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HISTORY | CRITICAL ESSAY

Why nobody likes a prophet: Bartolomé de las Casas, a loud voice in the wilderness

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Abstract: This essay focuses on and analyzes the role of prophet that Bartolomé de las Casas (1485–1566) lived out in the conquest and settlement of the New World. Borrowing a great deal from a shorter essay written years ago by Stafford Poole on the history and nature of prophets, we examine how Las Casas's life mirrored so many of the qualities and characteristics of the prophet, especially those of the Old Testament. It is part of our general argument that one can only truly understand the life of Las Casas, often described as the greatest defender of American Indians (the “indigenous” in today's jargon), by placing him squarely within the Scriptural prophetic tradition that drove both his thinking and his actions. This is a “Critical Essay” and it was originally delivered as a public lecture.

Subjects: Colonial Latin America; Conquest and Exploration; Latin American & Hispanic Studies; Religious History

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¹³ But Micaiah said, “As surely as the LORD lives, *I can tell him only what my God says.*” 2 Chronicles 18:13¹

¹⁰ we have not obeyed the LORD our God or kept the laws he gave us through his servants the prophets. Daniel 9:10

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My principal key research activity to about 2010–2011 was to finish two biographies of Bartolomé de las Casas (1485–1566), both long in the gestation and making. In doing so, I also continued in other research and writing relating to Las Casas, including an article in the online journal *History Compass* on Las Casas and the beginnings of the African slave trade, and a book now about finished, with David Lantigua, Theology, Catholic University, on original sources for the study of Las Casas, largely drawn from his own immense body of writing. I was attracted to Las Casas initially by the enormity of his presence in the search for justice in the conquest of the Indies, but as time passed, also by his equally immense devotion in applying what he was learning as a Christian to what he was witnessing in the Indies.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This essay focuses on and analyzes the role of prophet that Bartolomé de Las Casas (1485–1566) lived out in the conquest and settlement of the New World. Las Casas, a Catholic Dominican friar, was the greatest defender of American Indians during the Spanish conquest of the New World. We place him squarely within the Scriptural prophetic tradition that drove both his thinking and his actions. Las Casas's life mirrored many of the qualities and characteristics of the prophet, especially those of the Old Testament. It is part of our argument that one can only truly understand the life of Las Casas in his role as prophet. He was also known as the greatest advocate for justice for the indigenous peoples and defended them and their freedoms in the most celebrated debate of the sixteenth century called by the Emperor Charles V to determine the justice and legitimacy of the Conquest.

²⁰ Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. ²¹For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. 2 Peter 1:20–21

A few years ago in the 1990s, S.C.M. Poole, delivered a little piece entitled “The Prophetic Personality in Scripture and History” at the University of Florida during a symposium or conference devoted to some anniversary related to Thomas More.²

Thomas More quickly receded in Stafford's essay as he focused on the nature of prophetic personalities, of both religious and secular stripes, throughout history. It is an immensely informative and incisive little essay—about three pages long, single-spaced—but is packed with a message that I found totally compelling in examining the character of a contemporary of Thomas More, Bartolomé de las Casas (1485–1566).

I then used Poole's essay to write this critical essay which was originally read at several conferences and became the origins of this essay, expanded and edited for a reading audience.

Las Casas is perhaps best known as the source for the authors of the “Black Legend,” largely driven by his little book that first appeared in 1552 entitled *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*.³ The Black Legend was depicted graphically in the sixteenth century with great power and devastating furor by Protestant Europe against the acts of Catholic Spain in the conquest of the Americas.

The *Brevísima* was subsequently translated as the *Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies* and published widely across Europe in the seventeenth century, largely by Protestant polemicists seeking evidence for condemning Catholic Spain for iniquities and sins in keeping with their own Protestant faith and character. The *Brevísima* delivered the goods, giving the Protestants the proof they needed—and from an intimate Catholic insider like Las Casas—to pillory the Catholics, and Spain, in the wars of the Reformation.

In this *Brief History*, Las Casas satanized the conquest, and the conquistadors, and depicted Amerindians in an equally distorted fashion, idealizing their nature into almost caricature. Appointed as “protector of American Indians” in 1516 by then regent of Spain, Cardinal Francisco Ximénez de Cisneros (1436–1517), Las Casas devoted his life to justice for the Indians in the face of the Conquest, or the Encounter if you prefer the more modern label.

In the course of research and writing on Las Casas, I had to answer a lot of questions, and one of the principal ones was: Why did Las Casas choose to become such a pariah in his own culture? Or, in other words, hundreds, then thousands, of Spanish settlers and conquistadors to the New World in the sixteenth century witnessed what he did. What turned him into what he became, and not others?

