

Prophet or Loss?

Deuteronomy 18:9-22

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One of the most distressing things about the age we live in is that there isn't anyone to trust anymore. Whom can you trust in the world? Solomon said in one of the Proverbs, "Every man will proclaim his own goodness, but the faithful man, who can find." And when we look about us I think we ask the same question: Where is the faithful man? Where is someone we know is telling the truth, someone we can count on? I saw a little plaque in a café recently which said, "In God we trust, all others pay cash." It is very symbolic. That is the spirit of the age.

I was thunderstruck last night to discover that John Wayne and his wife are separating. The thing that struck me was that our last hero has fallen! I am really not being facetious, because I am sure that this situation is causing the Wayne family a great deal of distress. But it struck me as ironic, and more than a little symbolic, that there really is no one you can trust anymore, no one who is ultimately faithful. Who can tell us how to raise our children? Who can tell us how to solve our marital problems, and the great economic problems we face in our country, and the political problems? Where is a faithful man?

Fortunately, the Scriptures have not left us without a witness, and I would like to have you turn to the eighteenth chapter of Deuteronomy where the Lord tells us about someone we can trust. Deuteronomy is a book of discourses. There are four contained in the book. All are messages delivered by Moses just prior to his death. The nation of Israel is camped in the plains of Moab and they are ready to enter the Land. The forty years of wilderness wanderings are behind them, and now they are ready to possess the land the Lord had given them.

There are two key phrases that occur repeatedly in the book. The expression, "the land which the Lord your God has given you," occurs about thirty-four or thirty-five times, and the expression, "go in and possess it" an equal number of times. Those two phrases catch up the themes of the book. There is the land which the Lord promised to Abraham and which was theirs. Palestine belongs to the Jews. It is their piece of real estate, and now they are to go in and possess it. That is why God brought them out of Egypt -- in order to bring them into the land. In these messages Moses gathers together a number of things which Israel must know in order to enjoy their possession of the land. Their title-deed is not conditioned upon obedience. That was a promise given unconditionally to Abraham. But their enjoyment of the land is conditioned upon obedience to certain basic principles the Lord lays out. It is to these Moses calls their attention.

In chapters 1 through 4 he reviews for them the wilderness experience -- the wanderings in the wilderness. And in chapters 5 through 26 he calls the Law to their minds and comments upon it extensively. In chapters 17 and 18 he gives instructions regarding the three major figures in Israel -- the king in chapter 17, the priest in the first eight verses of chapter 18 and, in verses 9 through the end of the chapter, the prophet. In each case Moses tells them that the individual is chosen of God and that certain things are to be characteristic of him. Let's begin reading with verse 9 where he takes up the matter of the prophet that he promises will come:

When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations.

The nations he is referring here to are the Canaanite nations which had lived in the land of Palestine for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years. They were there when Abraham first arrived. And they were just as decadent in Abraham's day as they were at this time some six or seven hundred years later. We know this from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Morally they were totally corrupt. God told Abraham that he was going to take his own people into captivity that they were going to be slaves in Egypt for four hundred years until the iniquity of the

Amorites was "filled up to the full." That is, he was going to enslave his own people while he waited for the nations in Canaan to respond to the light that they had. They had the witness of Abraham and his descendants and their families. They had the witness of men like Melchizedek, the Gentile priest-king, who lived in the ancient site of Jerusalem. They had a great deal of light, and God waited for them to respond to the light. But they refused.

There is an ancient Phoenician historian by the name of Philo who tells us a great deal about the Canaanite culture. Until recently nobody believed him because he described their extreme corruption in such lurid terms that it was difficult to believe that any such society could exist. But recently archeologists have produced entire libraries from Canaanite nations which tell us that the situation was even worse than Philo depicted it. It was a society which was ravaged by venereal disease. They worshiped sex. And they were totally caught up in the dark arts and occultism.

So the Lord forewarns his people, "When you come into the land, have nothing to do with them. Don't learn from them, because they are guilty of 'detestable things.'" He recognizes that these Canaanites will not operate on the policy of "live and let live" but will propagate their teachings so as to infect all of Israel. The term Moses uses which is translated "detestable" is a word which means in Hebrew both something you long after and something you loath. There is a strange ambiguity about it, and I am sure the Spirit of God had Moses choose this term for a particular reason.

