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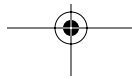
WHAT MAKES PROPHECY POWERFUL?

Climb into an eight-person raft for an October trip down the Upper Gauley River in West Virginia, and you will experience power. Millions of gallons of water being released from Summersville Reservoir turn the gorge into a competition between water and rock. The rock wins, and the water alters its course, surging over and around and between boulders and canyon walls. The result is roaring whitewater: massive hydraulics, towering liquid walls, class V rapids—powerful enough to stand your raft straight up in the air, with you and your buddies in it—maybe! Guides prepare rafters for the good and the bad: the rush of adrenaline, the teamwork, the risks. And they need to. Every year the river chews up and spits out hapless victims. But you are there to experience adventure, to behold beauty, to learn respect, to stand in awe, to feel power.

Prophecy is like whitewater, perhaps the most powerful whitewater in Scripture—maybe in all the literature of the world. This is language unmatched in what it beholds and in how it describes the beholden. Words of worship, terror and mercy are unparalleled. Words of beauty, passion and hope are unequalled. Words of adoration, condemnation and salvation are unrivaled.

KODAK MOMENTS

In order to speak to our hearts, the powerful language of prophecy brings God's might and wrath and humankind's sin and doom to life with surrealistic images. It is reality described in unreal ways. Stop and take in the scenery. You will discover four principal subjects that the prophets portray





in the language of West Virginia whitewater (see figure 1.1).

The prophets bring four subjects into clearer focus

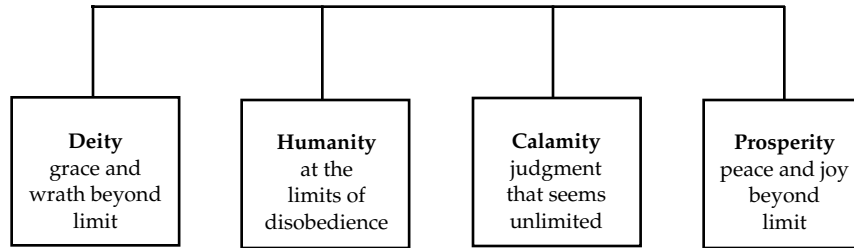


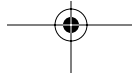
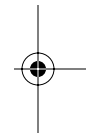
Figure 1.1. The prophetic focus

Deity. Prophecy beholds God in raw anger—punishing rapids . . . fire and brimstone. And in soft love—pools of water smooth as glass . . . grace and peace. It is God at the extreme limit of his attributes. As Isaiah knew well, to stand too close to the Almighty is to be shaken to the very core (Is 6:4-5). Heavens convulse, mountains crumble, hearts cringe.

Isaiah reports that when God whistles, people come speedily from the ends of the earth (Is 5:26). His voice thunders and people flee at the sound of it (Is 33:3). Islands are struck with fear, and the ends of the earth tremble (Is 41:5). The word of his tongue is a destructive fire. He shakes the nations in the sieve of destruction (Is 30:27-28). Jeremiah pictures God as a mighty warrior (Jer 20:11), as a storm swirling down on the heads of the sinful (Jer 23:19), as one who pushes his enemies off cliffs (Jer 51:25). Habakkuk says that the earth shudders when God shows up: hills collapse, mountains writhe, sun and moon stand still, and pestilence follows his steps (Hab 3:4-12). As an advertisement for travel in Manitoba, Canada, says, “If this doesn’t leave you breathless, check your pulse.”

God’s towering attributes stand out most vividly on the flat landscape of human helplessness (Is 40:6-31). Nations are but specks of dust on a set of scales. People are like grasshoppers, potsherds left lying on the ground (Is 45:9).

Unfortunately, we tend to forget who we are—and more important, who he is:





*Your thinking is perverse!
 Should the potter be regarded as the clay?
 Should the thing made say about its maker,
 "He didn't make me"?
 Or should the pottery say about the potter,
 "He doesn't understand"? (Is 29:16 NET)*

But God is not only about fireworks and sonic booms. He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his own heart (Is 40:11). He prepares a feast of rich food and a banquet of aged wine for all people (Is 25:6). He bequeaths the most beautiful heritage (Jer 3:19).

