



## Analysis

*Limits to Growth*, environmental science and the nature of modern prophecy

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## ABSTRACT

The voice of the prophet has both disquieted the complacent and comfortable and provided direction for those willing to listen. I argue it is the environmental science community, and especially those engaged in ecological economics, sustainability analysis and climate change research, that are acting as modern-day prophets in direct continuation of the biblical prophetic voice, and using as an exemplar the 1972 text, *Limits to Growth*. Providing analysis of their contemporary situation and then projecting from those situations into the future, prophets describe the outcome of the trends they see and offer warnings about collective dangers being faced. The life of a prophet, both then and now, is not simple, and those offering penetrating analysis of their society face a variety of hardships and threats.

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## 1. Introduction

Readers of this journal do not need to be told in detail that the news about the state of the global environment is not one of increasing resilience and ecosystem health. The questions about the nature of warnings given to societies, what the warnings address, who delivers the warnings, and what societies do about them, are not new. Today, scientists are often the ones providing warnings of social collapse, of disease pandemics, of environmental disasters. In Biblical times, this work was done by a group of individuals called prophets. In this paper, I examine the nature of prophets and prophecy and look at the paper by Graham Turner (2008) who examines what might be considered prophetic statements of the 1972 book *Limits to Growth*.

## 2. Prophets and prophecy

The Jewish tradition has a rich history of prophets<sup>1</sup> including Jeremiah, Isaiah, Hosea, Ezekiel and Micah, who appeared between roughly 1000 and 600 BCE (before the common era). It is striking that many of them have similar attributes, and those attributes do not correspond with our common concept of the prophet as a seer into the future. Indeed, Shemtob ibn Shemtob (d. 1489) wrote “The

mere foretelling of future events is the lowest stage of prophecy, and in the eyes of the great Prophets of Israel, it was of quite secondary importance” (as cited in Hertz, 1990). “The prophets were seldom concerned with the far-distant future, with times not related to their own” (Hyatt, 1958).

While there were at times a class of professional prophets, even guilds and association of prophets (Bess, 1960), the great prophets of the Old Testament seemed to have been called to their tasks in surprising ways and at surprising times. While some of the Old Testament prophets were priests like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, or members of royal families as was Isaiah, a prophet who was neither, Amos, described himself in this way: “I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet... I am a cattle breeder and a fig grower. But God took me from behind the flock and said to me, ‘Go prophesy to My people Israel’” (Amos, 14–15).

But regardless of who they were or when they were called, the prophets we read in the Old Testament had an important task: “... prediction was not the larger part of prophecy; it was as much the prophet’s responsibility to interpret correctly the past and the present” (Bess, 1960). An important part of the prophet’s work was to accurately describe their present: they tell us what the situation they are living in looks like to them, a situation often of social despair, or of complacency and corruption, and of willful ignorance regarding the “correct” or divinely-mandated manner of human conduct. They then presented an analysis based on a sense of a direct and personal call, whereby God spoke to them (the source of their data upon which they are building their prophecies: “The Word of the Lord came to me.”) and then *through* them (e.g., “I will put my words in his mouth and he will speak to them all that I command him”: Deut. 18:18) for the benefit of the community of whom the prophet

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<sup>1</sup> Ancient Greek *προφήτης*; interpreter, proclaimer, expounder, especially of the will of the deity (from Oxford English Dictionary). The Hebrew term is *navi*, translated as spokesman or mouthpiece, comes from a root meaning “to bubble forth, as from a fountain”.

is part of and speaking to. The prophet then extended his (and for the most part, the prophets are males) analysis, based on their divinely-inspired message as they understand it out from their present time to paint a picture about what the future may hold *if* nothing changes; and it's usually an unhappy picture of doom, of loss, of exile, of diminishment. It is important to remember that their audience has a belief in a God who can provide those messages to true prophets and *may* have provided the particular message the prophet was proclaiming. Having analyzed the present situation, the prophet then presented the choices that the people/nation can make leading either to salvation or damnation, to joy or unhappiness, to leading a meaningful life or a life filled with meaningless distractions, and these choices are always within the ability of the people to make. "A prophet does not foretell. He warns. A prophet does not speak to predict future catastrophe but rather to avert it. *If a prediction comes true it has succeeded. If a prophecy comes true it has failed*" (Sacks, 2005 italics in original).

The prophet's teaching is usually of an *if/then* variety. They speak of change, but never impossible change: "He begins with a *message of doom*; he concludes with a *message of hope*. The prominent theme is exhortation, not mere prediction.... his essential task is... to disclose the future in order to illuminate what is involved in the present" (Heschel, 1962, italics in original). And the prophet doesn't necessarily accept that any particular future is inevitable, but repeatedly presents alternate visions of the future (e.g., Costanza, 2000), visions that may be, and often are, in conflict with the status quo.