Las Casas, I think, was driven by two forces in his life: one, elemental and part of his being; and the second, he arrived at by a deep, and continuing, study of and reflection on Scripture. That he was almost an exact contemporary of another friar, Martin Luther, both born in 1485, may not be a total coincidence.

The first force driving him was his nature to act on circumstances he encountered. He tried the contemplative life, devoted to prayer, meditation and obedience within the Dominican Order, but it really wasn't him. As one frustrated friar of the Hieronymites commented, “he is a candle that lights everything he touches!”⁴

The spark that set off the dynamo—mixing metaphors a bit here—was the abuse and exploitation of American Indians by the conquistadors. He first witnessed the brutal and callous treatment of the

Tainos on the island of Española, then of the Arawak on Cuba, all between 1502 and 1514. A brutal slaughter of hundreds of innocent Arawaks in a village along the Caonao River in central Cuba (near modern Camaguey) in 1514 pushed Las Casas past the line, dividing witness from activist. He determined to do something about it, and went straight to the king, Ferdinand, in 1515 to demand the righting of wrongs, and that justice be served. This was his right in a society still Medieval in many ways, where the King adjudicated between right and wrong.

The second part of his nature belonged to the long tradition of the prophet in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and it is the one we examine in this essay.

It goes back, of course, deep into the Old Testament where prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Amos, and others, periodically surfaced in the life of the Israelites to bring them back to God. Prophets fulfilled two roles basically. One, they told the truth, unvarnished and often unwanted by the Kings and rulers of Israel and Judah, and, two, by these very actions, they tended to foresee the consequences of sin in the body of the nation. In other words, there were consequences in the future for the failure to both hear and heed the warnings of prophets.

Technically, as Stafford noted, prophets were not exactly seers or diviners. Prophet is “referred to a person who had received the call and the spirit of God to go out and preach to his people, usually for the purpose of calling them back from some errant way. As such it had little or nothing to do with predicting the future. Prophet is not the same as seer.”

In Jeremiah 19, the prophet is told to buy a potter’s bottle. Jeremiah buys it and smashes it a few moments later, in front of a crowd. He tells the people that God will do to them what he just did to the bottle because of their disobedience. Jumping ahead a bit, as one might easily guess, prophets were not liked by very many people. In fact, they were often outcast in their own lands. They were begrudgingly tolerated by most since it was generally believed that the prophetic call was directly from God, but being tolerated and being liked were two very different reactions.

The two roles of a prophet—a call to repentance and foretelling what was to come—were frequently intertwined, for prophets often not only called people back from their errant ways, but also predicted what would happen to them if they didn’t, or what was about to happen them as a result of their sins.

In the Book of Daniel, chapter 9, verses 4–6, for example, Daniel prayed to the Lord and spoke directly of sin and prophets: “O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.”

Further along, in Book 10, verse 14, the prophets’ role in the future is clearly articulated: “Now I have come to explain to you what will happen to your people in the future, for the vision concerns a time yet to come.”

And in the Second Book of Chronicles, in 2 Chronicles 24:17–22, the perils of being a prophet were clearly described as Zechariah went down in a hailstorm of stones for preaching against the iniquities of the nation.

After the death of Jehoiada, the officials of Judah came and paid homage to the king, and he listened to them. They abandoned the temple of the Lord, the God of their fathers, and worshiped Asherah poles and idols. Because of their guilt, God’s anger came upon Judah and Jerusalem. Although the Lord sent prophets to the people to bring them back to him, and though they testified against them, they would not listen.

Then the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah son of Jehoiada, the priest. He stood before the people and said, “This is what God says: ‘Why do you disobey the Lord’s commands? You will not prosper. Because you have forsaken the Lord he has forsaken you.’”

But they plotted against him, and by order of the king, they stoned him to death in the courtyard of the Lord’s temple. King Joash did not remember the kindness Zechariah’s father Jehoiada had shown him but killed his son, who said as he lay dying, “May the Lord see this and call you to account.”

And in the New Testament, John the Baptist was clearly revealed as a prophet. In Mark 11, Jesus replied to Pharisees questioning his authority: “I will ask you one question. Answer me, and I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!” They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’³²But if we say, ‘From men’...” (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)⁵

Now that we have established sufficiently from Scripture that prophets told the truth and called people back to God, and were not very popular, when we examine Las Casas’s life, it almost perfectly fits the prophetic model.

In Poole’s essay, he separates prophets into religious and secular categories, but they share similar traits. He mentions, among his secular examples, William Lloyd Garrison, Ralph Nader, and Dorothy Day. Some of the major prophets of the Old Testament we have already briefly presented above.

