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Prophet's Prey

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Abstract
This is a film review of *Prophet's Prey* (2014), directed by Amy Berg.

Author Notes
Rubina (Ruby) Ramji is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. After serving as a Chair of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion and then on the steering committee, Rubina continues to serve on the Executive Committee for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion as President and is the Film Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film. Her research activities focus on the areas of religion, media and identity, religion in Canada, and religion and immigration. Jodi McDavid is an instructor in Folklore and Gender & Women's Studies at Cape Breton University. She earned her BA at St. Thomas University (New Brunswick) and her MA and PhD from Memorial University of Newfoundland. Her PhD dissertation was on anticlericalism in folk and popular culture. Her current research interests include vernacular religion, digital culture, the folklore and popular culture of children and adolescents, and gender and women's studies.

This sundance film festival review is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol19/iss1/31
This documentary follows author Jon Krakauer and private investigator Sam Brower as they uncover the abuses, underage marriages and eventual conviction of Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints (FLDS) leader Warren Jeffs. Known as the “the Prophet,” Warren succeeded his father Rulon’s role as head of the organization upon his death. Although he was the second son of Rulon, by all accounts his mother was the favourite wife, placing him in a favored position as well. Sam Brower (who wrote a book based on the same name as the film), was investigating the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints (FLDS), led by Rulon Jeffs.
The film interviews relatives of Warren Jeffs including his estranged nephew, an ex-wife (his sixty-third wife, Janetta Jessop), and his brother and sister who all left the group. Some of these relatives report that they were “cast out” (essentially “ex-communicated”) and removed from their property, the community, their families, and their way of life. Casting out has further religious implications, because when men are cast out of the FLDS, they no longer hold the priesthood, their role as spiritual leader in their family. These interviews and those with the private investigators and reporters provide an understanding of how this underground polygamous group stayed under the radar of police and state officials, including telling accounts from Warren’s brother about how the community was bankrolled by “the Prophet’s” declarations that his followers should part with their worldly goods and provide him with funds in order to ensure their piety for the end of the world. The church trust had amassed $110 million in assets.

Even at a young age Warren Jeffs enjoyed privileges and was allowed to run the rudimentary school that served the congregation. He wanted to be the next prophet after his father, and set out to create a culture of adoration, fear and dependence, so that members felt they could not leave or did not want to leave. This culture of “keeping sweet” and being required to submit to the elders also allowed him to sexually abuse students under his care. After his father died in 2002, Warren created a school system specifically to prepare youth for “the Holy Ghost,” created a dress code for the girls and instilled a sense of impending doom; only those who followed the “priesthood” of Warren Jeffs, the truly faithful, would survive the coming apocalypse. Although Warren predicted the coming of the apocalypse numerous times, it did not occur. He blamed the lack of faith of his followers for its absence.

Eventually Warren Jeffs fled to avoid prosecution for sexual misconduct (he was placed on the FBI’s Most Wanted List, after Osama bin Laden). During his time in exile, he often
blamed his female followers: “Your condition of a lack of oneness is driving me away.” He wanted to build a New Jerusalem in Eldorado, Texas and built a new temple there so that his followers would have a place to survive the end of days. In 2007, Warren Jeffs was eventually caught and evidence was found that he had sexually abused Merrianne Jessop, whom he “married” at the age of twelve. While incarcerated, Warren has told his followers that they are being tested, to show that they must love their “prophet more than their own selfishness.” He is currently serving a sentence of twenty years. He tells his followers that he is in prison to “atone for the unrighteousness” of his people. His followers remain devout to him, remaining on the land which Warren set up for them, and they continue giving their earnings to him through his brother Lyle Jeffs, whom he made bishop of his group. What teachings Rulon Jeffs envisioned for his group as prophet, Warren has taken them to new extremes, and his followers await the day when the apocalypse will come, for it means that they are finally worthy of their prophet.