They usually spoke about the future in conditional terms, saying that God would punish the people if they continued in sin, but bless them if they repented and turned to him. Thus they usually spoke of the near future as it would arise out of conditions of their own time; and they believed that God's treatment of the nation and individuals in it would be determined in part by their actions and their attitude toward him. Their prophecies of the future were not based upon mechanical foresight, but rather upon their insight into conditions of their time and into the nature of the God they served. (Hyatt, 1958)

This is pretty straightforward stuff: here is "now", based on the prophet's understanding/interpretation of the divinely inspired/delivered "data" he has received; the path of "now" *could* lead to a bad "then", and there is something you can do about it *if* you take the prophet's advice and change your actions. Prophets present "ifs": if you do x, then y may happen. If you don't, other things may happen. In contrast, oracles and soothsayers, individuals who searched for patterns to predict future events, differed from the Old Testament prophets in that they present a fate that is pre-determined; nothing that one could do will be able to change that fate. Nothing, for example, could change the fate of Oedipus: he was going to kill his father and marry his mother no matter what his father did (like bind him up and have the baby left on a hillside to die), and no matter what Oedipus himself does (leaving Corinth where he was raised and returning to Thebes, which he doesn't know is really his home). He fulfilled the oracular vision, killed his father and married his mother. Old Testament prophets, on the other hand, offered choices of behavior which, once taken could provide drastically divergent alternative futures.

Bess (1960) notes the "sense of compulsion to prophesy" (p. 11). The great prophets seemed to not go looking for this particular calling, and indeed some, like Moses, "... would have liked to escape the obligation but could not" (p. 11). Once called, they didn't talk to just one person: the prophet's conversation was directed toward the people, the nation, and the group, and what they could do collectively. As Abraham Joshua Heschel describes, "... national sin would bring about national disaster..." (1962). But when prophets did speak to the people, "His tone, rarely sweet or caressing, is frequently consoling and

disburdening; his words are often slashing, even horrid – designed to shock rather than to edify" (Heschel, 1962). "Often, his words begin to burn where conscience ends" (Heschel, 1962).

The prophet did not live a life of comfort, but a life of isolation and rejection, of being ignored and mocked, a life of burden, of hearing the voice of Truth in the midst of falsehoods and self-deception. Jeremiah, for example, was told not to have children or marry or

... even to commiserate with his people... He had only one task...: to warn the people that Judah would be destroyed unless the Jews repented. As a result, he was reviled, beaten and imprisoned. He was threatened with death, more than once, and his would-be assassins almost succeeded. (Elman and Schapiro, 1995)

And he carried a huge burden, having the awareness that his mission was likely doomed even before he started. Brueggemann, citing Heschel, says "A man whose message is doom for the people he loves not only forfeits his own capacity for joy, but also provokes the hostility and outrage of his contemporaries. The sights of woe, the anticipation of disaster, nearly crush his soul" (Heschel, 1962 as quoted in Brueggemann, 2007).

While we may think about the Old Testament when we think about prophets, there seems to be prophets amongst us all the time, and we can choose to pay attention to what they say as we consider the present, think about the future, and then make our decisions, individually and collectively, about how to proceed. Or we can ignore them.

### 3. Sustainability, biodiversity, climate change and modern prophets

Today, the most important prophets may be those scholars trying to understand the relationships between the environment and our global economic enterprise, trying to predict the outcome of our global environmental manipulations with the potential for unprecedented biospheric and atmospheric alterations, e.g. "This paper shows that the climate change that takes place due to increases in carbon dioxide concentration is largely irreversible for 1,000 years after emissions stop" (Solomon et al., 2009). This role of scientist as prophet is well expressed by Bron Taylor, who wrote "This represents a significant innovation in the history of religions, where apocalyptic expectation arises not from the fear of angry divinities or incomprehensible natural disasters but from environmental science" (Taylor, 2004). Can we not hear, for example, the voice of Old Testament prophecy in the words of ecological economist Herman Daly who wrote in Daly (1996) (p. 224), with particular relevance to ignoring 'limits to growth' (and I have taken liberty with the typography, putting his words into a 'versified' format)...

If it is a sin to kill and to steal, then it is a sin to destroy carrying capacity –the capacity of the earth to support life now and in the future...

We may sometimes have to sacrifice future life to preserve present life – but to sacrifice future life to protect present luxury and extravagance is a very different matter...

We must face the failures of the growth idolatry.  
We must stop crying out to the growth economy,  
"Deliver me, for thou art my God!"  
Instead, we must have the courage to ask with Isaiah,  
"Is there not a lie in my right hand?"

We as yet have no real idea as to how many of our colleagues engaged in global change science, sustainability analysis and biodiversity research are feeling, in the face of their data, as Heschel puts it, are they too experiencing "*the crushing of their souls*" even as

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