Among the elements Poole describes that are common to all prophets, we find the following:

- The call
- Compulsion
- Idée Fixe
- No compromise or gradualism
- Exaggeration and symbolism
- Possibility of neurosis
- Rejection
- Ambiguous relationship to the establishment

In the Old Testament, the prophet is called directly by God.⁶ The call is usually described in the form of a vision. In Jeremiah 1 and Isaiah 6, the experience is something sudden and dramatic. The prophet always has a sense of mission, a sense of being sent. He doesn’t necessarily like this call. See Jonas 1 before he gets swallowed by a whale. When Moses was called by God, his first reaction was “why me?” Moses offered excuses, but God had his hand on Moses and the excuses were brushed away.

Las Casas was called to action after witnessing the massacre of Arawaks at the River Caonao near modern Camaguey, Cuba in 1514 (for details, see Clayton, 2012, pp. 70–71). Like one of his heroes, the Apostle Paul, the change was dramatic, although perhaps not as sudden as Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus. Las Casas had already been deep into Scripture, reading what Jesus taught, and measuring it against what he had witnessed on the island of Española since he had arrived in 1502. As time passed, he found the lessons of Scripture and the actions of the settler/conquistador class more and more irreconcilable. And, unlike Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Jonah who felt initially inadequate to the task, Las Casas never doubted his calling or his ability to shake and move the world by the truth of his message.

The second category—compulsion—was marked by the premise that once received, the call could not be rejected.

As Poole noted, “the prophet is a compulsive personality and as such is not totally free.” The classic description has been given in almost psychosomatic terms by Jeremiah, “The word of Yahweh has meant for me insult, derision, all day long. I used to say, ‘I will not think about him, I will not speak in his name any more.’ Then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart, imprisoned in my bones. The effort to restrain it wearied me, I could not bear it.” (Jer.20:9). The Apostle Paul alludes to this when he says “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” and “The love of Christ impels us.” Las Casas said, “I had no choice but to unsheathe the sword of my pen.”⁷

This does not preclude periods of discouragement and depression, but the prophet always goes on in spite of these. There were many times when defeat plunged Las Casas into despair, although it was usually of short duration and he emerged from it stronger and even more committed to his mission. Nothing perhaps is more representative of this reaction than his dismal failure to establish a kind of friar-led Utopia on the coast of Venezuela (Tierra Firme) in 1520–21. It is a long episode, and covered in detail in my biography of Las Casas.⁸

In the prophetic personality, Poole writes there is usually one theme or idea that predominates and is the focus of all his activity. To a greater or lesser degree, the prophetic personality centers on a single idea, sometimes to the exclusion of any other.

Las Casas, after his epiphany, was totally committed to the defense of the Indians, some of his critics said to the point of clinical neurosis.⁹ And as Poole noted, “the prophet tends to see all issues in relation to or within the orbit of this single idea. Las Casas was so intent on Indian freedom that he seriously suggested the importation of black Africans to free them from arduous work, an idea he later rejected.” (Clayton, 2009). We’ll return to this theme briefly below.

Las Casas’ prologue to his three volumes, *History of the Indies*, blasts other accounts of the Indies as false or misleading, and extols his as the absolute truth. He chose to write the “true” history to correct all the falseness, lies, and ignorance of other chroniclers, especially with respect to his role as a prophet: the defense of American Indians.¹⁰

As we consider the role of prophet, it also may be useful to think of the role of advocate in a legal sense. In the great universal court of justice—admittedly an imagined and artificial space in our political imagination—Las Casas assumed the quintessential role of advocate, or lawyer for the defense, of the Indians.

He explained himself clearly in one of the subtitles in the Prologue: “Great defects in the works of those who have written about these Indian nations, and what caused these defects.”¹¹ His *History*, and especially of course the *Brevíssima*, has often been targeted for their exaggerated, polemical style whose strident voice so offends modern readers. In fact, it was a voice consistent with his role of prophet and advocate—and I might add with chroniclers and historians of his epoch, and throughout history.

If I could sound a bit pedantic here for a moment, a bit of epistemology if you will, the goal of any good historian is not pure objectivity. That, in fact, is impossible. The goal is a subjective rendering of the truth, based solidly on the documentary evidence, but also given an interpretation and analytical form by the historian herself. Don’t leave it up to the reader to decide the merits of the issue. Tell them what it is, with as much power and persuasion as you can, but never stray too far from your evidence.

This is kind of like a good homily or sermon I suppose. I am an evangelical Christian, grounded in the Word, but when I preach—whether under a tent somewhere in rural Honduras in my other native language, Spanish, or in the Tuscaloosa County Jail every Tuesday night—whatever I say never

ranges too far from Scripture. I draw out the lessons clearly and loudly in a literal as well as metaphorical fashion on occasion. Las Casas hardly ever made an accusation, prophetic or otherwise, without ballasting it with trunk loads of evidence. It is a good model for the prosecutor in court, the preacher in the pulpit, or, as we consider his role in this essay, for the prophet behind his bully pulpit.