Humanity. Prophecy also beholds the naked sinfulness of God's chosen people. They are adulterous, with men thronging to the houses of prostitutes, "well-fed, lusty stallions, each neighing for another man's wife" (Jer 5:7-8). God can put up with no more—he files for divorce (Jer 3:8; cf. 8:10). Like a bride who comes to the wedding but forgot her jewelry—"my people have forgotten me for more days than can even be counted" (Jer 2:32 NET).

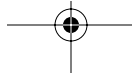
*My people have committed a double wrong:
 they left me, the fountain of life-giving water,
 and they have dug cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns,
 which cannot even hold water. (Jer 2:13 NET)*

*Now why go to Egypt to drink water from the Shihor?
 And why go to Assyria to drink water from the River? (Jer 2:18)*

*"Although you wash yourself with soda
 and use an abundance of soap,
 the stain of your guilt is still before me,"
 declares the Sovereign LORD. (Jer 2:22)*

*Such idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field.
 They cannot talk.
 They have to be carried
 because they cannot walk. (Jer 10:5 NET)*

Such sinfulness on earth appalls the heavens—they shudder with great horror (Jer 2:12). The creation of the world is undone; it once again becomes without form and void (Jer 4:23; cf. Gen 1:2). Worst of all, God cancels his blessing, love and pity (Jer 16:5-6).





Calamity. If beholding the sinfulness of humanity is not enough to dissuade hearers from joining the parade to destruction, language of impending catastrophe may help. Once having soared with eagles and made nests among the stars (Obad 4), now the disobedient only mumble out of the dust of the ground (Is 29:4). Once having been jars of fine wine, now they are empty, smashed jugs (Jer 48:11-12). Once having eaten from fields rich with produce, now they are dead bodies lying like manure on open fields, like grain that has been cut down but left to rot (Jer 9:22). Once a thriving olive tree laden with beautiful fruit, now they are ablaze with the roar of a firestorm (Jer 11:16). Once a mighty war club, now they are only a burned-out mountain. God's arsenal of weapons of wrath seems to be limitless (Jer 50:25).

I will punish them in four different ways. I will have war kill them. I will have dogs drag off their dead bodies. I will have birds and wild beasts devour and destroy their corpses. I will make all the people in all the kingdoms of the world horrified. (Jer 15:3-4 NET; cf. Jer 16:4)

*"I will sweep away everything
from the face of the earth,"
declares the LORD.
"I will sweep away both men and animals:
I will sweep away the birds of the air
and the fish of the sea.
The wicked will have only heaps of rubble
when I cut off man from the face of the earth,"
declares the LORD. (Zeph 1:2-3)*

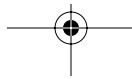
Some of the language of judgment is not so calamitous but is no less vivid. Picture this if you will:

*I will pull up your skirts over your face
that your shame may be seen. (Jer 13:26; cf. Is 47:2)*

*No, they have no shame at all;
they do not even know how to blush. (Jer 8:12)*

*We were with child, we writhed in pain,
but we gave birth to wind. (Is 26:18)*

*The bed is too short to stretch out on,
the blanket too narrow to wrap around you. (Is 28:20)*





I will put an end to the sounds of joy and gladness, to the glad celebration of brides and grooms in these lands. I will put an end to the sound of people grinding meal. I will put an end to lamps shining in their homes. (Jer 25:10 NET)

"As surely as I live," declares the LORD, "even if you, Jehoachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a signet ring on my right hand, I would still pull you off." (Jer 22:24)

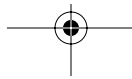
Prosperity. Prophecy beholds not only calamity but blessed prosperity. The blind will see again. The deaf will hear again (Is 29:18). The sounds of joy and the tambourine will be heard again (Jer 31:4; 33:11). Maidens will dance again, and young men and old as well (Jer 31:4, 13). No one will be without a mate (Is 34:16). The lame will prance like deer (Is 35:6). Livestock will graze freely (Is 32:20). Swords will be made into plowshares (Is 2:4). The moon will shine as bright as the sun, and the sun will become seven times brighter (Is 30:26). Valleys will be lifted up. Mountains and hills will be leveled (Is 40:4). Highways will be built through the wilderness (Is 35:8). Burning sand will become pools of water (Is 35:7; 41:18). Rivers will flow in the desert and on the mountaintops (Is 30:25; 43:20). Trees and flowers will grow in the desert (Is 35:1; 41:19).

