

The Prophet Bob and The New New Testament and Bonus Offer

By [Eric Rozenman](#) (August 2024)



Conversation in the Bar (William D Dring, 1942)

Hardly anyone remembers it anymore, and that's too bad, but for a few months there half a century ago, the Prophet Bob was one of the biggest things going in Queens. And then came the New New Testament and Bonus Offer to top it off. Like the song said about New York City, "If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere..." and Prophet Bob did. For a little while.

Anyway, my own kids never took the story seriously and the grandchildren are too young to appreciate it. Me, I'm one of the last who still remembers. Remembers it clearly, that is. Clancy's gone, long gone; Doris Beobacher's got dementia and her kids put her in a home; Father Krzyzankowski's also gone on to his final reward, mixed as it might be, and he had reason not to recollect Prophet Bob truthfully anyway; Polycarp Rhinegold retired and moved to Florida, became a big surf fisherman, so they say—sitting in a folding chair at the edge of the water and casting his line as the waves broke, puffing on an endless succession of Swisher Sweets cigars. Diablo Hornbeck's still around—I see him on the sidewalk bent over and shuffling past the Bel-Aire 24-Hour Diner once in a while, old before his time even before it was his time—but he's refused to say a word about Bob in decades. All he says now, straightening up about once every three blocks, is, "The end is near!" Then, stooping again, he shuffles on mumbling, "or maybe not near, but getting closer."

So, there you are. If you want to know about the Prophet Bob and the New New Testament and Bonus Offer, you're stuck with me. And if I want to pass the story on, which I do, I'm stuck with you.

I hardly ever say this, and I'm only going to say it once more now—so pay close attention please: This is important, and it happened just like I'm going to tell you...

...In the beginning was the word, or were the words, and they were nearly stewed. That's what Prophet Bob was getting. Nearly but not quite stewed. Right there on his stool at Clancy's, chomping a big, dry pretzel and swallowing his fourth or seventh beer, he wasn't sure which.

He wasn't really a prophet, although he did occasionally predict the future, and his name wasn't Bob. It was Engelbert. And as Prophet Bob often explained, sometimes less than calmly, the name Bob had absolutely nothing in common with the

name Engelbert. Might as well call him John, Paul or Ringo, Prophet Bob would insist.

But some of the guys at Clancy's would say there were already prophets with those names. And Bob would say they weren't prophets, they were disciples. Then somebody else would say they were the same thing so it didn't make no difference and Bob would get mad and start calling people stupid and Clancy, whose real name was Maurice, would have to hurry the next round.

Clancy, nee Maurice, had been running his tavern for as long as some congressmen had been in the House. He was smart enough not to have called his place Maurice's and experienced enough to tell when a man, any man, was drunk. Except Bob.

The Prophet was a regular drinker. The Prophet was a heavy drinker. But Clancy could never tell if he ever was really out of it. Sure, he'd get loud and his movements weren't always drill-field sharp, but he never talked nonsense, passed out or complained of a hangover.

Something peculiar about the Prophet Bob Clancy had noticed was the way his speech actually got clearer the more he drank, and how he made better sense then than he did stone cold sober. Made better sense then than most men ever did. And once in a while, when he'd been at it for the better part of a night, his voice would suddenly get really deep and sound like it was ringing. When that happened, everybody shut up and Bob would prophesy.

He had been coming in for several years before he ever started prophesying. In those days he was married and drove a truck for one of the city's smaller dry-cleaning outfits. He didn't come in much then, but Clancy noticed him when he did. Bob was a couple inches over six feet and real hefty. Broad shoulders and thick through the chest, he had a large head topped by red hair. Not that orange-blond hair freckled kids have that

people think is red, but the rust-red of new girders. He was hard to miss.

There were a couple of stories about his wife, but the one I bought—and so did Clancy and Doris Beobacher—was that over some little argument she threatened to leave if she didn't get her way and Bob said it wasn't important enough for him to give in on so he threw her out. She couldn't have been much, nobody remembered what she looked like.

Anyway, after that Bob started coming in more often. This particular night he was hulked over the bar, arm thrust in Clancy's direction, saying, "Clance, another draft and two bags of those beer nuts. I'm real thirsty tonight and..." Boom! It sounded like his voice dropped into his shoes and took the long way back up, reverberating through the gonads. Everyone at the bar got real quiet.