In his Prologue, he harps on the many “defects” of others of his contemporary chroniclers of the Indies. They can be summarized into two broad categories: errors in interpretation and/or as errors on the nature of the American Indians. For example, since Indians were depicted as “barbarians,” Las Casas delved into the past of Iberia and discovered the very same “barbarians.” Everyone was a barbarian early in their civilization. It was just a stage, not a sin, a defect, or some fatal flaw. I addressed some of what Las Casas took up in his Prologue in a book published a few years ago by literary scholars on how to teach Las Casas (Clayton, 2008).

In 1550, the Emperor Charles V was pulled into the debate by the insistence of Las Casas and his supporters on the gross injustice of the Conquest. Charles, long an admirer of Las Casas, did something extraordinary. He called a temporary halt to all conquest activities, and convened a board of scholars and clerics to study and recommend on the justice and legality of the Conquest. In the debates that followed before this board, Las Casas, not surprisingly, was called to defend the indigenous point of view, while another Dominican, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, defended the Spanish position. Both argued from the classics, and while Sepúlveda was acknowledged as the leading Aristotelian scholar of the times, Las Casas gave his fellow Dominican little slack.

In his Prologue to his *History*, Las Casas quoted extensively from Cicero for example, (Marcus Tullius Cicero, 106 B.C.–43 B.C.), that all nations and people were in the beginning barbarous savages. But God endowed them with an innate sense of rationality and an industrious nature which, when combined with the Christian religion and Catholic faith, transformed them into civil people. Las Casas moved beyond Cicero and applied this model of progressive improvement to his own nation, Spain.

“It is well known among those who write history that the Spanish people, more so those from Andalusia than others, were simple, ferocious barbarians when the first Greeks came to settle in Monviedro. And [it is also when] Alceo, a captain of corsairs, and the Phoenicians came to Cádiz. These were all astute people when compared with those in these kingdoms who were like animals.”¹²

The meaning of this passage is transparently clear. The Indians too are like the Spanish were centuries ago, in an earlier stage of development. Then came the Greeks, the Phoenicians, the Romans, and finally the capstone of civilization, Christianity. With the coming of Spaniards of good will to the New World—like Las Casas and a very few of his contemporaries he might, but chose not to, add—and Christianity, the same transformations were taking place in the New World, or will take place. All of this is based on three basic sources: personal observation, scholarship, and a deep reading of Scripture. To be a good prophet, it helped to be deeply based in all three sources, especially the will of God, but, as Las Casas argued passionately, also on a knowledge of what had come before, or history.

Las Casas addressed other issues in his prologue to the magisterial *Historia de las Indias*.¹³ He devoted more than 20 pages to what any modern class of graduate student in history would easily recognize as historiography, or the history of history. Why is history written? How is it written? The prologue is a significant reading for the student of history, or, in fact, students of prophecies. Las Casas presents a theoretical frame for historiography, drawing on a long line of distinguished predecessors—pagan, Jewish, and Christian. While he often goes off into detours and digressions in his writings that frustrate modern readers, he is particularly clear and cogent in his prologue, beginning, characteristically, with a prologue to his prologue.

Prologue is in which the author deals with the differing motives and goals which historians usually touch on. He touches on the great usefulness of dealing with things past. He refers to many ancient authors and writers. He deals with the rationale which prompted him to write this chronicle of the Indies. He defines the great errors committed against these Indian nations and how and why they occurred. He also points to other causes, formal, material, and efficient, which usually appear in all works of this kind.¹⁴

Las Casas identified four principal reasons why historians write, and then categorized ancient historians such as Marcus Cato (Cato the Elder, 234 B.C.–149 B.C.), Pliny the Elder (23–79), Herodotus (484 B.C.–425 B.C.), Plutarch (46–127 AD/CE), and Josephus (37–100 AD/CE) among others according to these categories. Historians who fall in the first two categories—those who write for fame and glory and are carried away by their clever rhetoric, and those who write to please rulers—are dismissed rather summarily. In the latter two categories are those historians who write to preserve the truth, and those who preserve the past for posterity. Las Casas includes himself, of course, in these latter two categories. Among those he admired were Herodotus, often thought of as the “father” of history, Josephus, the first century Jew who witnessed and recorded the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 A.D., and a number of Christian historians such as Justin Martyr (100–165 AD/CE), one of the first Christian apologists in the second century.

We mention this role of Las Casas the historian for it fit well into his role as Las Casas the prophet. If he was to chastise, admonish, and correct his own people, then he needed to know who they were, how they became those people, and so have a grasp on how to make them right with their Christian faith, a departure, of course, from Old Testament prophets. If the prophet was to insist on preaching or telling the truth, then it certainly helped to establish him as a truth giver, one who could be depended upon to render the truth, even when it wasn’t particularly desired by rulers and others. And Las Casas set that stage by being the quintessentially truthful chronicler and historian—at least in his perspective—in rendering what happened in the Indies over his long life.

