

## Inspiration and Authority in the Middle Ages: Prophets and their Critics from Scholasticism to Humanism

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**Reviewer:** Lesley Coote

Brian Fitzgerald begins this timely, useful and extremely interesting book by stating what should be pretty obvious to scholars of medieval prophetic texts; that prophecy in the Middle Ages took a wide variety of forms, right across Europe and beyond. It *should* also be fairly obvious that a considerable amount of this corpus cannot, or should not, be linked directly to the theologically-based deductions of the Calabrian abbot Joachim of Fiore (c.1135–1202). However, it *does* still need to be (strongly) stated that this is the case. Brian Fitzgerald starts from this initial premise, and that is a very good thing. The impact of Marjorie Reeves's seminal work on Joachim, 'Joachite' and 'pseudo-Joachite' prophecies, as well as his famous *figurae*, great though it is, has tended to obscure the influence of other biblical scholars of Joachim's own time, and that of their immediate successors in the 13th and early 14th centuries. It has proved all too easy to use the term 'Joachite' as an anchor to situate other prophetic work originating in Europe during what used to be known as the '12th-century renaissance', just as it is also easy to represent 'prophecy' itself as being related only to ecstatic utterance and 'prediction' of the future. His initial premise allows the author, whilst acknowledging Joachim's importance (and he was, indeed, very important, as his influence was keenly felt by his followers, his successors, and their opponents, both lay and clerical, the well-, less well- and completely un-educated), to see him rather in the context of the intellectual climate of his time. Fitzgerald highlights the debates concerning the nature of prophetic authority among the Schoolmen of the 12th century, through to the early influence of humanism in the first decades of the 14th. Rather than Joachim, the Spiritual Franciscans and the 'spirit-filled' ecstatic prophets who claimed inspiration from his ideas, this book examines the development of prophecy as a form of hermeneutic study by biblical scholars, beginning with the great French Schoolmen Hugh of St Victor, Gilbert of Poitiers and Peter Lombard. He moves on to the influence of the friars, and the important, but little-recognized, work of Dominican scholars in general, highlighting not only the famous, such as Thomas Aquinas, but also the little-studied work of Englishman Nicholas Trevet on Seneca's *Tragedies*, and early humanists in Italy and in papal Avignon.

During the 12th century the slow drip of 'secular' or 'political' prophecy also became a steady flow. The nature of these prophecies is such that they, too, must be grounded in the hermeneutic methodologies of spiritual, theological, study. Although Brian Fitzgerald's book deals with theological and biblical prophecy

only, the ideas and developments he discusses – and the conclusions he reaches – have important applications for prophecies in a wider, more secular context. The work in this book provides a long-overdue insight into the development of a powerful discourse, a tool for spiritual understanding which became an important weapon in peace and war from the 12th to the 16th centuries, and beyond. Fitzgerald's work gives the reader an idea of prophecy's importance for the Church herself, her texts, her unity and her place in history.

A brief introduction to the ideas of earlier theologians and biblical scholars such as Augustine, Cassiodorus and Gregory the Great leads into Fitzgerald's examination of Hugh of St Victor's assertion that prophecy is a way of understanding history, not a way of predicting the future. Augustine had entertained similar ideas, and Gregory's view of St Bernard's vision of the entire history of the world in one glance had supported, rather than denied, this view. Prophecy's purpose was to reveal hidden realities in the mind of God. (It is not difficult to see how this could become an avenue towards, or justification of, inspired prediction or *ex eventu* prophecy, the presentation of past events as future, in the present). Fitzgerald also notes, albeit in passing towards his own particular purpose, the need for collusion between author and audience in the making of prophetic meaning, another important feature which enabled prophecies transferability to other spheres than that of spiritual understanding.

For the Schoolmen, Fitzgerald says, prophecy was essentially the understanding of patterns within history (something which Joachim of Fiore also asserted – although he developed it in different ways). In the Third, Christian (i.e. after the Incarnation of Christ, a turning point in sacred history) Age of Grace, the Holy Spirit was able to impart greater knowledge than before, especially to those who practiced prudence (*prudentia*) and moral virtue. Preaching was included, as an important part of the ability to discern and to tell, or teach, this understanding to others. Thus, prophecy is important for the study of historiography – Fitzgerald mentions Henry of Huntingdon's view that prophecy brings the past into view as if it is the present, enabling judgments to be made about the future. There are wider applications – it should also be noted that John of Celle, sometime student of Hugh of St Victor, was the superior and mentor of Matthew Paris at St Albans, and that the influence of the Northern French schools extended from Paris to Oxford, and thus outward to scholars such as Geoffrey of Monmouth and Gerald of Wales. (Was not Bishop Alexander of Lincoln a patron both of Henry and of Geoffrey?)

Speaking of Gilbert of Poitiers and Peter Lombard, Fitzgerald discusses in detail the fundamental importance of the Book of Psalms for the development of prophecy theory, because King David, generally accepted as their author, was believed to have been making prophetic statements about Christ and the Church. Here, for the first time, Fitzgerald introduces the idea of natural and artificial ordering, the latter being seen as the nature of poetry rather than history, for which 'natural' or chronological ordering was required. The prophet Ezra was supposed to have rearranged the Psalms (after the Old Testament restoration of Jerusalem) according to the order not of historical events in David's life, but that of prophecy, the underlying pattern of God's, or 'sacred', history. By this means he revealed their prophetic meaning.

