they are praised as martyrs and moral heroes.

I propose that we call them prophets because they play a political role analogous to the great Hebrew prophets from Nathan to Ezekiel. Even Socrates largely fits this template, though he alone was not aware of the Hebrew prophets. First, like the Hebrew prophets, they all claimed to have received a divine summons to the office of prophecy. Socrates, for example, claimed to have been stationed by Apollo on the street corners of Athens. Second, they were all “divinely-authorized whistleblowers”⁵ who rebuked the political and religious leaders of their day. Third, they were all persecuted as both traitors and heretics. And like the Hebrew prophets, they all denounced their own societies, not out of hatred but

⁴ In an interview shortly before his death, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel observed: “one of the saddest things about contemporary life in America is that the prophets are unknown. No one knows the prophets.” Heschel, quoted in Schwartz, *The Path of the Prophets*, xxvi.

⁵ In the words of Kenneth Seeskin, *Thinking about the Prophets* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), xiii.

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out of love. None of them ever chose to leave their own country even when doing so would have saved their lives. We cannot live with prophets or without them.

This book presents a theory of prophetic politics, a form of politics that is both important and neglected. The volcanic moral passions that upend our politics usually stem from some prophetic condemnation. We get the language of our politics mainly from the ancient Greeks and Romans – as reflected in words such as *democracy*, *tyranny*, *citizen*, *demagogue*, *constitution*, and even *politics*. But we get our moral crusades – against slavery, against alcohol, against Jim Crow, against abortion – from the example of the biblical prophets.

Appealing to divine authority, prophets dedicate their lives to setting moral limits on human authority. Prophets chasten the pretensions of politics, reminding us that there are values that transcend politics. Without institutional power, these anti-politics-as-usual naysayers have repeatedly transformed our politics.

More than poets, prophets are the unacknowledged legislators of our lives. Prophets do not tell religious and political leaders what to do but only what cannot be done. Prophetic politics is the politics of the veto, the politics of setting moral limits on what is permissible in religious and political life.

Because the word prophet is now applied to a bewildering variety of visionaries, cranks, fanatics, and dissenters, I propose to define prophets as those people who see themselves as ambassadors from God entrusted with an urgent message for religious and political leaders. Prophets get a hearing only because of respect and fear of divine power among political and religious leaders. If God has no authority in a society, neither will his prophets.

There is no single set of criteria that define all prophets; rather, prophets have a broad “family resemblance” to each other. Some prophets share one feature and others share another feature; moreover, they share these features to differing degrees. I illustrate my theory of prophetic politics in chapters on the Hebrew prophets, Socrates, Jesus, Joan of Arc, Thomas More, and Martin Luther King, Jr. These prophets do more than illustrate my theory of prophecy; they also reveal the diverse variety of lives compatible with a prophetic vocation.

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Some of these prophets, such as Socrates and Martin Luther King, Jr., lived in democratic societies while others lived under monarchies. That these prophets were persecuted and killed under very different forms of government reveals the common challenge that prophecy poses to all kinds of politics. No political regime, especially no theocracy, welcomes denunciation in the name of God. I could just as easily have chosen Paul of Tarsus, Francis of Assisi, Savonarola, Martin Luther, John Knox, Oliver Cromwell, Joseph Smith, Carrie Nation, or any number of other political prophets. I invite readers to apply my theory of prophetic politics to their own favorite political prophets.

Biography is enlivened by the art of necromancy, of conjuring the dead to speak. In each chapter, I construct dialogues so that we can hear the voices of these prophets and listen in as they argue with their contemporaries. Some of these dialogues are found in the historical record, but others I have synthesized from the whole range of the prophets' surviving speeches. I know no better way to enable these prophets to address us directly today.

III

Western societies are often said to be governed by both civil governments and by organized religion – the political sword of state power and the religious sword of the churches.⁶ As rival powers, states and churches have come to resemble each other: Each has its own bureaucracy, laws, courts, and sanctions. These institutions give both state and church their staying power, but power tends to corrupt the politicians and priests who exercise it. Even in ancient Israel, the corruption of monarchical and sacerdotal power created the need for the Hebrew prophets, who rebuked both kings and priests in the name of God.

Prophets play an essential political role, even though they lack the established power of kings or priests. Prophetic power is personal and charismatic rather than institutional or routinized. Beyond the familiar

⁶ The medieval theory of the two swords stems from the contrast of regal power and priestly authority drawn in the letter of Pope Gelasius I to the Roman Emperor, Anastasios, in the year 494. The image of two swords stems from Luke 22:38.

