


Article

Forthtellers Not Foretellers: The Origins of a Liberal Orthodoxy about the Prophets

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Abstract: The insistence that the prophets of the Hebrew Bible were “forthtellers, not foretellers” is ubiquitous in academic, liberal Christian, and even secular circles. It categorically denies that the prophets of ancient Israel predicted the future and characterizes them instead as voices of social critique. This article explains the origins of the phrase, its philosophical and religious underpinnings in Protestant, Enlightenment, Romantic, “scientific” and “modern” thought and traces its rhetorical usage in religious debate.

Keywords: prophet; prophecy; forthteller; foreteller; liberal Christianity; prediction; social justice; Social Gospel; German scholarship

1. Introduction

The insistence that the prophets of the Hebrew Bible were “forthtellers, not foretellers” is ubiquitous in academic, liberal Christian, and even secular circles. This catchy phrase is used to deny that prophets predicted the future and characterizes them instead as those who spoke out in their own historical contexts, proclaiming a truth aligned with divine truth.

Examples of this “orthodoxy” about the Hebrew prophets abound. Steve McKenzie’s chapter on prophecy in *How to Read the Bible*, entitled “Forthtelling, Not Foretelling,” instructs readers that (despite common misunderstandings) “the intent of the genre of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible was not primarily to predict the future—certainly not hundreds of years in advance—but rather to address specific social, political, and religious circumstances in ancient Israel and Judah. This means that there is no prediction of Christ in the Hebrew Bible” (McKenzie 2009, p. 67). Online, a post of a United Church of Christ pastor in Ohio (Lattimer 2016) instructs readers that prophets forthtell rather than foretell. When prophets are described as both foretelling and forthtelling, such as on the website of a Presbyterian church in Ohio (Westminster Church Presbyterian Church of Akron OH n.d.), the podcast of a Bible Church in West Virginia (McDonald 2019) and an entry on “Prophets in the Hebrew Bible” in the Oxford Research Encyclopedias database (Lundbom 2016), forthtelling is always vaunted over foretelling. Australia’s SimplyBible.com, for example, acknowledges prediction but insists that prophets were more forthtellers than foretellers (Graham n.d.). The difference between these terms has been granted its own WikiDiff entry (WikiDiff n.d.).

While the popularity and categorical tone of the phrase might suggest that it is a universally-accepted description of prophecy, competing definitions of prophecy proliferate in the marketplace of ideas. The Revised Common Lectionary, the schedule of prescribed Scripture readings followed by many Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, correlates passages from the Hebrew prophets with New Testament accounts of Jesus’s birth and crucifixion; prophecy conferences correlate biblical predictions with their current fulfillment (Gospel Ministry n.d.); websites offer participants (for a donation) predictions tailored to their own lives (Benjamin n.d.); and those in the New Apostolic Reformation proclaim that God is raising up new prophets and apostles in order to assert dominion over culture and government (Beverley 2021). In academic settings, contemporary scholars of the ancient



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Near East draw parallels between Hebrew prophecy and ancient Near Eastern divination (Lenzi and Stökl 2014; Nissinen 2003) and document the ways that editors of biblical texts sought to convince readers that the prophets indeed had predicted the events that later befell the Judean state (Nogalski 1993). Clearly, not everyone denies that the Hebrew prophets predicted the future.

The claim that prophets are “forthtellers not foretellers” is clearly a persuasive claim couched as a descriptive one, an argument rather than an objective datum. In this article, I explore the origins, popularization, and uses of the English phrase “forthtellers, not foretellers.” I seek its earliest appearances and the networks by which it became popular. I also consider some of the diverse purposes that the phrase has served in various periods of its usage, including in the present.

2. Origins

2.1. The Phrase

Two of the three first published appearances of the actual English phrase “forthtellers not foretellers” come from the Scottish Unitarian minister William Maccall. In an 1852 article entitled “Prophetic Voices” in the journal *The People*, Maccall uses both terms repeatedly without explaining either. He caricatures those who practice the “gipsy trick of foretelling,” and he appeals to God to “raise up [contemporary] prophets as forthtellers of thy sacred and salutary truth” (Maccall 1852). In his 1855 lectures entitled *National Missions*, Maccall places these terms in close proximity. He argues that while “prophecy has two powers, a power to foretell and a power to forthtell,” the true prophet is a “flaming outspeaker” (Maccall 1855, p. 264). Prediction, on the contrary, is an art and an instinct that can be developed by anyone attentive to the world: Maccall is convinced that he could predict more effectively than the prophet Isaiah due to his own knowledge of the “developments of history”. Maccall’s use of “forthtellers not foretellers” articulates what would become the liberal orthodoxy, that the prophet is the courageous individual who speaks truth amidst a culture of lies.