The credulity, or authenticity, of Las Casas’s observations, especially in his *Brief History*, was analyzed in almost pathological detail in a well-argued little monograph by Jeremy Lawrance (2009). Lawrance does not question what Las Casas witnessed, in a general sense, but finds Las Casas’s penchant for exaggeration to achieve the effect he wanted among his readers as distorting the truth. Nonetheless, in one famous passage which Lawrance quotes, he finds the “key to everything Las Casas wrote.” (Lawrance, 2009, p. 20).

“Suddenly,” Las Casas wrote, “the Devil got into the Christians, and they began to put to the sword *in my presence* [ital. added by Lawrance], without the slightest provocation, more than three thousand souls who were sitting in front of us, men, women, and children. There *I saw* [ital. added] cruelties greater than living men have ever seen or thought to see.”¹⁵

And, as Lawrance commented, “these two sentences read like a key to everything Las Casas wrote. He saw what no human being can live with having seen. The affect of *Brief Relation* lies in passages like this, where emotion brings into play—unselfconsciously in his case—subjective techniques of representation. ‘I saw’ achieves a genuine link with the body.”¹⁶

I think perhaps this is true, but a prophet sees no virtue in the literal truth of the matter. It is, as in all great literature, the rendering and conviction of the message that carries the day. Metaphor and symbolism are as important as what actually happened or was said. The greatest teachings in Scripture, after all, were rendered in the Parables.

Returning to Poole, “the true prophetic personality is uncompromising. He may make compromises but he is still against them. He sees everything in absolutes, black and white. Good is good, evil is evil.” In Las Casas’s case, he was more than willing to accommodate to the world to bring about

his ends, but in one instance, it led to one of his greatest personal failures and disappointments mentioned above.

When he attempted to establish a model colony on the coast of Tierra Firme (eastern Venezuela near Cumaná) in 1519–1520, he faced the issue squarely: How to reconcile his high cause with the world which necessitated he make compromises to make his experiment possible? For Las Casas, reconciling God and Mammon led to the disaster that drove him into the embrace of the Dominican order who removed him from the world for a few years.

In the course of negotiating his contract in 1519 to evangelize and plant a model settlement on the Tierra Firme coast (near Cumaná as noted), Las Casas was upbraided by an older Dominican or Franciscan, a Licentiate Aguirre. Aguirre was attached to the royal council then and was an old timer who had been one of Queen Isabel's executors.¹⁷ Aguirre liked Las Casas, but when he heard about the secular provisions of the contract to settle Tierra Firme, he balked. The place was just outside of Barcelona where the king, Charles, was holding court that winter.

"Your project, father. I've heard it is nothing but a commercial enterprise. You have betrayed your evangelical calling," Aguirre sniffed, looking Las Casas straight in the eyes, adding, with disappointment, "I never expected this of you."

"Father," Las Casas began softly. "If you saw our Lord Jesus Christ mistreated, denounced, beaten, injured, and insulted, wouldn't you beg and plead with all your strength to bind him over to you to adore and serve and give him everything any true Christian ought to do?"

"Well, of course."

"And," Las Casas continued, as a tutor to a pupil, even given the great differences in their ages, "if they did not wish to give him over to you, but only to sell him, would you not buy him?"

"Without a doubt, I would buy him."

"Well," and Las Casas dropped the boom, "I have done this, sir. I left Jesus Christ in the Indies, our Lord, lashed, afflicted, beaten, and crucified, not once, but millions of times. That is what the Spaniards are doing in the Indies, the ones who assault and destroy those people, denying them conversion and penitence, killing them before their time, and so they die without faith and without sacraments."

Aguirre listened. It was clear where Las Casas was taking him.

"I have pleaded and begged often before the Councils of the King. I have asked for remedy. I have pleaded with them to remove the impediments to salvation. I have asked them to free those taken captive."

"Yes, yes, so I've heard," Aguirre answered. He tried to defend himself, "but I've heard nonetheless father"

"And now," Las Casas interrupted, his voice rising a bit, "I have asked the council to forbid Spaniards from going to a certain part of Tierra Firme where friars, servants of God, have begun to preach the Gospel. Spaniards who go there, with their violence and bad examples, block the Word of God and blaspheme the name of Christ."

"And the council," Las Casas continued, "has told me that if the friars occupy the land, the king won't get any income." He paused. "You can imagine what their response to my repeated pleas and petitions have been father."

“Yes, yes,” Aguirre said, bowing his head slightly.

“So, you see, when I saw that they wished to sell the Gospel, and Christ, who they lashed, insulted and crucified, I decided to buy him, proposing that the King will receive many goods, rents, and riches.”

