

“Questions About Prophets”
Deuteronomy 18:15–22
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In the October 1999 issue of *Theology Today*, there was a fascinating article entitled “Theological Table Talk: Rapture, Red Heifer, and Other Millennial Misfortunes.” The author began with a personal story about end times thinking. During the early 1960s, he did a year of graduate study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and discovered Christians and Jews who wanted to build a Third Temple to re-establish the sacrificial cultus that ceased operation in 70 C.E.

When he asked Israeli friends how they felt about the possibility of the blood of bulls and lambs flowing from the altar, they replied that no one may officiate at a temple sacrifice who is not ritually pure. No one can be pure who has not been sprinkled with the ashes of a red heifer. No one can burn the red heifer who is not ritually pure. And the last ritually pure person died several decades after the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. So, not to worry, they said.

However, when the author wrote, red heifers were being bred again. Preacher/farmer, would-be prophetic figure from Mississippi, Clyde Lott, shipped five hundred pregnant red angus cows from a farm in Nebraska to the Jordan Valley, along with frozen embryos and sperm, in the hope that a red heifer would be born in Israel in 1999.

Lott and his friends, Gershon Salomon, founder of the Temple Mount and Land of Israel Faithful Movement with 15,000 members, and Rabbi Chaim Richman, a leader of the Temple Institute, believed the age of the Messiah was at hand with the turn of a millennium. They also believed that re-establishing the temple cultus and purifying Israel were required preludes to the Messiah and to find the red heifer was to set the clock ticking toward the culmination. Patting Dixie, one of Lott’s red heifers, Richman said, “This is the heifer that will change the world.”

Such are the times in which we live, and such is the nature of much prophecy today. The very idea that there is something human beings

must do to force God's hand in the work of redemption is ludicrous. Yet, this is what the self-proclaimed prophets of our time preach, and whatever we think of their message, they attract an audience. Diogenes was right. Discourse on virtue and people pass by in droves. Whistle and dance the shimmy and you've got an audience!

We believe that prophecy has played a vital role in the history of Judeo-Christian faith. We believe that God did indeed call prophets such as Moses and Elijah, Isaiah and Anna to proclaim the word of the Lord for people. But we wonder about today. We wonder whether God still uses prophets, largely because so many of the persons who claim to be prophets have so little to recommend themselves.

They attempt to force God's hand or lead vulnerable people to stockpile weapons or claim that God is behind the latest natural disaster. Many would-be prophets are little more than highly troubled souls one diagnosis away from institutionalization, but does this mean there are no more prophets? It is an important question, and it is not the only one we have. If there are still prophets, what is their function, and how do we distinguish the true prophets from the false? There are a number of questions we ought to ask before we follow anyone too far.

Regarding the first question, as to whether there are still prophets in the world, I would say — yes... and no. There are still prophets, but they do not play the same role as the prophets of ancient Israel did. Historically, prophets had a specific relationship to the chosen nation, but there is no single chosen nation now, that's the teaching of Christian faith. Thus, there is no place for a court prophet.

However, in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah, when tradition claimed prophecy had ceased because not enough Jews had returned to the Land, rabbis argued that, while the institution of prophecy had ceased, God still spoke to the people through wise elders of the community. God still speaks through representatives whether we call them prophets or not.

In our reading from Deuteronomy, Moses alludes to his calling and the calling of prophets after him. The people needed guidance, but they could not bear direct encounters with the God who created the universe. So, representatives were chosen to speak for God.

This is why prophets still exist — we still need guidance from God, and we still have difficulty with direct encounters. I doubt many would argue with our need for guidance, given our ongoing struggles with fear and division, poverty and violence, our apparent desire to destroy the earth, our struggle to hold on to any kind of faith. I also doubt that many would question our fear of direct encounters with God. We may talk to God directly, but what will we do if God responds?

I love the issue of “Ziggy” in which our friend’s plane has crashed, and he has parachuted into the ocean, only to be surrounded by sharks. Ziggy looks up into the heavens and wonders, “What did I ever do to deserve this?” Much to his surprise, a voice replies, “Wanna’ list?” We may ask questions of God, but we do not expect direct answers. We may have access to God’s presence, but we tremble when we enter it. We still have difficulty with direct encounters. So, we need representatives, prophetic voices, to help us to hear God’s word.