One outlier to this orthodoxy that I will trace, however, appears already in this period. The 1854 issue of *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* reports on the activities of the millennialist Dr. John Cumming who predicted that the year 1864 would be a momentous year—“if 1864 be not the close of the age that now is, and the commencement of a better one, it will be a time unprecedented since the beginning—portentous, startling, terrible to the enemies of God”. Cumming insisted that this knowledge of the future comes from a straightforward reading of the biblical text: “I do not prophesy; I do not foretell the future; I only forth-tell what God has said” (*The Prophets of Our Day* 1854, p. 736). While for Maccall the forthteller is one who speaks from his conscience about current social ills, for Cumming the forthteller is one who relays (almost mechanically) a message about the future revealed by God and unfiltered by the human recipient.

The nuances of Cumming’s usage are important to note. Cumming denies that he himself is a foreteller, though his use of the Bible insists that the Hebrew prophets did indeed foretell. This is made clear by Maccall’s *National Missions* lectures, where he ridicules Cumming by name for pretending “to predict the destinies of the world from passages of the Bible” (Maccall 1855, p. 264).

In the years to follow, Maccall’s usage will dominate in liberal circles and become the most common meaning of the phrase. Cumming’s usage remains distinctive. While later conservative voices will embrace the term “forthtellers,” they rarely deny that prophets are also “foretellers”.

Although I have yet to locate usages of the exact English phrase “forthtellers not foretellers” prior to 1852, the path toward its characterization of the prophet as an outspoken speaker of truth began long before. Rather than a new idea, it is best seen as the mid-nineteenth century convergence and crystallization of Protestant, Enlightenment, Romantic, and “scientific” thought.

2.2. Protestantism: Not Only Foretelling

From the time of the New Testament, the claim that Jesus of Nazareth had fulfilled the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament was a keystone of Christian apologetics. As G. Sujin Pak demonstrates, however, prior to the Protestant Reformation Christian theologians were attributing additional functions of prophecy. Cassiodorus, Rabanus, Aquinas, and Erasmus spoke of prophecy as having a dual sense: both as knowledge of the future and also as interpretation of Scripture (Pak 2018).

The Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin prioritized this latter function of the prophet, characterizing the Hebrew prophets as those who exhorted the community to abide by the Law of Moses. In keeping with the Reformation insistence on the authority of and completeness of Scripture, they closely linked prophecy with preaching and excoriated religious rivals who claimed to receive new revelation. In his polemics against Thomas Müntzer, Andreas Karlstadt, and the Zwickau prophets, for example, Luther argues that the outward work of the Holy Spirit (scripture and the sacraments) must take precedence over the inward work (such as tongues and other gifts of the spirit) (Luther 1958, pp. 81–83, 146–49; Kuhr 1962). In his commentary on 1 Thessalonians 5:20, Calvin explains, “By the term prophecy, however, I do not understand the gift of foretelling the future, but as in 1 Corinthians 14:3, the science of interpreting Scripture, so that a prophet is an interpreter of the will of God” (Calvin and Haroutunian 1958).

This description of the Hebrew prophets as both predictors of Christ and interpreters of the Law continued in the following centuries, including in Webster’s dictionary in 1828. Yet Christian apologetics continued to rely heavily on the “proof” of Jesus’ fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament and biblical accounts of miracles, such as Jesus’ walking on the Sea of Galilee and his resurrection from the dead. Prophetic foretelling was central to traditional Christianity.

2.3. Enlightenment Rationalism: Not Foretellers

The supernatural underpinnings of these Christian apologetic claims were directly challenged in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries by rationalists, Deists, and skeptics. Fueled by the Enlightenment ideals of Reason, Logic, and Nature, they insisted that Christianity is valid only if it is rational. David Hume’s 1740 “Of Miracles” denied the possibility of both miracles and supernatural prophecy on the basis that both are beyond verification by human observation and reason (Hume 1748). Heinrich Paulus (and later Albert Schweitzer) suggested that Jesus’ seeming “miracle” of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes is better understood as the success of his appeal for the crowd to share with one another (Paulus 1828; Schweitzer and Montgomery 1948). David Strauss denied that any of these events actually happened, attributing them to “myth” instead (Strauss 1892).