“I see.”

“That is what you heard, father,” Las Casas said, his impassioned voice now falling, almost dropping off into quiet.

Even capitulating to worldliness—buying Jesus Christ as he explained it to Aguirre—did not get Las Casas what he wanted, the peaceful settlement of Tierra Firme, led by friars and hard-working Spanish peasant farmers. By the time Las Casas and his contingent arrived near Cumaná, the well had already been poisoned by Spanish slave raids along the coast and the discovery of rich pearl fisheries on the island of Margarita nearby. The Amerindians almost destroyed the Franciscan and Dominican communities established in their midst and Las Casas had to flee for his life, back to Española where he eventually joined the Dominicans. Selling out to—or compromising with—the world had proved costly indeed.

Continuing with Poole, another characteristic of the prophet is the tendency to speak in extremes, to use superlatives, to press language to the limit. This was done by Las Casas in his famous *Brief History of the Destruction of the Indies* which eventually was the source for the Black Legend. One has to read passages to appreciate the cutting edge of this book that indicted Spanish behavior with an almost uncontrollable passion (Lawrance, 2009).

And, as Poole notes, “the prophet is often accused of being crazy. [The Spanish philosopher historian Ramón] Menéndez Pidal wrote an entire book to prove that Las Casas was paranoid. Prophets are often highly emotional and may truly be neurotic. But a neurotic has fewer defenses than the normal person, and may, like the artist, be more sensitive to and aware of the defects of society. He may suffer from them before the normal people are aware of them. The problems of the neurotic today may be everyone’s tomorrow. The prophet may well be the canary in society’s coal mine.”

I read a book in 2014, *David and Goliath*, by Malcolm Gladwell, whose theme bears on our subject (Gladwell, 2013). Perhaps his subtitle is even more revealing: *Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants*. Gladwell never mentions prophets, but he does turn common wisdom on its head. David may not have been, for example, at such a great disadvantage, a little shepherd boy with a slingshot against the giant warrior Goliath, as one thinks. Read the book for we don’t have space to pursue the theme and its many proofs offered by the author, other than mentioning one. Gladwell looked at the Impressionist artists of mid-nineteenth-century France who were basically outcasts in the world of what traditional French art edified and admired. But the outcasts eventually formed their own society, and persisted in their art genre, and slowly came around to be considered true artists with much to communicate.

It was the same, in a way, with Las Casas. His flaws—exaggeration, perhaps neurosis, compulsion, and no compromise—have over the centuries become virtues, not without his critics, even today, but he, in his own way, and with his supporters, turned conventional wisdom on its head, like so many characters in Gladwell’s book. Prophets rarely prevailed in their own time, but with the passage of time, their prophecies very often became realities. Las Casas, for example, notably championed the natural rights of indigenous people long before that point of view became acceptable, and even popular.

Having saved Las Casas by invoking the long view of history, let’s return to his times. “A prophet never gains acceptance in his own country,” Poole wrote. “It is impossible to be neutral about a prophet. One takes him or one leaves him but one is rarely indifferent. A prophetic message is often

denunciatory. He is the living conscience of his people but few can put up with a conscience for very long. The very element of self-righteous denunciation can turn many people off. A prophet is alienated from his people yet fundamentally he loves them and is in tune with their deepest traditions. Jeremiah was an example of this. Las Casas was bitterly anti-Spanish but he felt deeply the anguish caused by his people. The prophet is often hated by his people, harassed by them, and at the same time he seems to court martyrdom.”

Of course, the model for martyrdom was Las Casas’s Lord and Savior himself, Jesus Christ.

Jesus himself was an outcast, or, at the very least, not accepted in his own hometown and community. Perhaps a bit bitterly, but entirely true, Jesus told his listeners in Luke 4:24, “Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.” He expressed the same thought in Matthew 13:57.¹⁸

So, surmised Poole, “the net result of the prophetic message is often polarization and division. Many of the reformers of the sixteenth century, such as the Franciscan Motolinía, rejected Las Casas as a fanatic and exaggerator Las Casas knew that he would not be heeded but his message would at least take away the excuse of ignorance. The sin of his people would be worst because they could no longer say that they had not been warned.”

“Because of this rejection the prophets sometimes leave their written word behind so that in the future they will be vindicated and people will know why God’s punishment was delivered.” Las Casas delivered this written record in spades. His modern Dominican brothers gathered, edited, annotated, and published his *Complete Works* between 1988 and 1998 in 14 volumes, some of them almost genuine doorstops in their size, over a 1,000 pages in length.

