

Moses: Prophet of Deliverance

Deuteronomy 18:15-22

¹⁵ The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. ¹⁶ This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.” ¹⁷ Then the LORD replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. ¹⁹ Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. ²⁰ But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.” ²¹ You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?” ²² If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

Theme Statement

As the Israelites prepare to enter the promised land, fears about future leadership are assuaged by the promise of a prophet like Moses. As believers see that promise embodied in Jesus, prophetic ministry continues among us.

Exploring the Word

Already at this point in the Mosaic tradition there is a story of prophets raised up from among the people and who were like Moses. Numbers 11:24-30 recounts how the spirit of Moses was set upon seventy of the people's elders who prophesied, as did Eldad and Medad who had not been present with the others. Far from objecting, Moses said, "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!"

Deuteronomy 18:15-18a A prophet like Moses

Nevertheless, the biblical tradition credits Moses with a unique position to fulfill his prophetic calling. Yahweh knew him "face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10; also see Exodus 33:11; Numbers 12:6-8) and "by name" (Exodus 33:17). Not even Moses, however, could *see* Yahweh directly; more than a glimpse of Yahweh's goodness and passing glory would be lethal (Exodus 33:17-23).

The people long recognized that problem and their danger. Verse 16 refers to the theophany of 5:23-31 (see Exodus 20:18-21) when Yahweh appeared with terrifying glory and fire. On that occasion, the people pled with Moses to approach Yahweh by himself, to listen, and then to declare the word of the Lord to them (5:27). Likewise, Yahweh instructed Moses to hear the commandments accurately in order to declare them to the people (5:31).

Deuteronomy 18:18b-22 What's a prophet to do?

The declaration of the word of the Lord is precisely *the* prophetic task. It is too often assumed that the prophet's job is to predict the future—usually the far-distant future. To the contrary, the prophet is God's spokesperson. The prophet has seen or listened to God and then reports what God has said to the people. Indeed, prophets often begin their oracles with a "messenger formula," declaring "Thus says the LORD," before repeating exactly whatever they perceived the Lord to have said. Moses often employed the expression when he confronted Pharaoh (Exodus 4:22; 5:1; 7:17; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3; 11:4), as did prophets after him. Over four hundred examples of the messenger formula appear in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Of course, simply hearing the word of the Lord via the prophet would not suffice. Having heard the prophetic word, the listener must heed it—or be held accountable by God (18:19). On the other hand, any prophets who purport to speak in the name of other gods or who speak a word not commanded by Yahweh are false prophets and subject to execution (18:20). A related law concerning prophets who, by means of dreams, omens, or other divinatory methods, would lead people to worship other gods appears in Deuteronomy 13:1-5. As in the present passage, the penalty is death.

The problem remains, however, as to how one is to discern a prophet who speaks a word not commanded by the Lord (18:20) from an authentic prophet to whom God has spoken. It is a conundrum that we will encounter again in future sessions. Here, a provisional answer appears in 18:22. An authentic prophetic word will be verified by whether what the prophet has said occurs or proves true. Such a solution, however, hardly satisfies even in the short-term time frame that the biblical prophets generally

addressed. For example, Isaiah's declaration to Ahaz that Jerusalem would be preserved from enemy invaders, supported as it was by the presence of a pregnant woman who would name her child "God is with us," still did not resolve that king's pressing military problem (Isaiah 7). As we will see, the problem becomes more complex when an authentic word of the Lord does not come to pass because God changes God's mind!

The Word Today

Long ago, Pontius Pilate asked Jesus, "What is truth?" (John 18:38). Whatever Pilate meant, his question haunts us all. What indeed is truth? We have learned that truth is not always what we see with our own eyes. Digital wizards manipulate photos and film to suit their own ends, whether that be to vilify a political enemy or to resurrect a deceased celebrity to shill some product. We hear about "fake news" and "alternative facts," often from people for whom facts and truth are cynically malleable.

These paragraphs are being composed amid the COVID-19 pandemic, in a historical moment when truth is difficult to discern: Testing for the virus is widely available; testing for the virus is not available. A cure is on the way in the form of a malarial drug; the malarial drug is quackery with respect to the virus. "Only" 100,000 people will die; millions will die. Governmental leaders acted early and with alacrity; governmental leaders ignored the warnings of scientists and journalists.

During this crisis, "truth" seems to depend on whatever "soothsayers or diviners"—read "media outlet," "celebrity 'expert,'" or "televangelist"—one consults. Even by the

time these words are read almost a year hence, we still may not know which of the competing claims about this pandemic represents truth.

It would be good to encounter a prophet like Moses in a time such as this or, for that matter, in a time such as the spring of 2021. From this historical juncture, we cannot foretell what "normal" life might be like in a year. It would be good to have some glimmer of the truth. It would be good to hear the word of the Lord from a person into whom God has put a divine word.

We have no such prophet, or at least not one "like Moses."

We have no prophet, but we do have Jesus. We have Jesus, the Word of God incarnate. We have Jesus, the self-expression of God's will and desire for the world. We have Jesus, whom Peter identified as the quintessential prophet about whom Moses spoke (Acts 3:22). We have Jesus, who not only testifies to the truth but also brings us into truth (John 18:37).

We have Jesus, who is both resurrection and life (John 11:25). We have Jesus, who promises that not even death can thwart the life he brings (John 11:26).

We need not wait to see if that word takes place or proves true. We have the truth in Jesus.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Who do you trust to tell you the truth? Share who that is and why you trust that person.
2. When, specifically, have you experienced the word of the Lord addressing you?

Exploring the Word

1. Read Deuteronomy 18:9-14. Why might the Israelites have been tempted to imitate their neighbors' practices? Why is that a problem? What is the alternative described in our reading?
2. As a group, make a list of the duties of a prophet for the Israelites. Next, complete this sentence: "A prophet is someone who . . ."
3. Considering your list and definition in the last question, identify persons in modern times who exemplify(ied) prophetic behavior. What "prophetic" characteristics or behavior did they exemplify?
4. View together "Martin Luther King's Last Speech: 'I've Been to the Mountaintop.'" In what ways might King be considered a prophet? What reservations might be had about so considering him?

The Word Today

1. Given that Jesus is the culmination of God's promise for a prophet like Moses (Acts 3:22), list what you can count on to take place and prove true.
2. Would you want to be a prophet? Why or why not?
3. Consider the prophetic ministry of your congregation. List how your congregation as a whole and its individual members convey the word of God.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, Word of God made flesh, please live within us. Give us the courage to be your prophetic voice when we encounter injustice. Renew your love in us so that those we encounter this week will perceive that love in our words and deeds. Amen.

Further Study

Exodus 3:1—4:17; 1 Corinthians 14

Daily Readings

M. Psalm 77:11-20

T. Luke 16:24-31

W. Exodus 12:43-50

T. Numbers 9:9-14

F. Exodus 13:1-2;

Deuteronomy 15:19-20

S. Exodus 13:3-10

S. Deuteronomy 18:15-22

Memorization

Deuteronomy 18:15

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.