The supernatural understandings of the “messianic” prophecies of the Old Testament were challenged as well, to varying outcomes. In a tone decidedly antagonistic to the historic claims of Christianity, the Deist Anthony Collins claimed that since the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament were not literally fulfilled as the gospels claim, then the New Testament is itself suspect (Collins 1724; Berman 1999, p. 206). Hume similarly insisted that prophetic predictions were a subset of miracles, both violations of natural law (Force 1982, p. 474, n. 48).

Other rationalists retained the value of prophecy but attributed its origins to rational rather than supernatural agents. In 1660, the Cambridge Platonist John Smith insisted that prophecy is a function of the rational mind (Smith 1660, p. xl), and in the 1670’s the Dutch philosopher and scientist Baruch Spinoza insisted that the prophets’ knowledge came not through God speaking directly but through the application of human reason. Sounding much like Maccall, Spinoza suggested that prophets could anticipate the future only because of their deep analysis of the present (for a discussion, see Jacobson 2011).

Such rationalist assertions in turn provoked the reaction of traditional Christianity. According to Berman, Collins’ 1724 volume attacking the veracity of Old Testament miracles

provoked thirty-five pamphlets or books in three years (Berman 1999, p. 206). Traditionalists such as Ralph Cudworth (1617–1688), Thomas Sherlock (1678–1761), and William Paley (1743–1805) continued to insist that the truth of Christianity depends on the historicity of Jesus' miracles and the literal fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy; according to Sir Isaac Newton (1643–1727), the fulfillment of prophecy is the foundation of Christianity (for these references, see Force 1982). As Force demonstrates, “by the middle of the eighteenth century, the argument from prophecy was still the dominant argument for the truth of revealed religion” (Force 1982, p. 492).

By critiquing the depiction of the Hebrew prophets as foretellers, rationalists not only privileged a contrary epistemology—one valuing human insight and reason as means of knowing truth—but also an alternative definition of Christianity. They insisted that the essence of Christianity (to use Adolf van Harnack's later phrase) is a set of natural and universal moral values rather than a supernaturally-orchestrated series of historical events revealed in advance to the prophets of the Old Testament. Maccall's antagonistic dismissal of foretelling stands within this rationalist tradition.

2.4. Romanticism: Forthtellers

While the Protestant Reformers advanced the characterization of prophets as interpreters of Scripture, Enlightenment thinkers increasingly described prophets as speaking out *against* tradition. In his 1647 treatise “On Prophesying”, Jeremy Taylor uses “prophecy” as synonymous with speaking from the freedom of conscience (Taylor 1647). Thomas Hobbes, in his 1651 political manifesto *Leviathan*, explains that a prophet can be both a predictor and also a Prolocutor, one who speaks on behalf of God to humans (Hobbes 1651, chp. 36).

A key turning point in discussion of prophecy came in 1753 when the English scholar Robert Lowth identified Hebrew prophecy with poetry. While Lowth was not the first to make the prophecy-poetry connection, his *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* “proved” that Hebrew prophecy was poetry by identifying poetic parallelism as the distinctive style of biblical prophecy. Lowth described prophetic pronouncements not as clear predictions with verifiable fulfillment but as obscure, evocative poetry—the “spontaneous overflow from the heart of an artist moved by passion”.

Lowth's characterization of prophetic poetry was appropriated—and transformed—by English Romantic poets. Although Lowth himself maintained a belief in messianic prophecies, poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, and later Coleridge used Lowth's insights to create Hebrew prophets in their own image: as expressive, heroic individuals. William Blake, in his *Annotations to an Apology for the Bible by R. Watson* (Blake 1972, p. 392) and in “All Religious are One,” defined prophecy as speaking the truth and as poetic genius (Blake 1972, pp. 98, 392); William Wordsworth insisted that the prophetic spirit inspires the poet (Wordsworth 1814, p. 425); and Thomas Carlyle identified the hero as both prophet and poet (Carlyle 1840, loc. 2302). For Romantics inspired by Lowth, “inspiration” was no longer a matter of supernatural revelation but instead insight borne of deep feeling. For Romanticism, individual experience was the most reliable source of meaning and authority.

