GENE M. TUCKER
Professor of Old Testament
Candler School of Theology, Emory University

Deuteronomy 18:15–22

WHO IS TELLING the truth here? How do we know the difference between a true word and a false one? How will the Lord communicate with us—and we with him—once Moses is dead and gone? Those are the questions that lie behind this paragraph from Deuteronomy 18. The answers given in the passage are set in the future tense, anticipating the time after the people of Israel "come into the land which the Lord your God gives you" (Deut. 18:9), but behind the instructions we can hear unmistakably the voice of a people for whom that future has already become the present. Like us they are separated by centuries from the foundational events of their faith. Moses had been gone for at least six hundred years, and God is no longer speaking face to face with anyone. How could they continue to know the will of the Lord? If someone claims to be a genuine prophet, speaking the Word of God, how could they know whether to trust him or not?

We should set this passage in its context lest we miss its links with human realities and thus a great deal of its power. First consider its wider literary and historical framework. It appears in the central part of the Book of Deuteronomy, the legal section that includes at least chapters 12—26. That is the part of the book most likely to have been the "book of the law" associated with the reform of Josiah, *circa* 621 B.C. (II Kings 22—23). Most of the units in this section of the book are sermons, often taking an old law, explaining or reinterpreting its meaning, applying it to the contemporary situation, and laying it upon the hearts of the listeners (e.g., 15:1–11). Yet 18:15–22 seems not to rest upon any particular ancient law, and probably was composed no earlier than the seventh century. The broader literary framework of the text is the Book of Deuteronomy as a whole, which is presented as a report of the last days in the life of Moses. Except for the narrative framework at the beginning (1:1–5) and the end (34:1–12), the book is the last will and testament of Moses, a speech to the people of Israel before they entered the promised land.

More immediately, Deuteronomy 18:15–22 must be recognized as part of a unit that begins with 18:9. Following a section concerned with the rights of the levitical priests, 18:9–14 gives a catalog of prohibited activities, specifically identifying them as "the abominable practices of those nations" (18:9). Although the catalog begins with the abomination of

making one's son or daughter "pass through the fire," it is not a general list of pagan cultic practices but an inventory of mantic activities, means for determining the will of the deity or for knowing the future. The list is extensive if not exhaustive, including many of the practices known to have been used in the ancient world: various forms of divination, sorcery, and consulting the spirits of the dead. All assume magical causation and have in common some form of manipulation by a religious specialist. That is, the authority resides in the skill or special capacities of the practitioner by which he or she seeks answers from the realm of the divine.

All such means of mediation are prohibited to the people of Israel. However, one must not minimize the seriousness of these alternatives. They were real possibilities and not always easily ignored as mere superstition. In Babylon, for example, the ritual consultation of the liver of the sacrificial lamb was based upon "scientific" observation. Precise records were kept of the liver's appearance and correlated with the events that followed. Therefore the religious specialist could say with confidence that this is the way the liver looked when such and such a king was killed and therefore the present king should take precautions—both religious and practical—to avoid a similar fate.

It is against this negative background that our text begins. If Israel is not to use the methods of "those nations," and since Moses is soon to die, how will the people of God know his will? Verses 15–18 present a positive and a hopeful answer and then verses 19–22 consider both positively and negatively the problems that will arise from that answer. According to Deuteronomy, the means of mediation of the divine will in ancient Israel is prophecy. Thus Moses reports Yahweh's promise to raise up for the people "a prophet like me" (vs. 15, 18), whom they are to heed. Two aspects of that promise call for comment at this point. First, that the Lord will "raise up" a prophet does not mean only once but from time to time, as necessary. The text must have in view a long succession of authentic prophets, including some already known in the seventh century, when this paragraph was written. Second, what does it mean to be a prophet "like Moses"? As the conclusion of the book takes pains to emphasize (34:10–12), there will never be another quite like Moses. At the very least, a prophet like Moses will be one who mediates the Word of God as he did, and whose word is consistent with what Moses taught. That prophet's authority, like that of Moses, will derive from Yahweh's revelation.

This solution, however, is not without its problems. There will doubtless be prophets who speak presumptuously, putting out their own ideas as the word of the Lord, or even speaking in the name of other gods. Deuteronomy's reaction to such false prophets is harsh and uncompromising:

They are guilty of capital crimes. Those who speak in the name of other gods require no further comment, for their duplicity is obvious; but how do the hearers know if the word that claims to come from Yahweh is authentic or not? Time will tell. It was firmly believed in ancient Israel that the Word of God through the prophet set events into motion (Amos 1:2; Jer. 1:9–10). Thus the test: If what the prophet says does not happen, it did not come from Yahweh. One can hardly argue with that criterion, but it is also of limited usefulness to the people who first hear those words and have to decide whether to fear the prophet or put him to death.

Two main themes emerge from this text as we view it in its own context and consider its encounter with hearers and readers in our time: the mode of revelation for the people of God and the problem of distinguishing between true and false prophecy. In addition to these explicit themes, there is the strong undercurrent of concern with faith as uncompromising devotion to Yahweh.

On the face of it, our passage gives a straightforward answer to the question of the proper mode of continuing revelation for the people of God: Yahweh will raise up prophets in the tradition of Moses and tell them what to say. Yet even these few lines assume more than one understanding of the prophetic role, and the matter becomes more complicated when the Old Testament tradition as a whole comes into view. Moreover, Deuteronomy, to say nothing of other perspectives, takes it for granted that prophecy is not the only way that the will of God is known.