Las Casas, in fact, forecast, or prophesied a gloomy and disastrous future for his people. He wrote and preached that the Spanish were guilty of great sins in the conquest and settlement of the New World, and not unlike the Hebrews of the Old Testament, there was a price to pay for such monumental sins against their fellow men. It is little wonder that Protestant polemicists, especially those in England, the Lowlands, and in places like Germany and France where the Reformation was gaining converts against Roman Catholicism, picked up the *Brief History* as the unvarnished, unspun, truth to indict the Spanish for behavior in the Indies.

As Poole neared the end of his little essay on the prophetic personality, he described once again a general trait of prophets, a template if you will, a template that Las Casas fit almost perfectly.

“Prophets are not totally outside the institutional structure, whether religious or civil. Many of the OT prophets had ready access to the kings. Herod reluctantly listened to the Baptist but also with fascination. Las Casas was very closely involved with the civil government that he excoriated. Yet the prophet also stands apart from the civil or religious establishment and keeps it alert.”

Again, Las Casas fits the template almost perfectly. In 1516, he returned to Spain after his epiphany at a place in Cuba called Caonao where hundreds of innocent Arawaks were slaughtered by Spanish cavalry and swordsmen.¹⁹ And he returned specifically to engage the king, Ferdinand, then dying but willing to listen to this emboldened priest who came with letters of introduction from powerful individuals. But Ferdinand passed on before he could do much to rectify the wrongs being inflicted in the Indies, so Las Casas hung around Spain and waited for the new king, Charles, to work his way down to Castile from his home in the Lowlands.

Las Casas’s meetings with the young king, born in 1500 and so still only a teenager but one growing up rapidly under the circumstances, are so important that I dealt with them in detail in the Cambridge biography.

In summary, Las Casas most certainly got the attention of the new king, taught by humanist reformers like Erasmus of Rotterdam. Charles listened closely when this passionate prophet appeared before him in an audience in the winter of 1519 outside of Barcelona. That encounter is probably worth an article or conference itself, maybe even a short book. In a nutshell, Las Casas enjoyed the king's (soon to be elected Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire) friendship and empathy for the rest of his life. He had, as Poole noted, "ready access to the king...and was not 'totally outside the institutional structure'." Charles did not always act on the suggestions of Las Casas over the years. The king and emperor, obviously, had to deal with matters across a much wider spectrum than merely looking after the Indians of the New World, but he most certainly covered the prophet with his imperial mantle, not to be sniffed at by even the most renegade and intemperate of the conquistadors following their own whims in the distant mountains and jungles of the New World.²⁰

In summary, Poole wrote that "we have talked about a person with a sense of mission and call, dominated by an idea, compelled to carry it out against all opposition, polarizing his audience and his society, and perhaps suffering because of it. The prophet is not an administrator or necessarily an intellectual. Aquinas and Aristotle were not prophets. He is a person of vision, 'I have a dream'. He often has a great sensitivity, a new and sometimes deeper view of reality, yet at the same time, he often represents the best instincts or traditions of his people. He often seeks to recapture something."

Poole, of course, is not the only scholar and student of Las Casas to note the deep similarities between the life of Las Casas and other prophets, from the Old Testament to Martin Luther King, Jr.

Luis N. Rivera-Pagán, a Puerto Rican scholar, theologian, and historian, wrote a long piece entitled "A Prophetic Challenge to the Church: The Last Word of Bartolomé de las Casas," which he delivered as the Inaugural lecture as Henry Winters Luce Professor in Ecumenics and Mission, on 9 April 2003, at Princeton Theological Seminary. Paul S. Vickery, in a nice biography of Las Casas, entitled his study *Bartolomé de las Casas: Great Prophet of the Americas* and he has a very useful subsection entitled "The Prophetic Style." (Rivera-Pagán, 1992; Vickery, 2006).

Rivera-Pagán's structure and depth of his articles and other writings are deeply erudite, heavily researched and footnoted, and, truthfully, just about inaccessible to the reader not already immersed in the subject.

For example, his note # 17 on one aspect of Las Casas's prophetic character is composed in four languages and wanders across literature in recondite corners of the academic land, available—perhaps—in only the Library of Congress, if there.

See Fernández (1975, 1976), André-Vincent (1979), Henry Raup Wagner calls Las Casas "the Jeremiah of the Spaniards." (Wagner & Parish, 1967, p. 242). According to Rosner, Las Casas, in his historical books, "war weniger Chronist als vielmehr prophetischer and theologischer Interpret der Geschichte" (*Missionare und Musketen*, 213) (Rivera-Pagán, 2003).

And in Rivera-Pagán's initial epigraph, he cites James Joyce, Jorge Luis Borges, and V.S. Naipaul, all of whom I have started to read in the past, none of which I've finished. If Pagán is buried in the deep, much of the rest of the literature on Las Casas as prophet is considerably nearer the surface and accessible to all of us.