The question, then, is as to what a prophet’s function is in our time and thus who he/she might be. If we return to the roots of the institution, a prophet is one who represents God for his/her people. The author of Deuteronomy describes Moses as a prophet *par excellence* and, as such, he proclaims and embodies God’s word not for people who live far away from him in terms of time and space but for the people among whom he lives. Prophets of our day are raised up from among us to proclaim God’s word for us, to address the critical concerns of this time.

We think first of people like Gandhi, King, Tutu, Mother Teresa, Sister Helen Prejean. I would not dismiss the prophetic function of any of these voices, but I would argue that most of God’s representatives are closer to home. Perhaps we would not use the word “prophet”, but there are persons who represent God for us and challenge us to understand more of who God is and what God intends in and through our lives.

I think of people like Selma Cole. She was a member of the church I served in Danville, Virginia and, among other things, taught a children’s Sunday School class for forty-five years! She represented the God she had come to know for hundreds of children and carried the love of God with her wherever she went. When Selma was ordained as our

first female deacon, her friend in town, a member of another, much more conservative church called Selma and said, “I don’t believe in women deacons but, if you become a pastor, I will join your church!” Selma inspired everyone who knew her! She was a representative of God.

We know people who are prophets in this sense, who represent God in our midst, who have faithfully shared God’s word with us — a teacher, a minister, a parent, a friend. There are prophets among us! A prophet does not have to be written up in the news or appear on television. A prophet doesn’t have to be a household name. A prophet must simply represent God, proclaim and embody God’s word.

There is one other question we need to ask, and it is perhaps the most difficult — how do we distinguish between true and false prophets? It is an old problem without an easy solution, other than the one God suggests, that the false prophets drop dead, but that doesn’t seem to happen very often... The author of Deuteronomy suggests that we simply wait and see if the words of a prophet come true. This suggestion is helpful so long as we have the luxury of time.

For example, if I am so bold as to predict a winner of the Super Bowl, within a short time, we can find out whether I am a prophet or a fool! The same may be said of the failed red heifer enterprise, after the fact. Time can answer many questions, but we may not have time.

W. H. Whitsitt was a president of Southern Seminary who did not have the luxury of time. He published his findings that Baptists went back to the seventeenth century when English Separatists recovered the practice of believer’s baptism. It is a view few scholars debate now, but Whitsitt lived in the nineteenth century when the majority of Baptists believed we go back to John the Baptist. Whitsitt was safe so long as he published his work anonymously, but when he claimed it, he was out of a job! He did not live to see the day when his vision was accepted.

Vernon Johns was another prophetic figure of the Baptist fold who did not have the luxury of time. Johns was an opponent of segregation before such a stance was popular even within the African-American Church. His reward for trying to mobilize the Christian community to stand up for justice was that his church, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

in Montgomery, Alabama, accepted his resignation in lieu of dismissal. His successor at Dexter Avenue, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had better luck, partly because of his tremendous gifts, but largely because of time. The message of both prophets was the same, but Johns' message was understood to be right only after he had moved on in ministry.

What the stories of Whitsitt and Johns illustrate is that it can be difficult to determine who is a true prophet at the time of the prophet's ministry. Many claim to speak for God on opposing sides of significant issues like racial equity, economic justice, gay marriage, and religious pluralism. They express different opinions in uncompromising ways all tied to Divine intent! How can we tell who speaks for God? Allowing time to pass is one way to go, but we do not always have time.

So, what do we do? There is no easy answer, but I would suggest we begin by comparing the image of God presented by any would-be prophet with the image of God revealed in the ministry of Jesus. If the prophecy does not point to a God of endless mercy, a God who relentlessly pursues justice and peace for all, a God like the One seen in the words and deeds of the Nazarene who cleanses lepers, forgives adulterers, washes stumbling disciples' feet, and dies on a cross for us, it is not valid. If the prophecy claims something as hateful as that a hurricane or tsunami or even an illness like AIDS kills as a sign of judgment, it has nothing to do with the God who is in Jesus. But if it begins by claiming that God's love is for all, we might want to listen.

We have many questions. Most of those who claim to be prophets probably are not. Those who have amassed large followings almost certainly are not. Prophets tend to frighten people away. We remember Amos with his condemnation of the rich, Jeremiah with his scorn for Sabbath Day Spirituality, Jesus with his radical forgiveness of sinners. Would we invite any of these guys back for a second sermon? Prophets often speak difficult words, and their reward is often not in this life.

But God still speaks to us, often through representatives because this is the only way we ever seem to hear. Whatever we call them, God raises up messengers and, when God does, it is our responsibility to listen and follow what we believe to be the word of God.