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swords of state and church, prophets wield a third sword. In the Bible, a prophet is sometimes depicted with a sword coming out of his mouth (Isaiah 49:2; Revelation 19:15).

What is a prophetic sword? Unlike the coercive swords wielded by church and state, the prophet wields only the sword of the spoken word – a word, however, of such power that it threatens both thrones and altars, politicians and clergy (Ephesians 6:17). The “sharp sword” of the prophetic word cleaves the soul, dividing good from evil (Wisdom 18:16; Hebrews 4:12). A prophet demands that we decide about how to live: The sword of his word divides before and after.⁷

Because of our biblical heritage, Western societies have long been shaped by the rivalry of political, religious, and prophetic authority. Contrary to the prevailing ideology of the two swords, Western societies have always been ruled by three swords – the regal, the sacerdotal, and the prophetic. A just society needs stable political and religious authority *as well as* prophetic challenges to that authority. Prophets cannot rule us or create good institutions; they can only remind us of the moral limits of states and churches.

Despite the undeniable importance of prophetic witness, the political role of prophets has been neglected by political theorists and political scientists. That individual prophets often seem bizarre and idiosyncratic makes it very difficult to say anything meaningful about them in general. Prophets are usually viewed as random shocks to the political system, like earthquakes or pandemics. Is there any logic to prophetic politics?

Prophets are wild cards in the game of politics. They force us to confront evils we would prefer to ignore. Claiming to speak directly for God, they make the usual kind of discussion, debate, and bargaining all but impossible. The voice of God is a conversation stopper, a standing threat to normal politics, sometimes even an existential threat to the polity itself. Some of the ancient Hebrew prophets demanded that Israel surrender to Babylon; later prophets insisted that Israel rise up against the Romans. The result was the same: The repeated destruction of ancient Israel as a political community. The

⁷ “The word is also a sword, however, because it demands a decision about how to live, and any such decision divides before and after.” Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 245.

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prophetic cure for the body politic can be more dangerous than the disease. If prophecy can be justified, it is only when normal politics is otherwise irredeemable.

Efforts to contain the danger of prophecy are almost as old as prophecy itself. Ever since antiquity, religious leaders have attempted to neutralize prophetic power by declaring the age of prophecy officially over. The Koran even foresees the danger of prophecy by declaring Mohammed to be the last prophet, the seal of the prophets. Declaring the end of prophecy, however, has done nothing to prevent the rise of new prophets, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim.

Does it help to distinguish true from false prophets? As we shall see, true prophets are as much of a political danger as false ones. And there is no foolproof way to distinguish true from false prophets – that is part of the challenge that prophecy presents to our politics.

IV

Prophets bring out the worst in us and the best: First, we kill them and then later we proclaim them saints. What is most surprising is that the prophets we shall meet in this book were tolerated for a time and allowed to make their case – they were given a hearing, if not a heeding. In most times and places, such obnoxious critics would have been immediately exiled or killed. That these prophets were tolerated to varying degrees tells us as much about their societies as does their persecution.

All the prophets in this book met with personal defeat, often after a dramatic trial. By means of their own defeat, they transformed their societies, and even the course of world history. Each of them endured the agony of bearing bad news, of being hated, and of being alone. We hate the messenger as much as the message. To be a prophet is to fight a lover's quarrel with one's own society.

All prophets look to the future – a future, however, that harkens to the past. Prophets are conservative revolutionaries: They call their people back to first principles. In politics, they demand a return to the founding constitution; in religion, they demand a return to the covenant with God. Various Hebrew prophets promise a return to the Abrahamic

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or Mosaic or Davidic covenant; a return to the law, to the temple, and to kingship. Yet these same prophets speak boldly of a *new* covenant, a *new* law, a *new* temple, and a *new* David.⁸ Thomas More called England back to the law of the Magna Carta and Martin Luther King, Jr. called America back to the Declaration of Independence. Everything remains the same and yet everything has changed. Prophecy is not about predicting the future but about looking for deliverance in the future.

More than merely critics, the greatest of prophets are also utopian idealists, whose visions of peace and justice have transformed our religious and political lives. The United Nations General Assembly Building in New York bears this prophetic vision: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4). Here the prophetic sword promises to replace the political sword. Our politics would be much poorer without the visions of its prophets.