2.5. German Scientific Biblical Criticism

In the mid-eighteenth century, the influence of Lowth and the English Romantics extended to Germany. There, their views transformed and were transformed by scholars increasingly defining Biblical Studies as a scientific discipline grounded in study of the history of ancient Israel. A key locale for this fusion was at the university at Göttingen, founded in 1737 as an “Enlightenment” institution and dedicated to non-confessional scholarship.

J. D. Michaelis, who joined the Göttingen faculty in 1745, is often seen as the first true historian of ancient Israel and the first to distinguish between early “Israelite” faith and later postexilic “Jewish” thought. In 1758, he reported being “changed” by Lowth's lectures at Oxford and promptly published them in Germany (without Lowth's permission) along with his own corrections (Legaspi 2010, pp. 115–28). Far from simply disseminating

Lowth's ideas, however, these corrections turned Lowth's aesthetic observations into historical arguments. The vividness of early Hebrew poetry, Michaelis argued, reflects an early simple society, one close to nature and attuned to the divine, quite different from "Jewish" postexilic writings (for a fuller discussion, see [Legaspi 2010](#), pp. 105–28).

Johann Herder similarly explicitly relied on but also transformed Lowth's identification of prophecy as poetry. While Lowth always retained a dimension of prophecy as prediction (Hebrew prophecy was obscure in its time but clarified when it was fulfilled), in his *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (1782–1783) Herder denied that prediction was an essential part of prophecy, characterizing prophets instead as creative geniuses in opposition to priests ([Henderson 2019](#), pp. 137, 144). Prophecy, like Romantic poetry, "comes from the spontaneous overflow from the heart of an artist moved by passion (self-expression)" ([Henderson 2015](#), p. 132).

Both Michaelis and Herder exerted tremendous influence over subsequent scholars, including Johann Eichhorn, a student of Michaelis at Göttingen who in turn joined its faculty in 1788. In the first volume of his *Einleitung ins Alte Testament* ([Eichhorn 1780](#)), Eichhorn characterizes prophets as engaged in *Weissagung* (prediction). In his third volume ([Eichhorn 1783](#)), after reading Herder's *Letters*, he described the prophets as public leaders who advanced *Ahnungen* ("presentiments") (I thank Prof. Rainer Kessler for sharing these references). In subsequent work, Herder offered rational explanations for predictions of the future and "miracles," insisting that prophecy's meaning is only found in the past. In 1793, he declared, "The last three decades have erased the Messiah from the Old Testament" ([Clements 1979](#), p. 89).

Eichhorn's student Heinrich Ewald succeeded him on the Göttingen faculty in 1827. Deeply committed to the pursuit of history, Ewald was enamored of the prophets, whom he portrayed as insisting upon the worship of Yahweh alone and the ethical treatment of others. "Ewald's prophet is a lonely reformer, the only person who can see clearly what is happening in his time" ([Henderson 2019](#), p. 143). His volume on the *Prophets* (translated into English by J. Frederick Smith in 1875), insists that the Hebrew term *nābî'* means "a loud, clear speaker" ([Ewald 1875](#), p. 8). The prophets had promoted ethics over against the rituals of the Israelite cult and Canaanite polytheism, but once their spiritual teachings had been accepted, prophecy ended.

Wilhelm Gesenius, another student of Eichhorn, joined the faculty at the University of Halle after teaching at Göttingen. Although he was a widely popular teacher on diverse subjects (including ecclesiastical history, see [Miller 2009](#), p. 14) his lasting legacy was his production of Hebrew and later Greek lexica. Based on "scientific" principles and bolstered with comparative linguistics, his lexicographical work went through scores of editions, was translated into multiple languages, and remain the basis of much modern lexicography of the biblical Hebrew.

In his 1812 *Hebrew-German Wordbook*, Gesenius' entry for the verbal root *nabā'* ("prophecy") offers (among other options) the German equivalents *Ausspruch* ("to speak out") as well as *Weissagen* ("predict") ([Gesenius 1812](#), p. 670); he links the noun *nabî'* with an Arabic equivalent and offers the first definition as *Sprecher, Wortführer* ("speaker, spokesperson"). In these definitions, prophecy as exhortation and as ecstatic inspiration overtakes prophecy as the supernatural ability to predict the future. Not surprisingly, his students reported that Gesenius challenged traditional Christianity—including belief in miracles—in his classroom lectures (see [Cheyne 1893](#), p. 58).

