

## The Prophetic Message: Its Origin, Setting And Significance

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The word "prophecy," I suspect, conjures up in most of us certain immediate images, for it is indeed a word very much at home in contemporary vocabulary. Your images, like mine, are probably derived from familiarity with a variety of practitioners: from palm readers who find the contours of life etched in the lines of our hands, to professional prognosticators *a la* Jean Dixon or Paul Harvey who through different mediums offer predictions on an endless range of subjects from presidential politics to market investments. Of course, our images are shaped not only by such "secular" exemplars of the prophetic craft. The religious community certainly has its own contenders for the prophet's mantle. Here too we are confronted with an interesting array of persons competing for our attention, and often our dollars, along with other hawkers in our society: from Bishop Tutu who has sought to bring a prophet's *charge* of injustice against government sponsored apartheid and a prophet's *prediction* that unless God's vision of humanity can be brought to bear on South African policies, that government will be overthrown, to spokespersons of the religious right, some notorized more by their private dallies than their public piety, who have sought to rally Christians around "traditional" values. Failing this, they *predict*, America will reap God's righteous judgment.

So many and so different are the contemporary models that shape our perceptions of prophecy, it is difficult to stay reminded of the fact that prophecy is not a modern invention. We do not encounter it for the first time in the Bible, not even in its Old Testament version. Instead, prophecy is widely attested in ancient societies from at least the eighteenth century B.C. It is important for those of us who would bridge the gap between "Old Testament Prophecy" and "Today's Church" to be aware of this long and important history. Toward this end it is fitting, therefore, that the assignment of this introductory article is to survey how prophecy's "origin" and "setting" contribute to understanding its "significance."

### I. Origins

In a previous generation of Old Testament scholarship the dominant view was that Israelite prophecy emerged in the time of Samuel, that is, during the eleventh century B.C., and that it was shaped primarily by Canaanite antecedents. Subsequent investigations have established that this understanding of prophecy's origins is in need of revision at two points. First, even in Israel Samuel seems to have stood

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