In the clearest tones this side of a recording studio (even the Prophet's life occasionally imitated art) Bob said, "You have sinned and are as dust before my eyes. As a sin offering, I am taking two of your mighty men, yea, those you see standing inside the gate, passing judgment. I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of Egypt."

This was in August, 1971 and a few nights later they were talking about the prophecy and how Joe Willie Namath and Bart Starr were both hurt bad in preseason practice. Giants' fans—there were some in those days—said it was just coincidence, but Jets' fans, and there were some of those too then, and Packers' faithful looked at Bob with awe. Polycarp Rhinegold, steward in the sanitation workers' union, said the prophecy meant Namath and Starr would never play again, and some of the other football buffs at Clancy's were inclined to agree. They remembered when Bob had said Richie Scheinblum would never make it big with the Cleveland Indians, and that was even before Bob had started being a prophet.

Bob's first big prediction wasn't made in a bar. It was made in Gideon's Same-Day Dry Cleaning truck number 14. Gideon only had three trucks, but he started numbering them at 11, skipping 13, of course. "There might be an industrial spy around. You never know," Gideon once said to Diablo Hornbeck.

Hornbeck was Bob's assistant on the truck and an audience of one for his first big prediction. It was early one grimy February morning a year before the football incident. Staring out the windshield of the van as they waited for the light, Bob looked at the sky, smokestacks exhaling poison, high tension wires crisscrossing and the irregular armada of automobiles and trucks plowing the slush-filled streets. Not looking at Diablo, Bob said in a normal voice, "Soon, air will come from a utility company, just like gas or electricity. Only it's gonna cost a whole lot more. Same for water." Then Bob's voice got deeper and he added, "And when there's air shortages, like power black-outs now, people are gonna suffocate right in their own homes."

Diablo knew Bob drank, but he also knew he didn't start this early, so he thought about what Bob said.

"Could be," he finally replied. He looked closely at Bob for the first time since they were put on the run together. Other than that rust-red hair, he told me later, he saw an ordinary-looking man, if bigger than average.

Bob didn't say another thing until they stopped at the Bel-Aire for lunch. Then he said, "Open-faced roast-beef sandwich, mashed potatoes and gravy, coffee black."

Diablo said, "I'll have the same, except give me hash-browns and tea with cream." The tea was Diablo's only conscious affectation. He felt it made him more cultured. Than what he wasn't sure.

To understand Bob's prophecies it's not necessary to know a little about his background, theologians not being finicky

over facts. But future historians probably will want some information about where, exactly, the New New Testament and Bonus Offer came from.

Bob had a lower-class urban upbringing. His family wasn't Greek, like most of us in the Astoria section of Queens in those days. Might have been German, or Irish, maybe Irish-German. His father beat him, and sometimes his mother. Then his mother would beat Bob, too. But only until he got to be around 10 or 11. Bob was already getting big. He had an older sister who was a real beauty. I still have our high school yearbook with a picture of her and the rest of the homecoming queen's court in a box in the basement, along with my fielder's glove and scuffed baseball from the year I made Queens high schools' second-team all-league. I could show it to you sometime, the yearbook picture, I mean. She was a drug-store blonde with deep blue eyes—one of the first girls in school to wear contact lenses and colored at that—but Bob's sister would have been pretty even without that stuff. Right after graduation she moved to Los Angeles. We heard she became a part-time TV weather girl and full-time waitress, then married a rich Mexican and moved to Tijuana.

As for Bob, he went through high school, played football his sophomore year but didn't come back out after that. He hated to be told what to do, so offensive lineman was not a good fit. He also walked out of class sometimes if it bored him. And high school in general bored him. But the principal went easy on Bob; a little scared of him, I always thought, though Bob never started any fights or anything like that. He took mostly shop courses and graduated able to read the *Daily News*, but as he liked to say, not eager to do so.

Drafted, Bob spent all two years at Fort Benning, Georgia. He saw no Viet Cong, only one general and one rattlesnake. That was when he was caddying for the general at the officers' country club. He was a duty soldier, military occupational specialty 57 Charlie 10, so after basic and AIT—advanced

individual training, in Bob's case supply logistics—he spent a year and a half stuffing grocery bags for lifers' wives at the commissary. Logistics. Nights he prepared for his providential mission at the enlisted men's club.