Almost universally, by the early 1800's German scholars were characterizing Hebrew prophets not as predictors of the future but as inspired, impassioned, and courageous individuals. Though influenced by Romanticism, they insisted that their conclusions were bolstered by etymology, history, and science.

2.6. Scientific Criticism and English-Speaking Scholars

This demarcation between "scientific" and "unscientific" views of prophecy was, in turn, transported back to the English-speaking world, where German biblical scholars

were recognized as the experts in biblical interpretation (Sheehan 2005; Rogerson 1985). By the late nineteenth century, Michaelis, Herder, Eichhorn, Ewald, and Gesenius were cited and discussed constantly by English-speaking scholars, but also reinterpreted in the process. Perhaps in response to the resurgence of traditional Christianity in England by 1800 (Sheehan 2005, p. 247), English scholars appropriated German scholarship in a “milder” form. In his paean to Eichhorn, for example, Thomas Cheyne explains that Eichhorn was so passionate to stress the historical grounding of the prophets that he sometimes “forgot” to stress the divine element (Cheyne 1893, p. 15).

This appropriation of German scientific scholarship for English sensibilities is evident in the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. After his 1799 visit to Göttingen where he attended lectures, he deemed Eichhorn a “learned infidel” yet later advised his son Derwent to read Eichhorn as an antidote against superficial religion (Balfour 2002, p. 115). Well versed in the writings of Michaelis and deeply influenced by Herder’s thought, Coleridge’s own views of prophecy are eclectic: he denied specific predictions based on the books of Daniel and Revelation (Coleridge 2015, p. 4253) yet also critiqued rationalist approaches. He stressed that the biblical prophets spoke to their own time and place yet that they also announced future events (Balfour 2002, p. 255). He criticized Unitarians who deny this double sense of Scripture (Coleridge 2015, p. 4042).

A key pathway of influence was the translation of German scholarship into English, particularly Gesenius’ lexica. In 1827, London-based Howell and Steward published *A Hebrew and English Lexicon to the Old Testament; Including the Biblical Chaldee; Edited, with Improvements, from the German Works of Gesenius*, prepared by the U. S. scholar Josiah Gibbs. It links the Hebrew root *nabā’* with the Arabic root meaning “to bring forth, to shew, to announce”, such that the primary meaning of the verb is to “to speak as God’s ambassador”. The noun is defined as “one employed by God to make his will known to men” (Gesenius and Gibbs 1827). These definitions are repeated in the 1828 and 1832 editions (all three editions are available at the Internet Archive).

Gesenius’ definitions of prophecy gained even greater popularity through their incorporation into lexica of the Greek of the New Testament. In his entry on *prophetes* (“prophet”) in his 1836 Greek-English lexicon, the U. S. scholar Edward Robinson supports its translation as “exhort” based on the equivalences made by the Septuagint and on the authority of Gesenius: “with the Jewish use of *nābî* and *prophetes* was connected the idea, that the prophet spoke not his own thoughts, but what he received from God, retaining however his own consciousness and self-possession” (Robinson 1836, p. 723). In Robinson’s 1850 “translation” of Gesenius’ Hebrew lexicon, a crossreference to the Greek *prophetes* was introduced in the entry for *nābî* to support the translation of *nabā’* as “to speak under divine influence,” though the primary meaning of the verb has shifted (along with Gesenius’ shift) to “pour forth words of divine inspiration” in connection with an Arabic root meaning “bubble up” (Gesenius and Robinson 1850, p. 639).

These etymologies, along with the German scholarship that undergirded them, were being cited ubiquitously by British clergy and scholars by the mid-nineteenth century, particularly those in the Broad Church Movement. By 1840, the clergyman and Oxford professor Thomas Arnold (father of poet Matthew Arnold) was citing German scholarship to argue that Hebrew prophets did not make messianic predictions (Christensen 1957, p. 18).