It is this kind of attitude which we all experience toward occult things. They both hold a fascination for us and they frighten us. There is an allure there, and yet we feel uneasy. I can never walk by a book stall with books on black magic or any occult activity without wanting to pick them up and read them. It is fascinating, and yet there is also something in me which abhors that sort of thing. It is that fascination which catches people. They get involved with Ouija boards, Tarot cards, palmistry, astrology - because it is so fascinating. The Scriptures tell us that God has put eternity into the minds of men, and there is a desire in all of us to know what the future holds, what is beyond the world of the seen and known. We are intrigued and fascinated by it. Yet at the same time there is something detestable and abhorrent about it. But sometimes our fascination overrides our abhorrence and we become involved. And then we are trapped. And it is so difficult to extricate ourselves! That is why God says, "Don't learn from them."

Moses goes on to describe in verses 10 and 11 some of the characteristics of their occultism:

There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through fire...

Underlying all these other dark arts was the worship of the God Moloch and the child sacrifice which went along with it.

...one who uses divination...

This is the general term for one who uses occult practices. It means to divine the future by any of many technical means -- tea leaves or reading palms or charting the stars or peering into a crystal ball. The word actually means to decide or determine the future on the basis of such means. The next words are,

...one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens...

The word for witchcraft means just what our English word does. The word translated omens is the word for snake - literally. This refers to a demon worshiper, or a Satan worshiper.

...or a sorcerer...

That is the word which is normally used for an astrologer in the Old Testament.

...or one who casts a spell...

One who binds, who practices voodoo.

...or a medium...

An interesting word -- it is used elsewhere to refer to the leather-skinned bags which the Jews carried over their shoulder to transport water in. The idea is that the medium becomes the receptacle for something else. He or she is merely the shell which contains another personality.

...or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead.

Moses uses every term in the Hebrew vocabulary to describe occult phenomena. There are no other Hebrew terms. And he forbids it. This is something that God's people must have nothing to do with. Occasionally a spiritist will say that Scripture doesn't forbid it that in fact the witch of Endor used occultism to conjure up Samuel, and God spoke through Samuel. But it is very clear, if you go back and read that story, that this was extraordinary, that God intervened in this circumstance. The witch herself was frightened out of her senses when Samuel appeared. That wasn't what she expected. She had expected the demon who normally spoke. But instead she got Samuel, and what a surprise! Nowhere does God recommend spiritism, astrology, palmistry - any of these - as a way to discover truth. It is forbidden.

There are various means that people have used to try to discover truth. One is philosophy. Philosophy is legitimate within its limits. Plato said that philosophy begins with wonder. Anytime you begin to wonder about life, you are a philosopher. If you wonder about where you came from or where you are going or what life is intended to be right now, what purpose you are here for -- you are a philosopher. And philosophy has a legitimate function within those limits. But philosophy is limited. It can take you only so far. It can't answer questions of ultimate reality. It can't tell you what you were intended for in any ultimate sense. It can't tell you what your destiny is.

Science is another means men have used to discover truth. And again science is legitimate within its limits. It can be used to observe and formulate conclusions about what is seen, what is observable, what can be put in a test tube or measured with various scientific instruments. But again it doesn't have universal adequacy because it can't answer questions about origin or destiny. These are simply beyond that method.

Therefore, because people have seen today that both of these disciplines are limited, they have begun to look to astrology and others of the black arts to attempt to arrive at truth about the future. You see, it is God who put that desire for eternity in us, and it is an unquenchable desire. We want to know what we are here for. We can't explain our existence merely in terms of the seventy years we are here, and we know that. There must be something else, and so we turn to various occult practices to discover these answers. But that was never God's intention. Man never finds any final and ultimate answers in this way. It only leads to confusion.

If I were to walk into your house and see a tea kettle on the stove, with water boiling in the kettle, I might ask you, "Why is that water boiling?" I'm a philosopher. I am wondering. If you are a scientist you might explain it in such physical terms as "molecules in motion." But the real question to which I am seeking the answer is, "To what purpose are you boiling that water." And only the person who put the tea kettle on can have any kind of answer to that question. Perhaps it is there so you can make a cup of tea, or melt the ice on your windshield, or make a poultice for your infected foot I can't know unless I talk to the one who is responsible. I can't discover that truth. It is only by disclosure that it is made known.

