Prophets as Poets

A Review by Ed Christian

So, are you interested in last-day events? Do visions of multihorned beasts dance in your head? Have you ever given or attended a Revelation Seminar? Have you memorized the traditional explanation of the Dark Day, the moon turning to blood, and the falling of the stars? Do you roll your eyes over those *Left Behind* novels or secretly read them?

Do you ever wonder how classical prophecy and apocalyptic work, *how* they *mean*, how they communicate messages from God? Do you wonder if God actually said in words all those things the prophets quote him as saying? Do you assume, with the futurists and many historicists, that most prophecy should be taken literally?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you owe it to yourself to read *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks.* Although it's a scholarly book, it's written for educated lay people and pastors. This is one of the most exhilarating books I've read in several years. If you read it, it will almost certainly change the way you read biblical prophecy.

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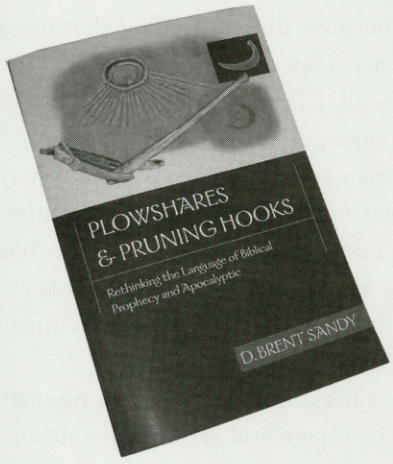

D. Brent Sandy. *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic.* Downers Grove, Il.: InterVarsity, 2002. 263 pp.

Winona Lake, Indiana, and has solid evangelical credentials. Although he claims to believe in biblical inerrancy, the message of his book undermines the usual definition of this, whether or not he intends it.

Sandy's approach is essentially literary. The Bible may be sacred, and it may be inspired or revealed "in various ways" (Heb. 1:1), but it is still a collection of works of literature that use literary techniques and formulaic language and structures to communicate messages and meaning. Sandy writes,

> [T]he language of prophecy goes out of its way to communicate with power. How does it do it? The short answer is, by means of the creative use of language. It is a performance....The result is a very heavenly revelation in very earthly language. (27)

In a chapter called "How Does the Language of Prophecy Work?" Sandy identifies poetic imagery, metaphor, and hyperbole as the primary tools of the prophets. The ancient Romans identified the poet as both "maker" and "seer" (*vates*)—recognizing a prophetic role for the poet (anyone who could write good poetry must be inspired!). Is it possible that biblical prophets were identified as such not only because of their message, but also because they presented that message in poetry? (There are a few exceptions.)

We would do well, I think, to see our biblical seers as makers or craftsmen, as well, to recognize the extent of their human contributions. As Sandy writes, "The prophets were wordsmiths, master carpenters" (24). We ought to take more seriously the fact that prophecy "is above all poetic." If we don't study prophecies in this light, we almost invariably misinterpret them.

Sandy discusses the difference between figurative and nonfigurative language and argues that although prophecy is always meant to convey a message, it seldom uses literal language. Thus, those who insist on, say, the literalness of lions and lambs lying down together or children thrusting their arms into cobras' holes are probably *not* interpreting the text the way the prophet intended. Much of what we take literally was actually stock imagery, clichés used over and over both by biblical prophets and sometimes in writings found in other languages.

For example, the four horsemen of the apocalypse who kill by sword, famine, plague, and wild beasts are drawn from stock imagery. Likewise, the signs in the sun, moon, and stars in Matthew 24—Jesus was using a cliché from the Old Testament to reveal a general truth, not speaking literally. In the moon turning to blood and [all!] the stars falling from the sky (not some amazing meteor shower, but literally an end to stars), we see not only a cliché but massive exaggeration. Such exaggeration does not mean prophets are liars. It means literal readings are often or generally wrong. The truth is discovered by reading texts as they were meant to be read, not as we *wish* they could be read.

This is not to say that prophecy is only poetry, without any heavenly message behind it. Sandy notes that there are "Degrees of literalness."

> Only when we reach the point of denying that anything will happen as a result of these words have we moved completely away from literal meaning. At that point to be nonliteral would mean to be nonhistorical (nonactual). In other words, the literal or figurative interpretation of Scripture is not a simple black-or-white issue. (39)

However, correct interpretation depends on correctly gauging the degree of literalness.