Less dense than Pagán, but deeply researched and thought out, are essays and books by David T. Orique, O.P. His "Journey to the Headwaters: Bartolomé de las Casas in a Comparative Context," *The Catholic Historical Review*, 95:1 (January, 2009), 1–24 is a good example of his work on Las Casas. The abstract of the article reads: "The data demonstrate that Las Casas's theological orientation was primarily prophetic in his quest for justice for the indigenous and drew from Thomism and Scripture."

I have only mentioned a few of the examples which demonstrate how Las Casas was prophetic, drawing heavily and gratefully from the article by Stafford Poole who offered the structure of a prophet's life: the call, rejection, the *idée fixe*, no compromise or gradualism, exaggeration, and paranoia, just to remind us of a few. But a quick scan of Las Casas's life finds dozens of examples which confirm his prophetic character.

Prophets, by the way, were not always outcasts, running around in hair shirts, eating locusts, and admonishing the living that they would soon be among the dead. Virtually, all of Jeremiah 33, for example, is devoted to God's faithfulness, and the prophet's role in confirming this.

Curiously, today, Las Casas is being promoted by some in his order for canonization, although I just don't see Las Casas as a saint in the normally accepted fashion, driven by love and service like Mother Theresa.

Las Casas was instead a warrior for justice and liberty, and he wielded his weapons like maces and broadswords, striking at his enemies with powerful, and sometimes spiteful, denunciations and accusations. Some feared him, many loathed him, but few ignored him, for as one contemporary observed, "he lights everything where he goes."

Writing about him has been a prolonged investigation into the state of man, sometimes looking into the black and fathomless pit of evil, sometimes lifted up by the ultimate nobility of his purpose.

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Notes

1. All Scripture from New International Version/Nueva Versión Internacional.
2. S.C.M. Poole, *The Prophetic Personality in Scripture and History*, typescript. Personal copy.
3. Las Casas (1552). See References for more details on this foundational book for the Black Legend.
4. Huerga (1998), vol. 1; see also *Obras completas, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas* (14 vols., Madrid: Fundación "Instituto Bartolomé de Las Casas," de los Dominicos de Andalucía, 1988–1998) vol. V, 2160.
5. Luke 11:29–32.
6. I have quoted freely from the Poole essay, omitting quotes to keep the narrative smooth, but, in all eight elements and their explanation, data and some interpretations are drawn from Poole.
7. This quote is from the essay by Poole, "The Prophetic Personality in Scripture and History," but no footnote. It sounds vintage Las Casas, but I don't know where in his writings it is, although I suspect it could be in the long prologue to his massive, three-volume *History of the Indies*. See also Clayton (2008, pp. 33–34), edited and with contributions by Eyda Merediz, Spanish, University of Maryland and Santa Arias, Spanish, University of Iowa.
8. Clayton, *Bartolomé de Las Casas*, see Chapter 3, "Catastrophe in Tierra Firme and the 'Long Sleep' in Puerto Plata," pp. 188–228.
9. See Menéndez Pidal (1963), devoted, in the main, as Poole notes, in establishing that Las Casas was clinically paranoid and so, indeed, crazy, although, curiously, Pidal does admit to moments of lucidity and sanity when Las Casas engaged other subjects aside from the American Indians. A famous Inquisitorial trial that Las Casas got involved in the 1560s is proof of this, according to Pidal.
10. Las Casas (1951). The most recent, and complete and well annotated, version of Las Casas (1994). These *Complete Works* were prepared by the Fundación "Instituto Bartolomé de las Casas," de los Dominicos de Andalucía.
11. Las Casas, *Obras*, III, 338.
12. Bartolomé de las Casas, *Complete Works*, vol. III, p. 342.
13. Las Casas, *Complete Works*, vol. III, pp. 327–349.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 327.
15. Las Casas, *Historia de las Indias, Complete Works*, vol. 5, p. 1879.
16. Lawrance, p. 20, referring to linkages between what one sees or perceives and one's body, as in a "body blow" to assure the full force of the language.
17. See Alvaro Huerga, *Las Casas*, pp. 132–134 for details of the contract and *HI*, V, 2373–2377 for these proceedings and where this story appears. Also, Clayton, *Bartolomé de las Casas* (2012, pp. 167ff).
18. And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home."
19. Clayton, *Bartolomé de las Casas*, pp. 71–75.
20. And in my study of Scripture, I came across these passages, from Psalms 119:21–24, 46 which fit Las Casas nicely:
²¹You rebuke the arrogant, who are accursed, those who stray from your commands.
²²Remove from me their scorn and contempt, for I keep your statutes.
²³Though rulers sit together and slander me,

your servant will meditate on your decrees.

²⁴Your statutes are my delight;
they are my counselors.

⁴⁶I will speak of your statutes before kings.

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