3. Convergence and Dissemination

In William Maccall, with whom our story began, we can see the synthesis of these strains of thought: Enlightenment rationalism, Romanticism prioritization of emotion and the heroic individual, and “scientific” mistrust of supernaturalism and prediction of the future. Even before adopting the “forthtellers not “foretellers” phrase, his earlier 1847 publication *The Elements of Individualism* insists that morality and the individual conscience are the primary values of humankind. Ranting against wealth and priests as the representatives of religious rituals, he longs for the Prophet to appear “to proclaim mainly

great moral principles, and appeal mainly to the conscience of Humanity”; until that time, he appeals to fellow Englishmen:

let us be Prophets, teaching by word and deed great moral principles, and rousing the deadened conscience of our fellows by a life wholly devoted to God and Duty, and works of mercy and holiness. (Maccall 1847, p. 61)

By the time of his 1852 essay in *The People*, he has adopted “forthtellers not foretellers” to reiterate his antipathy toward the supernatural and a romanticization of the heroic individual.

By the 1860’s, the phrase is common among liberal English speaking clergy and intellectuals. It appears in the publication of Charles Vaughn’s sermons at St. Michael’s Church (Vaughan 1861, ser. 26, p. 492); William Magee’s speech to the English YMCA (Magee 1862, pp. 411–12); and a book review in *The Theological Review* (P. 1865, p. 28). It appears in popular volumes such as Fredric Farrar’s *Minor Prophets* in his *Men of the Bible* series (F. W. Farrar 1890, p. 4). According to J. Ludlow, the term was used frequently by F. D. Maurice, one of the founders of Christian socialism and professor at King’s College, London, and later at Cambridge University (Ludlow 1893, p. 492); the connection with Maurice is also made by Thomas Lucas Scott (Scott 1893, pp. 277–78). Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, in his *Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church*, defines the Hebrew *nābî* as neither “foreteller” nor “forthteller” but as “spokesperson”: he characterizes “forthteller” as a common understanding (Stanley 1863, lecture 19, p. 459).

And, perhaps most importantly, it is ensconced in reference books: *Ellicott’s Commentary* (Ellicott 1878); *Strong’s Concordance* (Strong 1890); the *Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges* (Cambridge 1892) and *Hastings’ Sermon Bible* (Hastings 1900). By the turn of the century, preachers and scholars are citing both Greek and Hebrew etymology, especially Gesenius’ lexicon, as evidence that prophets were forthtellers rather than foretellers, as in the case of the Canadian pastor Rev. George Workman:

technically, however, as Gesenius shows, [prophecy] signifies to speak or to proclaim under the influence of Divine impulse. Hence, etymologically, neither prescience nor prediction is implied in the old Hebrew word . . . Properly, therefore, prophecy does not necessarily mean to predict or foretell coming events. It means rather to forthtell or tell forth existing verities. The distinction between prophecy and prediction is, therefore, of fundamental importance. (Workman 1890, p. 14)

Even when the phrase is not invoked, the underlying conviction that the prophets do not predict the future but announce truth to the present is ubiquitous: asserted by biblical scholars such as Samuel Davidson (Davidson 1862, pp. 459–60) and popularized by the essays and poetry of Matthew Arnold, both citing German scholarship as evidence (Arnold 1872, p. xxix). By 1903, Carpenter is attributing changes in understanding of prophecy to Eichhorn, Gesenius, Ewald, Stanley, and Rowland Williams, while attributing its popularization to Arnold (Carpenter 1903, pp. 164–71).

Although such views of prophecy clearly were dominant in educated circles long before the work of Julius Wellhausen, whom scholarship today considers the most influential of the Göttingen scholars, Wellhausen’s contribution sealed the liberal embrace of prophecy. Student of Ewald, a friend of Scottish scholar W. Robertson Smith, and teacher of Hermann Gunkel and Bernhard Duhm, Wellhausen used scientific biblical criticism to “prove” that the classical Hebrew prophets were the originators of Israel’s faith: contrary to the traditional understanding, the Torah (Law) was not authored by Moses but is instead a late combination of diverse written documents. Wellhausen’s famous article on “Israel” in the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* insisted that the prophets were the founders of ethical monotheism (Wellhausen 1881, p. 474), champions of “religious individualism” (Wellhausen 1881, p. 491). By dating the prophets earlier than the Law, Wellhausen added chronological priority to the prophets’ ethical priority.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the liberal characterization of prophets as “forthtellers not foretellers” was touted as scientific and etymologically assured. German scholars were cited as experts—Ewald, Gesenius, and Wellhausen often by name—not only in academic resources such as a commentary on 2 Peter 1:19–21 (Jowett 1910) but also by a Baptist pastor (Jones 1911, p. 40).