In an appendix, Sandy provides a fascinating list of English metaphors that lead us astray if taken literally ("to have egg on your face"; "to have a short fuse") and a list of French figures of speech with literal translations and idiomatic English equivalents. (The French "he has a cockroach" means "he is depressed," but how would we guess that?) Sandy writes,

> Even more important, examining the metaphors of an unknown language underscores an essential point: the meaning of a metaphor generally cannot be understood based on dictionary definitions. Literal translations are rarely helpful. Firsthand exposure to the culture is essential. (62)

Many of the puzzling or shocking expressions of the prophets might actually be once-common and now-lost idiomatic expressions.

To support his contention that we should read biblical prophecy according to the rules of poetry—rules that are still very much alive, though somewhat changed—Sandy provides a chapter called "How Have Prophecies Been Fulfilled?" He calls this "reading prophecy in reverse." Prophecy, he points out, was not primarily about predicting future events, even though this is the

only aspect that interests most prophecy buffs.

The prophets' primary role was prosecution and persuasion. Still, prediction was part of the prophets' message. So how did it work? Sandy examines five prophecies that biblical history shows were fulfilled (the prophecies against Eli, Solomon, the temple at Bethel, Ahab, and Sennacherib). What is the relation of the fulfillment to the prophecy?

His conclusion is that "Prophecies may... have a measure of uncertainty about fulfillment," "be inherently translucent," "give incomplete or enigmatic information," "employ stereotypical language," "conceal long spans of time," and "predict something that does not happen as expected" (147). Prophetic fulfillment is best determined after the fact, and even then, many details may not fit.

Again, this does not mean that the Bible is in error, but that our interpretation of prophecy should take the Hebrew approach to writing prophecy into account. We should not expect exact fulfillment of every detail of still-unfulfilled prophecy, either. Arguing over the exact order of obscure last-day events may be futile.

How much of the prophetic message was actually revealed by God, and how much was the prophet's poetic imagination, guided in some way by the Holy Spirit (much as pastors and writers feel guided or inspired as they work)? In Chapter 4, Sandy points out that much of the prophetic language is derived from the promised covenant blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28 and from various passages in Genesis. Little revelation would have been necessary. A helpful appendix provides several hundred examples.

Sandy identifies four major focuses of classical prophecy: (1) Deity's "grace and wrath beyond limit"; (2) "Humanity at the limits of disobedience"; (3) "Calamity"—"judgment that seems unlimited"; and (4) "Prosperity"—"peace and joy beyond limit" (20–23). Consider that almost every prophecy has one or more of these as its message. The primary variation is the person or group about whom the prophecy is given. The other variations are little more than differences in poetic imagery.

The implications for our understanding of revelation are mind expanding. God need only give Isaiah an impression that he should prophesy against Edom, say, then turn him loose. Isaiah draws curses from Deuteronomy, adds some details drawn from current events, couches the message in striking poetic language, and polishes it. Prophets, it seems, have permission to put words in God's mouth. We have assumed that they are God's mouthpieces, and they are, but it may be that what God "says" in the prophecies is conditioned by the culture and theology of the prophet and the prophet's time.

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This is not to say that there are no specific revealed details in prophecy—there are. But it may be that prophecy is about 95 percent human perspiration, with a lot less inspiration than we have assumed. By faith, we should see these prophecies as—in a way—God's word to us, claim the promises as ours, and heed their warnings. After all, our sins are likely to be much like the sins of an earlier age. We should not, however, imagine that these prophecies are dictated by God—free of cultural conditioning—even when they claim to be God's words. Such a claim was part of what prophets said, but it perhaps should not be taken altogether literally.

Useful evidence for this, though not mentioned by Sandy, can be found by comparing a number of prophecies that talk about the same event, such as the Assyrian conquest of Israel. If God revealed all the details mentioned by the prophets, then the prophecies should agree on those details, even if they don't each include all the details. But they don't agree on the details, only on the broad view of coming punishment.

What they have in common comes closest to what was revealed. Where they differ is more likely the prophets' poetic license to make God's point in an attention-grabbing way. We should not insist that these poetic details be fulfilled, and we should bear in mind that prophecy is often conditional, much like the covenant blessings and curses, even when it doesn't say so.

Apocalyptic prophecy differs from classical

prophecy in a number of ways, but apocalyptic is still usually in poetic form or at least in a highly complex literary structure. Sandy devotes a useful chapter to apocalyptic. He accepts Daniel as predictive prophecy written in the sixth century B.C. As a key to interpretation, he looks closely at Daniel 8, the vision of the ram and the goat, representing the Medes and the Persians and Greece.