As a billboard for God's hatred of sin, prophecy speaks boldly and to the point. Anyone who fails to see the message is terribly near-sighted. And as a sign of God's everlasting love, prophecy speaks tenderly and to the heart. Unfortunately, those who fail to read the billboards advertising God's anger probably miss the signs announcing his love as well. One cannot be understood without the other.

FLASHFLOOD WARNINGS

The perpetual pounding of what the prophets are proclaiming may seem overdone to modern ears, yet the whitewater of the prophets keeps on roaring. God's spokesmen will not give up. Their words crash against the stubbornness of the people again and again. It was as obvious then as now: ordinary and plain language simply was not enough for these prophetic sirens and flashing lights. Flashflood warnings and summons to arms are not announced in unexpressive, humdrum diction. The words of the prophets were poignant and pregnant with meaning, because the subject matter called for the most vivid words possible.

Prophecy was first of all oratory, because the prophets were first of all





preachers.¹ In the hearing of crowds and kings they denounced, warned and assured. Not only did the substance of their sermons call for vivid words, the iciness of their audience required burning rhetoric. They needed expressions that would explode in the heads and hearts of their hearers.² Isaiah reports, “He made my mouth like a sharpened sword . . . he made me into a polished arrow” (Is 49:2).

While the linguistic elements were the same as for anyone else, the prophets linked words with rhythm, used ordinary words for unordinary ideas (metaphor), gave inanimate objects life (personification), exaggerated to get points across (hyperbole)—all of it resulting in language that was colorful as well as memorable. Though it is from another time and another culture, we still sense some of its power, especially when we hear it rather than just read it.³ The language is imaginative, etching graphic pictures on our minds. It is conversation, drawing us into dialogue with the prophet. It is invitation—stop and ponder the word-pictures. It is mind-jarring, hope-crushing and heart-rending. It is above all poetic. The prophets were wordsmiths, master carpenters.

*As men gather abandoned eggs,
so I gathered all the countries;
not one flapped a wing,
or opened its mouth to chirp. (Is 10:14)*

*Like fluttering birds
pushed from the nest,
so are the women of Moab. (Is 16:2)*

*You conceive chaff,
you give birth to straw. (Is 33:11)*

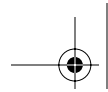
*Though at this time your ropes are slack,
the mast is not secured,
and the sail is unfurled. (Is 33:23 NET)*

You heavens above, rain down righteousness. (Is 45:8)

*You will drink the milk of nations
and be nursed at royal breasts. (Is 60:16)⁴*

We not only read the prophets, we feel the impact of their bombardment. “The prophet’s word is a scream in the night. While the world is at





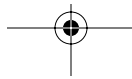
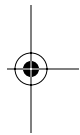
ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven."⁵ Prophecy needs to be experienced.

STREETS OF GOLD?

For another perspective on the power of prophecy, we need to slow down and think more philosophically. Language originates in humankind's fundamental need to communicate. It is a way to express what humans experience and need to voice. In rudimentary form, words are symbols for the things we want to talk about, such as bodily functions. "My stomach hurts" expresses a human condition. *Stomach* is a symbol that may refer to anywhere in the midsection of the body; *hurts* is a symbol that may refer to any kind of discomfort. But as our knowledge of anatomy and pain increases, these symbols become less and less precise. So as society learns more and more about the world it lives in, language evolves and becomes more sophisticated: vocabulary increases; words become more specific in meanings; grammar develops. "My stomach hurts" might be described more precisely: "An incompetent pyloric sphincter has allowed reflux of biliary acid, resulting in damage and erosion of the gastric mucosal barrier." For most us, now we have gone too far in the other direction with an overly technical description. Nevertheless, language remains a description of what humans experience.⁶

But humans have always been interested in things they have never experienced. If there is life after death, what is it like? We all have attempted to imagine it, but probably all in vain. Sometimes our imaginations run wild. But there is a clear pattern: our ideas about things we have never experienced are largely controlled by things we have experienced. No matter how hard we try, we cannot create the categories of thinking and expression necessary to describe what we have never experienced (see figure 1.2). We long to know about life after death, so we are fascinated by near-death experiences. But do we really know what the experience of moving from this world into the next is like? Likewise, we long to know about the future and are fascinated by a genre of literature called science fiction. But by the term we use to describe it, we admit that we do not expect the fictions to be true.