Honorably discharged, Bob returned to Queens, impregnated his second girlfriend, and honorably got married. He also began driving for Gideon. Bob was twenty-one. Soon thereafter he arrived at Clancy's.

Later on, Clancy noted that after Bob made a prophecy he usually didn't show up again right away. According to Bob he just didn't get thirsty or feel like having a beer after those sessions. Bob also told Clancy once, in strictest confidence, that he never remembered what he said "under the spell," as he put it. At least not until someone else reminded him.

Clancy only told Doris Beobacher, the woman who played piano Friday and Saturday from eight p.m. to one a.m., no cover. Doris only told Betty Lou, the waitress from Kentucky, and Franco, the waiter in the low-cut black tennis shoes. Franco was an immigrant too, from south Philadelphia. Franco and Betty Lou only told most of the regular customers. About this time, when they found out he didn't really know what he said, was when most of the regulars began considering Bob a prophet.

In the winter after his football prophecy, Bob was drinking along one night at his regular pace, Doris was playing "Respect" on her upright, and the prophesying voice came on. "Yea, as you cast wanton looks at women who profane themselves in shameless raiment, you shall assuredly suffer!" Shortly after this the bra-less look sagged into the neighborhood and there was a rash of traffic accidents, a couple of them serious. At Clancy's they thought this was no coincidence.

Meanwhile, word of Prophet Bob was spreading. People were coming from all over Queens and even beyond, hoping and maybe some praying to hear a chance utterance. Occasionally there

would be jeers, and then the regulars would throw out the offending philistines. Bob prophesied that epidemics of infectious diseases, once thought to have been wiped out and hence no longer vaccinated against in many places would, along with a lethal strain of flu, ravage the United States. That winter the Detroit flu, type C, struck and a little FM radio station interviewed Bob live at the bar one night, as much as possible. Then the hard-looking, chain-smoking woman reporter from the *Times* came to do a Sunday feature.

Father Shawn Krzyzankowski glared balefully over his Sunday *New York Times*, all four pounds of it counting the Macy's, Gimbel's, Lord & Taylor, Bloomingdale's and Bergdorf-Goodman advertising inserts. He watched the women strolling past the rectory window. Mini-skirts, tight sweaters, bleached hair piled high above eyes heavily shadowed with lashes thickly mascaraed. He watched them often. Father Krzyzankowski hadn't been outside much since Carol Doda first displayed her silicone injections at the Condor Club in San Francisco, all 44-D of them publicly defying gravity over her white go-go boots and designer mono-kini, though when it comes to the bottom of a bikini, what's to design? He was sure the end of days was coming and he wanted to be indoors when it arrived. But what he was reading really set his colorful, if mixed, blood to boiling, as he thought Patrick O'Brien might have put it as Father Flanagan in the movie *Boys Town*. He was reading an article headlined "Barroom Prophet Foretells Sports Event, Predicts Deadly Nationwide Epidemic."

He was furious. Here was another contemporary pagan, like those Berrigans—Fathers Daniel and Philip, inciting scruffy-haired draft dodgers at Cornell and all over God knows where else—mocking the true church. In a barroom! And the nation's most respected newspaper was giving the lout publicity! Father Shawn Krzyzankowski, O.D., K. of C., resolved to act.

"Mary Jergens, this is Father Krzyzankowski. I want you to read the article on page 3-B of the *Times*. It's beside the Bloomingdale's ad. One of them, anyway. Well, buy one! Then find out all you can about this so-called prophet. Call me back as soon as you know something. From a pay phone."

Mary Jergens, elderly like Father Shawn, was active in the parish. She and some friends, with more than 400 combined years of detailed experience in the city, particularly in Queens, ran an informal but efficient intelligence service for the father. With scores of sons and daughters, nephews and nieces, there were few locations, from precinct house to brokerage house, they couldn't penetrate. Had the father been a man of humor, he might have called them the Holy See. He was not a man of humor.