Sandy points out that the Medes were important in Daniel's day, but that by Alexander's day he was fighting the *Persian* empire. Alexander was not the first king of Greece, he did not conquer the Persians in one battle, and his empire did not split neatly into four parts controlled by four generals, as many interpreters have insisted, forcing history to fit prophecy read too literally.

> But in so doing [trying to find, in the historical circumstances of the Hellenistic period, four kingdoms that work as referents for Daniel's vision] they misrepresent the complexity of the struggles of the successors and miss the significance of the four kingdoms. While it is possible to find a brief window of time when there were four main kingdoms, that begs the question. *Four* is not a designation for the number of Hellenistic kingdoms. Daniel's use of the number four has a better explanation. (115)

If you want to know the explanation, read the book. In his look at Revelation, Sandy explains that

> Moving from the general to the specific, we become increasingly uncertain about the meaning of the details. This is not unexpected, given the allusive nature of apocalyptic visions. For much of the vision is an earthly way to think about a heavenly reality, or a present way to think about a future reality....It is also expected with the nature of apocalyptic language that some details may simply be for effect; stated another way, some details may be make-believe. (124)

Commenting on Revelation 12–13, Sandy writes,

> Apocalyptic visions often do not yield to attempts in advance to decipher details of fulfillment. Instead of being futuristic, the function of the vision is to provide encouragement and resolve....It tends to be more allusive than precise, more impressionistic than realistic, more fantastic than literal. Consequently we will not understand the parts of the story until we have read the last page. (126, 128)

In a useful appendix, Sandy provides hundreds of examples of end-time imagery in the New Testament, divided by topic. A multitude of related images in a number of books by different authors helps us discover basic trends in beliefs about last-day events, even though the details may differ quite a bit.

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I have a three-foot shelf in my home devoted to scholarly commentaries on Revelation, I've read the entire seven volumes of the Daniel and Revelation Committee reports, and I've published scholarly articles on chiastic structures I've discovered in Revelation. I've written a book-length commentary on Revelation from a historicist viewpoint for use in the New Testament Literature class I teach. I used to think I understood Revelation pretty well and knew what the end times hold in store for us. In the past few years I've grown more cautious.

Scholars know vastly more about Revelation than they did a generation or two ago, but what they know for certain is limited. They have identified a couple thousand echoes of the Old Testament beyond doubt, and they know much more about the history and culture of John's time. The astonishing, complex structure of the book is being peeled away like layers of an onion. These things are proven.

But what do we know for sure about the details of last-day events? We *know* much less than evangelists would have us *believe*. We know the broad themes, the call to faithfulness and perseverance, the promises of Christ's return, the destruction of what is wicked, and the establishment of a kingdom of righteousness. But we don't know whether "a new heaven and a new earth" is literally a newly created planet, a recreation of this planet, or something less literal yet still true.

I would die for my faith in the blessed hope of Christ's return. I would not die for my faith in the identification of the ten tribes or seven churches, seals, trumpets, or plagues. We can't be sure about the details. Even when the events occur, we may find that details we thought would be important turn out not to matter.

It should be clear by now that I recommend that you read *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks.* One quibble: it's a pain to have to turn to the back of the book to read the notes. Substantive notes should be at the foot of the page, not at the end. (Are you listening, InterVarsity?) My one big complaint about this book is that I was planning to write it. I was dismayed to find that Sandy had written it first—and probably better than I could.

The interpretation of prophecy has been fundamental to the development of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as has the belief in the continuation of the Spirit of Prophecy in the writings of Ellen White. It would be immensely helpful to apply Sandy's ideas to her and her work.

It seems likely that in the light of how biblical prophets actually worked—using their own creativity to develop brief general revelations, rather than passing on detailed revelations received from God—we could better understand how Ellen G. White worked, what God was saying through her, and the extent to which her words reflect his thoughts.

Indeed, her message is about the same as the message of the biblical prophets: be faithful and persevere and you will be blessed and rewarded; turn away and you will be cursed and destroyed. She devoted her life to saying this a thousand different ways.

By faith we may choose to accept this as God's word to us today and act on it, but we shouldn't assume we understand the details or that her elaborations of these themes are all exactly what God wanted her to write. I don't see much evidence in the Bible for God regularly monitoring the accuracy of his prophets and correcting errors of detail, though many of us fondly imagine that he did.

That doesn't seem to be how prophecy worked. Prophets were very human products of their time and place, doing their best to understand and communicate what God seemed to be saying, but not always succeeding. We shouldn't expect a higher caliber of information from Ellen White.

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