God's dilemma. When God sat down to write us a letter and to answer a few of our questions, he had a decision to make. How would he communicate to a population of billions that would inhabit this planet? After all, these billions *babel* in thousands of different languages and cultures. When you



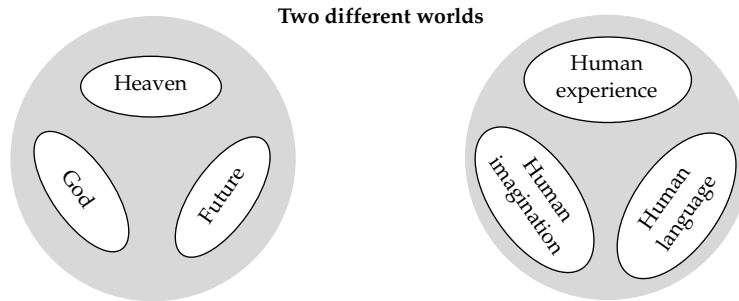
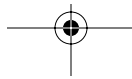


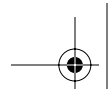
Figure 1.2. Humanity's dilemma

get right down to it, God's choices were limited. Perhaps he could create a new international language and culture that everyone would understand. But we assume he made the best choice: to use already existing languages developed by humans. We are not sure why he chose Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek—they are not superior languages—nor why he chose Palestine—the cultures of that region do not seem especially superior (neither in the past nor currently). However, those particular cultures and languages preserved for all humanity the eternity of the divine Word. For the rest of the world's population, translations, commentaries and other resources will have to suffice—except for those few who go to great effort to learn the cultures and languages of Palestine two to four thousand years ago.⁷

But the other issue God faced was how to describe heavenly concepts in human language.⁸ Earthbound creatures have language only to describe things we have experienced or fancied. Certainly our attempts to imagine what heaven is like would be fiction. Since we do not have the categories to describe the spirit world that God inhabits, and since his thoughts are not our thoughts (Is 55:8-9), God's choices were limited. Again we assume he made the best choice: to use already existing language developed by humans. Are human means of communication generally effective? Yes. Are they perfect? No.⁹ So would we not conclude that the descriptions of God and heaven and the future in human language have inherent limitations?

The majority of the Bible is in the genre of narrative—stories of people's experiences through which aspects of God's character are revealed little by little. God bridges the chasm between heaven and earth, shows up from time to time, works behind the scenes most of the time—and all the while





people are discovering who God is and what he is like.

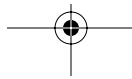
Second to narrative, as far as quantity goes, is the genre of prophecy. But prophecy is faced with a bigger challenge: to reveal God more directly, to proclaim the attributes of deity, to declare the agenda of eternity, to divulge the passions of the Trinity, and to do that with only the imperfect language of humanity. People must come to fear God and the extent of his wrath. People must come to appreciate God and the extent of his love. People must come to understand God and the otherness of his heavenly realm. The question was how to do that with mere human language.

“Asked to explain a difficult *étude*, Schumann sat down and played it a second time.”¹⁰ Performance was better than explanation.

Prophecy's dilemma. In a sense, prophecy was assigned an impossible task. With language limited to what we have experienced, how can God be described?¹¹ God is the only thing in the universe like himself, and nothing really compares to him. And how can heaven be described? We think only in the material realm, surrounded by tangible objects, but heaven is a place of spirits. And how can the future be described? Changes that will occur in the future are impossible to imagine in the present. Before there was electricity, could people have conceived of televisions and microwaves? Before there were computers, could people have conceived of cyberspace and computer viruses? Before there were test tubes and laboratories, could people have conceived of germ warfare?

Perhaps now it is clearer why prophecy faced a huge challenge. And we can see why the 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. A long answer will be developed in the chapters that follow. The result is a very heavenly revelation in very earthly language. “Since poetry is our best human model of intricately rich communication, not only solemn, weighty, and forceful but also densely woven with complex internal connections, meanings, and implications, it makes sense that divine speech should be represented in poetry.”¹²

Two radically different worlds find a meeting ground in the words of the prophets. These were human authors that surprise us as literary geniuses and at the same time thrill us as inspired geniuses. “Above all, you do well if you recognize this: no prophecy of Scripture ever comes about by the prophet's own imagination, for no prophecy was ever borne of hu-





man impulse; rather, men carried along by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (2 Pet 1:20-21 NET).