And, you see, only the One who made us understands what we are for. It is only as he discloses himself that we know why we were created. And so God says, "Don't try to discover truth in those things may be, they are limited. And don't try to discover it through occult practices. That is demonic. There is a better way." And the better way is described for us in verses 14 and following:

"For those nations which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do so. The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall

listen to him. This is according to all that you asked of the Lord your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, let me not see this great fire any more, lest I die.' And the Lord said to me, 'They have spoken well I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And it shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who shall speak a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he shall speak in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.' And you may say in your heart, 'How shall we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him."

In this brief passage Moses establishes the credentials of the true prophet. This is the man you are to listen to. You are not to resort to the abominations of the Canaanites. There is a better way. The better way is a prophet. And you can tell who the true prophet will be -- by four credentials. First, he is to be a Jew. "He will raise up a prophet from among your own people." If you go back into chapter 17 you find that he says the same thing about the king, and he elaborates by stating explicitly he shall not be from the Gentile nations. All three -- the prophet, the priest, and the king, were to be Jews. The only true prophets were Jewish. That means Kahill Gibran is not a prophet. That means Joseph Smith is not a prophet. That means Edgar Cayce is not a prophet. That means Jean Dixon is not a prophet. That means Maharid-Ji, and Sun Myung Moon, are not prophets. The first mark of a true prophet is that he is to be a Jew.

The second mark: he is to be like Moses. Verses 16 through 18 describe what being like Moses means. There was a time in Israel's history when God spoke face to face with the people, and they said, "Please, don't ever do that again. It is too terrifying." So God appointed his spokesman, Moses, who stood between God and man and spoke for God. And that is the second credential. He is to be like Moses, a man of Moses' character, who stands between God and man and speaks the word of God.

He further elaborates, and this is the third credential, by saying in verses 18 and 19:

" I will put My words in his mouth and he shall speak to them all that I command him...he shall speak in My name."

That is, he shall not speak anything contrary to the word of God. He will say only the things that God says or has said. He will never conflict with the word of God. Again this disqualifies Edgar Cayce, or Jean Dixon. It disqualifies a number of other people who are called "prophets," because they speak contrarily to the word of God.

Back in chapter 13 Moses says that even if a prophet comes and works miracles and signs among you and he says, "Let us go after other gods to worship them," you shall not listen to him. Signs and wonders and miracles are not in themselves signs of a prophet of God. Satan can work signs and miracles, and he will. The anti-Christ who is to come will cause the whole world, by and large, to follow him because of his miraculous ability. Miracles, in and of themselves, do not designate a spokesman for God. That prophet must also speak God's word, and must not conflict with any known word of God. So it doesn't matter what other credentials a person may have, or how great a miracle worker he or she may be, "If that person conflicts with the word of God," he says, "don't listen to him."

There is a fourth credential in verse 22:

"When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken."

The true prophets had to be able to predict the future with absolute certainty and accuracy. They did not make vague, general prophecies about the future. They made very specific prophecies which were fulfilled precisely as they were uttered. And they had to come true one hundred percent of the time. So that means Nostradamus was

not a prophet. That means Edgar Cayce was not a prophet. Jean Dixon is not a prophet. She is not always accurate. In fact, in Israel when a prophet's word failed to come true, they took him out and stoned him. This cut down sharply on the number of false prophets! They were that serious about the prophetic ministry.

All of these men who are designated prophets in the Old Testament fulfill all these credentials, and that is why the Jewish people accept them. That is why Moses is accepted as a prophet and therefore, his writings, the first five books of the Old Testament, are considered by Jew and Christian alike to be the word of God - because they were spoken by a true prophet. That is why Samuel and the books of the Kings and Joshua and Judges and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Hosea and Zechariah and all the other books in the Old Testament were binding and authoritative - because the men who uttered these words filled the credentials laid down in Deuteronomy 18. That is why the Jewish people accepted the Old Testament as Scripture.