Is there a role for prophets in an increasingly secular world? If the voice of conscience is seen as the voice of God, then prophets could be agents of their own consciences. People who act boldly and fearlessly are led by a certainty of conscience – a certainty which is sometimes interpreted as divine inspiration. In our time, the third sword of prophetic power is wielded by human rights advocates who call out abuses of power. Like the prophets in this book, human rights activists do not attempt to govern society – they just attempt to set moral limits on governance.

Leaders of states or churches usually fear prophetic witness as a threat to stability, whether from true or false prophets. The clergy could learn from the prophets how to address political controversies – not by endorsing particular politicians, policies, or laws, but simply by condemning violations of basic moral rights. As citizens we must decide whether to heed a would-be prophet. Many people today claim the mantle of prophetic authority, ranging from radical environmentalists to radical libertarians. To whom should we listen? One purpose of this book is to sharpen our ability to distinguish true from false prophets.

⁸ “Thus Hosea foretells a new entry into the land, Isaiah a new David and a new Zion, Jeremiah a new covenant, and Deutero-Isaiah a new Exodus.” Gerhard Von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, translated by D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 93.

CHAPTER 1

The Hebrew Prophets

THE PROPHET NATHAN – HAVING LEARNED of King David’s crime of taking the beautiful young Bathsheba from her husband, Uriah, and then arranging for Uriah to be killed in battle – decides to confront his king (2 Samuel 12). As a court prophet, Nathan is known to David, but still cannot risk a direct confrontation.

NATHAN: Sire, I heard a story that may interest you. There was a man so poor that he owned but one tiny ewe lamb. He loved his lamb so much that he fed it from his own table and raised it like one of his own children. A rich man in the same town owned hundreds of lambs, yet to welcome a visitor one day, he stole the poor man’s only lamb to prepare a feast ...

DAVID: (*erupting in anger*) As the Lord lives, the rich man who has done this deserves to die! He shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and because he had no pity.

NATHAN: You are the rich man! Thus says the Lord God: I anointed you king and rescued you from your enemies, but how have you repaid me? By adultery and murder! You have committed these crimes in secret, but I will disgrace you in public.

DAVID: I have sinned against the Lord!

NATHAN: Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because of your deed, your child by Bathsheba shall die.

Nathan fearlessly speaks moral truth to power because he claims to speak on behalf of God. If God is with him, who can be against him? Even more remarkable is that King David listens to Nathan, as if to God. By comparing the iniquity of a rich man to that of a king – “You are the

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rich man!” – Nathan pioneers the prophetic critique of the rich, whose pride and greed mirrors that of kings.

A prophet wields a unique kind of moral authority to check the power of kings and priests. Kings and priests control institutions, wealth, and minions; prophets stand alone, with only the power that derives from respect for God’s word. In Israel, the royal and the priestly offices were hereditary whereas anyone might be commissioned by God as a prophet.¹ Priests were bound by strict ritual protocols while prophetic ministry was free from all fixed forms. God authorizes the establishment of the monarchy and of the priesthood in Israel – and also raises up prophets to check the power of those kings and priests.

The most famous of the Hebrew prophets are those with books of the Bible named for them, from Isaiah to Malachi. These literary prophets pronounce God’s judgment on all of Israel and on the other nations, while continuing to confront individual kings and priests for their abuses of office.² Prophets launch a scathing attack not only on the realpolitik of rulers but also on the ritualism of religion. Prophets fight a two-front war against political crimes and religious hypocrisy. Prophetic indictment focuses on the political and religious leaders but extends to the whole people who are complicit in the sins of those leaders (Isaiah 3:14; Amos 2:7; Micah 3:9).

The Hebrew prophets are always reformers rather than revolutionaries: They never call for the abolition of the monarchy or the priesthood.³ Prophets often stand alone because they attack everyone – kings, the people, other prophets, priests.

We do not usually condemn people unless they know or could have known that what they did was wrong. It seems churlish or worse to

¹ We have first-person reports of these prophetic commissions in Amos 7–9, Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1, Ezekiel 1–3, Isaiah 40, and Zechariah 1–6.

² All prophetic judgments in the Books of Kings are directed toward individuals; only in the books of the literary prophets do we also find judgments against social classes and against nations. For evidence, see Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, translated by Hugh Clayton White (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 137.

³ “In all of the sharp criticism of the kingdom as well as of the priesthood, cult prophesy, and temples, no prophetic speeches have been passed down to us that demanded a total change in the political or cultic spheres. Prophesy, therefore, does not have a revolutionary character in either one of these areas.” Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, 99.