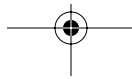
Under divine empowerment, the prophets created metaphors and similes from their world to let us experience what the world of God and heaven is like—as best they could. But Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and John could do only so much with the words and categories of earthlings. Will we walk streets of gold? We can be sure heavenly existence is something like what they describe, but if we think it is exactly what they describe, we will have lowered the spirit world of God and heaven to the physical world that we have experienced.

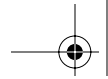
ONE REWARD OR MANY REWARDS?

A significant example of the extensive power of prophetic language is found in the pronouncements to the seven churches in Asia Minor recorded in Revelation 2—3. The language sounds similar to that of the Old Testament prophets.¹³ Note a selection of blessing phrases:

To those who overcome, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. I will give you the crown of life. I will give you some of the hidden manna. I will give you a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it. To those who overcome and do my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations. I will also give you the morning star. Those who overcome will be dressed in white. I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will you leave it. I will write on you the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God. I will write on you my new name. To those who overcome, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne.

The concept of rewards—an important form of motivation in Jewish and Greco-Roman society—runs through the whole of Scripture (from Gen 15:1 to Rev 22:12). Though rewards for Christians were generally spiritual rather than tangible, in some instances the reward offered was a crown: of righteousness, of life, of glory (2 Tim 4:8; Jas 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4; cf. Is 61:3). But even there the genitive case ("of") may designate apposition, suggesting that these rewards also were spiritual: not actual crowns but a crowning with spiritual blessings of righteousness, life and glory.¹⁴ Whatever the intent of *crowns*, the opportunity to receive rewards and, conversely, the fear of not receiving them were effective means of encouragement for holy and faithful living.

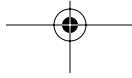


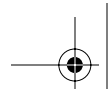


Are these for real? In the seven letters to the churches, the way the rewards are described is unexpectedly specific and extravagant. What are readers supposed to conclude about this treasure room of promises? Will overcomers have the privilege of eating some Garden of Eden fruit from the tree of life just as Adam and Eve did? Will they have the privilege of eating some Sinai desert manna as Moses and the Israelites did—which, by the way, has been hidden away for thousands of years?¹⁵ Will each overcomer receive a crown, a white stone and a personal star? Will there be a monumental colonnade of overcomers, each a pillar on the eschatological temple porch? Will each rule a nation? Will they all sit alongside Jesus on his eternal throne?¹⁶

Or is each of these images symbolic? Instead of real manna or white stones or personal stars, each of these objects may actually designate something else. But then we want to know what each object symbolizes. For example, does the white stone refer to a courtroom scene where God declares faithful followers innocent? That idea is based on the practice of Roman jury members' casting votes of acquittal with white stones versus black stones for votes of guilt. Or does the white stone refer to an invitation for faithful followers to the banquet of all banquets? That suggestion is based on the custom of using white stones as admission tickets for grand banquets. Or does the white stone suggest the privileged role of faithful followers as priests? That suggestion is based on the precious stones in the breastplate of the high priest's attire. This list could go on, for at least twelve different suggestions have been offered for the meaning of the white stone.¹⁷ But the next phrase needs to be researched as well—what is the new name written on the stone? And the next phrase needs to be researched too—why is it known only to him who receives it? And so on.

While this may seem a tedious and uncertain way to interpret prophecy, no one said understanding a document written two thousand years ago in an unfamiliar genre would be simple. It definitely makes entering into the culture of the people living in Asia Minor in John's day indispensable. In that regard, an understanding of the literary conventions current then may suggest a solution. From the study of imagery we observe that prophetic language freely uses a variety of images to refer to the same thing.¹⁸ In the case of the rewards of Revelation 2—3, perhaps rather than disassembling each reward piece by piece to determine its significance, we should keep





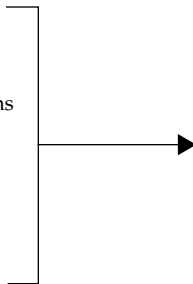
them whole and look at their referent collectively rather than individually.