But this prophecy is not fulfilled merely in the writings of the men who wrote the Old Testament or in their oral messages. It is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And that is why Deuteronomy 18 uses a singular noun to refer to the prophet - because its ultimate fulfillment is in Jesus of Nazareth. In John 4 the Samaritan woman at the well, to whom Jesus spoke, said, "I know that when Messiah comes he will declare all things to us." The Jews and the Samaritans who accepted the Pentateuch as authoritative knew that the Messiah would be that prophet predicted in Deuteronomy 18.

In chapter 5 of John Jesus says, "I came in my Father's name [an almost verbatim quote from Deuteronomy 18]. You did not believe me. Another will come in his own name. Him you will believe." And, "Moses wrote of me. You won't believe Moses; therefore you won't believe me. If you had believed Moses, you would have believed me because Moses prophesied of me [in Deuteronomy 18]." In John chapter 6 when Jesus fed the five thousand, the response of the people was: "This truly is that prophet who is to come into the world."

And in Matthew 17 on the Mount of Transfiguration when Jesus stood with the two great prophets of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, the Father singled out the Son and said, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him." God quoted the Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy 18 verbatim -- "Listen to him," just as Moses said, "Listen to that prophet." Jesus fulfills in himself all these credentials. That is why Jesus could say, "I do not speak on my own initiative. Whatsoever I hear, that is what I speak." He was the prophet who spoke what God told him to speak. Oh, he was God. But in his humanity he set the prerogatives of deity aside and he became the prophet who fulfilled all of the credentials given to us here in Deuteronomy 18.

He transferred that authority to his apostles; and to those who would write under their authority, such as Luke, who wrote under the aegis of Paul. And when the apostles wrote they knew that they wrote with the authority of prophets. When Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica he said, "When you received the word from me, you received it not as the word of man but as what it really is, the word of God which is at work among you who believe." And the early church never quibbled over that. They knew that what Jesus and his apostles said was intended to be taken as Holy Scripture, on a par with all the writings of all the Old Testament. That is why so many of the books that we term apocryphal or pseudepigraphical were set aside -- because the writers of these books did not fulfill the qualifications laid down for a prophet. So it is not because some later church council canonized them that the books of our Bible were accepted. It is because the Jews and the early Christians knew the marks of a true prophet. They accepted those who fulfilled these credentials, and they accepted their writings as the very word of God.

So, you see, that is where this passage brings us. What can you trust in? As John Fischer says in one of his songs, "Whom can you trust when the world turns to dust?" There is a trustworthy witness. And it is found in the "prophetic word," as Peter calls it, "made more sure." The Scripture, the Old and New Testaments - this is what we trust. Not astrology, not witchcraft, not mediums, but the word of God.

We are approaching Christmas, and we will see a great deal of the three wise men. These wise men were astrologers from the East. They were wizards. They came because, long before, an old Babylonian wizard by the name of Balaam had prophesied that there would be a star in the West and that they should follow it. So when the

star appeared, they followed it. And very often the nativity scene is pictured with the magi having been led there by the star. But it is very clear in Scripture that the star did not lead them to Bethlehem initially. As a matter of fact, the star led them to the wrong place and the wrong king. It led them to Jerusalem, to King Herod, who wanted to destroy the Christ-child. When the magi arrived in Jerusalem they asked, "Where is he that should be born king of the Jews?" And do you know where they discovered the answer? In the book of Micah in the Old Testament. The rabbis got out their scrolls and they read Micah's prophecy that the one who was to come would be born in Bethlehem. It was not the star which led the magi to Jesus, it was the word of God.

And may I say that if you trust the stars, they will lead you to the wrong king every time. There is only one trustworthy witness that will lead you to the right King, and that is the word of God. With all of the conflicting witnesses we have today, whom can you trust -- the child psychologists who can't agree among themselves on how to raise our children, the educators who are frankly confused about what education is, our political and military leaders -- can we trust them? Who knows? But there is one trustworthy witness, and that is the word of God, which tells us about our families and tells us about our homes, which tells us about every aspect of life. And it is faithful. It is faithful. The prophet says, "Thy words were found, and I did eat them, and they were unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart." And I trust that you will find this true that you will read them, and heed them, and that they will be a source of joy and rejoicing in your life.

Thank you Father for a trustworthy witness, something to count upon, something which is accurate, Someone who understands us and life, understands what we are here for and what we are destined to. Give us, Lord, an uncompromising confidence in your word. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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