4. The Social Gospel Movement

In Great Britain and particularly the United States, biblical science found a ready home within the intellectual and theological sensibilities of Modernism. Placing its hope in scientific progress and the potential of humans to improve the material conditions of the world, Modernism sought to release society from the shackles of the past and to embrace new understandings and perspectives.

The Social Gospel movement drew from this science to advance its theological claims. Insisting that that Christianity is not only concerned with people’s souls but even more importantly with the actual physical conditions of their lives, advocates of the Social Gospel framed poverty, poor labor conditions, war, and other social ills as religious problems, and it sought to frame the message of Christianity to address the problems facing the world. In the Social Gospel, “natural” science and “biblical” science reached the same conclusions: human thinking and religious ideas have developed—and improved—over time, such that “modern man” can now rise above superstition and embrace his responsibility to his fellow man.

In this framing, the prophet became the social activist. Walter Rauschenbusch, a key figure in the Social Gospel, insisted that “Genuine prophecy springs up where fervent religious experience combines with a democratic spirit, strong social feeling, and free utterance” (Rauschenbusch 1917, p. 195). In the *Minutes of the National Council of Congregational Churches of the United States* from 1907, every address (including that of outgoing Moderator Washington Gladden), stressed the importance of modern critical biblical scholarship and the value of reason; since men have a new understanding of Nature, they now know that miracles don’t really happen and that predictions of the future aren’t possible (Congregational 1907). Instead, to be prophetic is to embody a commitment to challenging social ills just as the prophets of old did. Throughout these proceedings, “biblical scholarship” (by which they meant German biblical scholarship) is credited with recovering the prophets’ true worth.

In the Social Gospel, what the prophets “forthtell” is social change. In his 1896 essay “What is a Prophet?” in *Prophets of the Christian Faith* (reviewed on December 7 of the same year by the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*), the Congregationalist and Social Gospel advocate Lyman Abbott bestowed the label “forthteller” not only on the biblical prophets but also to “every such man seeing the need of humanity” (Abbott 1896, p. 15). The Detroit pastor George Elliott cited W. Robertson Smith to affirm that prophets are “forthtellers rather than foretellers,” “practical politicians and social reformers” (Elliott 1910, p. 15).

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the most popular face of the Social Gospel movement, studied at Union Theological Seminary with Francis Brown, who had been taught by Charles Briggs, who in turn had studied with Ewald. Briggs’ major address at Union, “The Authority of Holy Scripture,” grounded in German scholarship, prompted charges of heresy from the Presbyterian church; that heresy trial helped popularize Wellhausen’s ideas in the U. S. In Fosdick’s popular publications such as *Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Fosdick 1938) and the aptly-named *Modern Use of the Bible* (Fosdick 1924), Fosdick describes the prophets as promoting ethical monotheism and as opposed to the law, the clearest precursor to Jesus. Throughout his works, Fosdick appeals to the results of scientific biblical scholarship to demonstrate that what the prophets forthtold as a message of social change (Fosdick 1938, pp. 40, 80).

Though Fosdick did not widely use “forthtellers not foretellers,” he popularized the equation of “prophetic” with social justice. He not only preached before great crowds as the minister of Riverside church but also wrote prolifically in popular publications including

the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Good Housekeeping*, *The Christian Century*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*. He published over sixty times in the *Reader's Digest*, conducted regular radio programs, and graced the cover of *Time* magazine in 1930.

As the twentieth century continued, this liberal characterization of the prophet as a forthteller of social justice was further fueled by its incorporation into Liberation Theology movements. Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the founders of Latin American Liberation Theology, quoted various biblical scholars to insist that prophets do not predict the future but point the way to economic justice (Gutiérrez 2019, pp. 10, 69). James Cone, the founder of Black Liberation Theology, states it simply: "The prophets of Israel are prophets of social justice" (cited from Cone 2010, p. 19).

By the end twentieth century, the "scientific," objective basis of the characterization of prophets as "forthtellers not foretellers" allowed its incorporation into seemingly "secular" contexts. A "The Bible as Literature" curriculum approved in 1971 for public high school students in Broward County, FL, cites scholars of the era as the basis for its reminder that prophets' "first responsibility was to be 'forthtellers' rather than 'foretellers'" (Broward County 1971). The phrase continues throughout introductory biblical studies textbooks intended for college and university students and is "common knowledge" among those educated in such contexts.