From this base, the author goes on to consider the part played by some famous Dominicans, as well as members of the Dominican Order in general, in the debates about the nature of prophetic authority in the 13th- and early 14th centuries. This element of the book is particularly interesting, not only because it is a feature of Thomas Aquinas's work that is easy to overlook, but also because of the amount of attention which has already been paid to the Franciscans at this time. The turbulence and internal struggles of the Friars Mendicant, again as chronicled and assessed by Marjorie Reeves, has tended to overshadow the spiritual energy of the Friars Preacher. They often appear somewhat staid and conservative by comparison with their Franciscan counterparts, but were equally concerned with definitions of spiritual authority and the definition of prophecy; it was, after all, their *raison d'être*. (They were also equally devoted to the Virgin Mary, something else that can be overlooked) – and Fitzgerald points out their increasing concern with the authority of poetry. This, if we take Marian devotion into account, is not surprising, as some very erotic poetry was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin in the 13th century. For the Dominicans, the ordering of the Psalms was right in that it had made them useful for contemplation, and it was inspired contemplative study

that led to the Holy Spirit's inspiration. They did not, Fitzgerald points out, mean by this that the 'spirit-filled inspiration' of the visionaries, the 'heretics' and the Muslims was a valid expression of God's mind; the recipient had to be prepared by contemplative study to receive inspiration. In this way, scholars as well as theologians could be prophets, and prophets should be preachers and teachers, 'forth-tellers' of God's words.

Whilst not losing his focus, Fitzgerald pays increasing attention to the historical forces shaping these debates, which could not be avoided at the time, most notably the issues of the Spiritual Franciscans, the Eternal Evangel, the general fallout from Joachim's theories, and the rise (and fall) of unorthodox ideas, in particular those preached by disaffected priests and uneducated visionaries. He notes how prophetic inspiration became a useful tool for the Church's critics, including lay people. This included women; among others, he gives the example of Hildegard of Bingen. Prominent among the issues raised was whether an ordained priest's authority derived from the sacred nature of his office or from the moral purity of his life. If preaching stemmed from prophetic authority, who should preach? The book examines this question in detail, as debated by Dominicans – and others – in the 13th century. Prophecy could not be delivered without understanding, they concluded, and the greatest means to understanding was intellectual vision gained by contemplative study. Perhaps the most important contribution of this age (at least, for scholars of medieval poetry and song) to the study of prophetic authority was the assertion that poetry, music and song were able to deliver this power, conveyed by means of 'delight'. The conclusion of Peter John Olivi (1248–98) that prophetic vision could reveal past, present *and* future events, thus linking prophecy back the ideas of Joachim of Fiore on sacred history, was not the most prominent among the doctrines for which his work was rejected and condemned by his Order (the Franciscans), but it *was* controversial.

The book concludes with a discussion of the work of two very interesting figures, Nicholas Trevet (of Italy, Avignon, Oxford and London) and the Italian layman Albertino Mussato, as representatives of the rising humanist, philosophical tendency in the scriptural studies of the early 14th century. There is a particular focus on a little-known and studied aspect of Trevet's work; his glossing of Seneca's *Tragedies*, the first medieval work on these plays, was undertaken between 1314 and 1317. Seneca's work was considered important in that it was seen to prefigure Christianity. Through the plays, Trevet links tragedy, history and consolation, in a manner also true of poetry. In an advance on the idea of the poet's ability to teach by offering delight to the listener, Trevet maintained that the poet offered consolation for the suffering and ills of the world, like the tragedian, and therefore he was imbued with the spirit of prophecy. Poetry's artificial order and language was an aid to cognition and a sweeter way to receive spiritual teaching. The poet speaks using *fabulae*, or stories (the Latin version of the French *fablel*, a word associated with *fabliau*, the comic tale which could also be coarse and obscene at the same time as offering moral teaching), but his work can be dedicated to presenting a moral and spiritual message. This element of prophecy has implications for the understanding of apparently secular poetry and narrative.

Fitzgerald notes Trevet's travels, and particularly time spent in Italy, which gave him access to the new, humanistic philosophies of the early Renaissance. He offers an account of the work of Albertino Mussato, a layman who strayed into spiritual deliberations had formerly been the preserve of the clergy, as an example of this spirit. Just as theology had been seen to encompass all other disciplines, said Mussato, so did poetry; revelation was a poetic form, using figures (*figurae*) and imagery to communicate. Poetry attracts and draws its audience in, as scripture does, towards philosophical contemplation, as also does music. Poetry is inspired wisdom, leading towards philosophical discussion, just as scripture does. Poetically, says Fitzgerald, Venus and Mary are the same. (This gives voice to something which had formerly been true allegorically, since erotic verses had been used by poets in Marian devotions since the 13th century at least.) These ideas challenged the clerical monopoly on inspired prophecy, and echoed the view of Trevet that not only clergy but also inspired lay intellectuals could be prophets.

It is with the beginnings of Renaissance humanism that Brian Fitzgerald ends his study of prophecy and spiritual authority; this is good, as it allows him to focus and does not lead into the more varied channels of the ensuing decades and centuries, which surely require such a study, or studies, of their own. Similar work on the later 14th, 15th and early 16th centuries would probably offer even more developments, and perhaps

conflicts, in the history of prophecy and theology (and would provide a background context for the popular devotional texts and the 'heresies' of those times, including the Wycliffites). The undoubted effects of the Avignon papacy and the Great Schism, along with the Council of Constance, mark a finishing point for this book, but they might very well begin another. It is not possible to do justice to this book in such a short space. Brian Fitzgerald's subject is complex and the scholarship behind it must have taken a great deal of time, but it is treated clearly and efficiently, and the material is not difficult to read. There is an up-to-date bibliography to enable further inquiries. Although not designed for general readers, students and scholars of prophecy (of all kinds), theology, the medieval Church, historiography and medieval historians, philosophy and the beginnings of Renaissance humanism and of literature and poetry will all be able to read this book and come away with something of value.

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