Toward a solution. The reasoning goes like this. The finish line that the universe longs for and the book of Revelation is moving toward is God's future and full presence with the whole of his creation.¹⁹ As it was in the beginning. The anticipation for that cosmic conclusion occurs throughout John's writings, but the climax is expressed by a loud voice from the throne at the end of his last book: "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (Rev 21:3). The reality of deity and humanity in perfect unity is underscored in numerous ways throughout the book. It is evident in the son of man standing among the lampstands, which are symbols of the churches. It is evident in the opening of the door to heaven and the invitation for John to "come up here." It is evident in the multitudes representing every nation, singing and serving before God's throne. It is evident in the new Jerusalem prepared as a bride for her husband. It is evident in the Lamb's providing the only light necessary for the holy city. It is evident in the river of life flowing from the throne of God. In John's Gospel Jesus looked ahead to this glorious future before his departure: "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (Jn 14:3). "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am" (Jn 17:24).

Since that is where the book of Revelation and the consummation of time are headed, we now have a possible map for understanding the rewards for overcomers. Though expressed in different words, the reward is to experience God's presence in all its fullness (see figure 1.3). For example,

Various images are used to visualize one reward

- Tree of life
- Crown of life
- White stone
- Authority over the nations
- Morning star
- Dressed in white
- Pillar in God's temple
- Name of God
- Name of Jerusalem
- Sit on God's throne

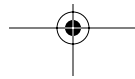
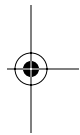


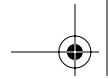
The reward is deity and humanity in perfect unity—

Now the dwelling of God is with man.

—Rev 21:3

Figure 1.3. The reward for overcomers





the tree of life recalls the unique closeness Adam and Eve had with God in the Garden. Overcomers will have that same kind of closeness with God. The manna from heaven was God's special provision, and in eating what God rained down from heaven, the people experienced God's presence.²⁰ Overcomers will have that same kind of closeness with God. To become a pillar in the temple of God is to be in God's presence forever. Overcomers will experience an everlasting oneness with God. So each reward is a different way to visualize the same basic truth. "He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son" (Rev 21:7).

In line with this thesis, of the twelve options for the significance of the white stone, there is a good possibility: white stones were worn as amulets to represent divine presence. That matches perfectly the author's primary intent of highlighting oneness with God.²¹ In turn, this supports the premise that the essential idea of the different rewards was to depict in graphic terms one overall reward: how wonderful the relationship with God will be in the final state.

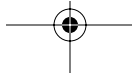
This proposal for understanding the rewards for overcomers may seem helpful, but it is deficient. The approach has been cerebral almost to the exclusion of the emotional. But prophecy speaks to the heart as much as the head. If we think that by objectifying and exegeting every aspect of prophecy we can grasp the intent, we will have ignored one of the most important features of prophecy. The variety of expressions of future rewards allow us to *preexperience* a small part of what being in God's presence will be like. As an old hymn puts it, "O that will be glory for me!"

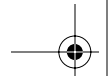
As evident from Revelation 2—3, prophetic language communicates with bright lights and a full range of colors. Its subject is photogenic, and images of the subject appear on a large screen with an infinite number of pixels. To read prophecy correctly means to stand in awe of the aesthetics of prophetic artistry and to catch a vision of what heaven will be like.

CONCLUSION

What makes prophecy powerful? Imagine a twentysomething American student describing a whitewater rafting experience to a seventysomething Bedouin patriarch. The American has something exhilarating to tell about, but how can she express it?

The Bedouin ekes out an existence in a water-deprived desert, has barely seen rain, let alone a river, and has no framework for conceiving of mil-





lions of gallons of water being released at the base of a huge dam. The Bedouin cannot understand concepts like whitewater, the deafening roar of crashing water, hydraulics and walls of water. He is also baffled by the notion of pumping air inside of cloth, with men (and women!) floating in a boat made of such cloth. He is puzzled by the possibility of people having the leisure or desire to do such a thing.

For the American to communicate with this man of sand—assuming language is not a barrier—she must use things from a Bedouin’s world and conjure up images that will let him experience a very different world. The combination of something exciting to describe and something impossible to describe will result in something like the language of prophecy. The power is in what it beholds and in how it describes the beholden.