While the liberal usage of the phrase has long predominated, "forthtellers" has also been used in contrary ways by those who retain the belief in the prophet's ability to know the future. As noted at the beginning of the essay, the nineteenth century millennialist Cumming employed "forthtelling not foretelling" to bolster his own knowledge of the future. In later conservative uses, however, "forthtelling" is embraced without denying "foretelling." In the 1980's Billy Graham defined the word prophet as "forthteller" but nonetheless insisted that a "true prophet must be 100% accurate in prediction" (Graham 1980, p. 209). In the bestselling evangelical textbook *Encountering the Old Testament: A Christian Survey*, Bill Arnold insists that the prophets were not fortune-tellers; they are instead both forthtellers, "telling forth God's truth to their own generation," and "foretellers. God revealed to them the future" (Arnold and Beyer 2008, pp. 342–43). By the twentieth century, these terms are clearly enconced in the vocabulary of diverse thinkers; the insistence that prophets do not foretell, however, remains the orthodoxy in liberal and secular circles.

5. Conclusions

As a scholar of the prophets, I am struck by the persistence of this collocation and the claims that undergird it. This phrase endures even as feminist and postcolonial scholars have challenged the prophets' conception of "justice" (Gafney 2017; O'Brien 2015; Cataldo 2021); as contemporary study of the ancient Near East has discerned common patterns of predictive divination throughout the region (Lenzi and Stökl 2014; Nissinen 2013); and as critiques of the anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic frameworks of German biblical scholarship have proliferated (Kurtz 2018; Marchand 2009; Heschel 2008).

Throughout its history, the "forthtellers not foretellers" orthodoxy has functioned as what sociologist Thomas Gieryn describes as "boundary work" (Gieryn 1983). Distinguishing between "science" and "not science" deems some interpretations respectable and others naïve; in the case of prophecy, it gives seemingly-objective validity to rationalist interpretations of the prophets, while casting supernatural interpretations as uneducated and naïve. And yet, despite its self-presentation as objective scholarship, this orthodoxy was formulated at a particular time and place for a particular set of reasons. While resting on earlier assumptions, it congealed in nineteenth century Germany and was popularized in the twentieth century in Great Britain and the United States. Although its sheer "catchiness," its clever alliteration, may have contributed to its success, the reason it is ubiquitous is not because it is factually more true than other definitions of prophecy but because it has been advanced by "scientific" scholars and popularized by those who share their assumptions. In the present as in the period of its origins, "forthtellers not foretellers" is a persuasive claim presented as a scientific one.

Such boundary creation has not served Christianity, the academy, or the world well. It exacerbates the difficulty that persons with varying religious and secular epistemologies have in understanding and valuing their differences. “Not foretellers” invites liberals (religious and secular) to dismiss the claims of Pentecostal Christians and believers in other modern mystical traditions as “superstitious” and uneducated, without considering their experiences. In turn, those who do attest to ongoing prophecy can only assume that liberals have simply not read the Bible or are “closed off” to alternative realities. The self-proclaimed objectivity of educational institutions, especially on religious matters, is itself thrown into doubt, feeding the proliferation of alternative schools and curricula.

This boundary between educated “forthtelling” characterizations of the prophets and uneducated “foretelling” ones also has allowed liberal voices to ignore ways in which they undercut their own values through the repetition of this trope. Throughout its history, the “forthtellers, not foretellers” orthodoxy has vaunted the heroic individual over against institutions—civic, governmental, and religious. It has fueled not only anti-institutional and anti-Jewish ideologies but also what Willie James Jennings deems the racist idolatry of “white self-sufficient masculinity” in Western education (Jennings 2020). Those who value collaboration, who insist on their own embodiment, or who challenge in other ways rationalist models of thought are deemed to be lacking in the necessary mastery of independent and detached inquiry.

Ironically, those who decry individualism, racism, and anti-Judaism continue to repeat a trope that has its origins in them all. Even though the theological origins of the “forthtellers not foretellers” phrase might no longer be embraced in liberal religious thought and the academy, the denigration of all—and everyone—that is not “rational” continues.

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