Mrs. Mary Jergens—a widow like most of her friends—called back around lunch time on Monday. Early Tuesday, Detective Sergeant Rizzo Marinello received a phone call and, returning home from work that afternoon, the Prophet Bob found himself arrested. Hours later, after what seemed to him confusing, vague and contradictory questions, Bob was charged with the murder of his wife.

Clancy went to the legal aid society, found himself a kid lawyer and promised him \$300 if he got Bob off. The kid's first case, and at this point his only other one, involved two neighbors, one with a pet lynx, one with a fence and both with an indeterminate boundary. The kid won, which as far as Clancy was concerned was just as important as his having graduated from Duke University law school. All kinds of people did that every year.

Clancy was concerned. Bob was drawing more people on weekends than Doris Beobacher at the piano, no cover. So, he took up a collection and all together got a little more than \$103. He

increased the price of a draft beer by a nickel, a whiskey shot by a dime, blamed it on the energy crisis, and made up the rest himself.

When Bob's hearing came up the police had no motive, no weapon, no *corpus delicti* and hence, as the kid lawyer kept pointing out, no case. The judge, who hated trial lawyers in general and young ones in particular, was forced to agree. The police even had trouble finding anybody who could remember much about Bob's wife even though he freely admitted to having had one once. Bob was freed.

The next time he came into Clancy's was about a week later. Bob drank two beers and left. Clancy was worried.

Bob didn't prophecy for almost two months. When he did, though, it was a double-header and his last. Early on a Tuesday night, the place nearly empty, Bob was three beers ahead, off his stool and headed for the foosball machine. He stopped, looked Polycarp Rhinegold straight in the eyes and said, "Earth will not outlive Israel." On his way back from the men's room Bob stopped again, stared Polycarp Rhinegold straight in the eyes again—Polycarp did not like this, not one little bit—and said, "Thus saith the Lord God: The Kingdom of God on Earth will be decided by a majority vote, after a free and fair election. Assuming one can be held."

He drank two more beers, belched loudly and wobbled out the door. Clancy never saw him again.

They did ask him to identify the body found in the place Bob had moved to after the hearing. The corpse was in the Prophet's bed but it didn't look anything like Bob. Or Engelbert either, for that matter, Clancy said. It looked like a broken-down old wino.

When the prophet disappeared Clancy decided to write down all he could remember about the prophecies and about Bob, with the tavern figuring prominently in his recollections. His

daughter, an English teacher at the High School of Performing Arts in Manhattan, polished the manuscript, which to be honest needed polishing. She also gave a little more dramatic flair to what already was, to be honest again, a pretty dramatic story. Clancy then carried the result to his brother-in-law, who ran a small job printing shop. The brother-in-law turned it into a 28-page booklet—what they call a monograph in college—with a glossy cover and gave it the title of “The Words of Prophet Bob.” He printed 200 copies, which at \$1.00 each sold out almost immediately at Clancy’s.

A critic for the student newspaper at Union Theological Seminary on the Upper West Side rechristened the booklet “Prophet Bob’s New New Testament” and thanked Clancy for the coupon on the back cover, good for a free beer and bag of Beer-Nuts. A writer for *The Village Voice* said, “while maintaining our opposition to excessive use of intoxicants, we confess more than curiosity, something approaching respect, for the words of Prophet Bob.” Father Krzyzankowski, fully cognizant of Union Theological Seminary’s execrable liberal Protestantism, not to mention the columns of classified ads in *The Village Voice* for what were referred to transparently as “female escorts,” experienced chest pains for two straight days.

That’s the complete story of the Prophet Bob, except that a second printing of 500 copies of what Clancy and his brother-in-law now called “The Prophet Bob and the New New Testament and Bonus Offer,” available at the tavern, a nearby carry-out and a newsstand down the block, also sold out in a couple of days at \$2.00 each. And Diablo Hornbeck’s wife Regina said he started talking in his sleep, something he never did before, in a very deep voice, something he never had before. But she could not seem to wake up in time to write down exactly what he had said.

[Table of Contents](#)

Eric Rozenman retired in May as communications consultant for the Washington, D.C.-based Jewish Policy Center. His most recent book is *From Elvis to Trump, Eyewitness to the Unraveling: Co-Starring Richard Nixon, Andy Warhol, Bill Clinton, the Supremes and Barack Obama!* (Academica Press, 2021).

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