One possibility for maintaining contact with the divine will would be Yahweh's direct address to the people. That is considered here and rejected as too threatening, more than the people can take (vs. 16–17). Moreover, it was not God but the people who turned this alternative down, and with good reason. No one can see God and live, and it is only a prophet who can hear God and live to tell the story. Thus revelation must be mediated.

There are two characteristics of prophecy here that run through virtually all Old Testament understandings of the office. First, one does not seek the office or train for it but one is called to it. It is the Lord who chooses—raises up—prophets, and generally they consider themselves to be unworthy. That perspective is expressed in the reports of prophetic vocations (Isa. 6; Jer. 1:4–10; Ezek. 1—3; cf. Amos 7:14–15) and in the account of Moses' call (Exod. 3—4). Second, and fundamental to the prophetic role, the words of a prophet are not his own but those of Yahweh: "I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (v. 18). Consequently, the speeches of the classical prophets are regularly introduced or concluded with such messenger and

oracle formulas as "Thus says the Lord," "says the Lord." In the Mosaic tradition, that basic understanding is used to interpret the role of Aaron as spokesman for Moses: "He shall be a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God" (Exod. 4:16).

Beyond those common features of prophecy, Deuteronomy 18:15–22 appears to assume two different understandings of the role, one that parallels that of the so-called classical prophets and one that is similar to the role of Moses. For the most part, the revelations of the preexilic prophets concerned the immediate future. In the name of Yahweh they announced what would happen, mainly as prophecies of judgment because of the sins of the people, but also as announcements of salvation. That view appears in our text as the test for true prophecy: "if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the Lord has not spoken" (v. 22). On the other hand, the revelatory role of Moses—and presumably that of the prophets like Moses—was quite different from that of figures such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. He was more a teacher and preacher of the will of God for the people than a proclaimer of God's plans for the future. This understanding of the office appears here in the admonitions to "heed" the words of such persons (vs. 15, 19), and reflects the knowledge that even the Mosaic law could not cover all situations that would arise.

There is abundant evidence that the text's other main theme, the difficulty of recognizing a false prophet, was no less a problem for ancient Israel than it is for us. Those in Jerusalem who heard both Jeremiah and Hananiah speaking in the name of Yahweh and performing prophetic symbolic actions surely must have asked the question (Jer. 28). Ezekiel accused certain people of uttering the lies of their own minds in the name of Yahweh (Ezek. 13). Moreover, the presence of prophetic vocation reports, and accounts of disputations with their audiences, show that the canonical prophets often had to justify themselves, to argue that their words were legitimate revelations.

Deuteronomy's criterion is less than satisfactory. First, it only concerns those prophetic words that announce the future; and second, what is one to do in the critical interim between the proclamation and its fulfillment or nonfulfillment? Consequently, other criteria were proposed, both in the Old Testament and in the history of its interpretation. Applying the criterion of fulfillment to the history of prophecy, Jeremiah argued that the prophet of doom was the authentic one, since that is what has happened (Jer. 28:8–9; 23:17; cf. Ezek. 13:10, 16). Thus some have considered prophets of judgment authentic and those of salvation false. But what is one to do with, for example, Isaiah 40—66? Others, on the analogy

of the story of Micaiah ben Imlah (I Kings 22) consider independent prophets true and official or court prophets false.

Just as the question cannot be resolved merely on the basis of the prophet's claims to speak the word of the Lord, so it cannot be settled in terms of ecstatic or visionary experience. Although authentic prophets report visions, auditions, and even ecstatic experiences, they argue that such experiences do not necessarily validate claims to know the true Word of God. Visions may be delusions and divinations may be lies (Ezek. 13:6–7; Jer. 23:16).

Another criterion is implicit in our text and explicit elsewhere in the book: Certainly one who prophesies in the name of other gods is a false prophet. Moreover, even one who speaks in the name of Yahweh, and even if his words come to pass (!), that one is a false prophet if he leads the people to serve other gods (Deut. 13:1–5). Thus those who would decide whether a prophet's words are true or false—and that includes all the people of God—must become theologians. Simple enough when the names of other deities are uttered: Baal, Anat, Marduk. Yet the authors of Deuteronomy as well as the prophets of Israel knew that the issues seldom were so clear. The alternatives to devotion to Yahweh were many, varied, and subtle. Thus we encounter that deep undercurrent within virtually every paragraph in our book, expressed most clearly in the Shema: "The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 5:4–5). Any prophetic words—even in the name of Yahweh and even if they come to pass—that contradict that injunction are false and to be rejected.

In various ways this passage addresses the contemporary situation of those who are called to proclaim the Word of God and those who attempt to discern that word among so much human babel. Our circumstances as preachers, teachers, and hearers of the Word of God are comparable to those of the authors, readers, and hearers of the Book of Deuteronomy. Removed by centuries from the age of primary revelation, we like they listen for the Word of God mediated through human voices. The prophets whom the Lord will raise up, then and now, will test their perception of the word against the tradition already revealed, the criterion of unqualified devotion to the one Lord, and will guard against all presumptuous speech, that is, intentionally presenting their own words as the Word of God. Nevertheless, both ancient Israel's prophets and our own are ordinary people, for the Lord will raise them up "from among you, from your brethren" (v. 15).

On the one hand our text counsels patience. In God's good time you will know the true Word of God. History will demonstrate it. Implicit here is an

understanding of history as the interaction of the divine and human wills. An eschatological form of that view becomes explicit in the reading of the promise of a prophet like Moses as the prophecy of a messiah both at Qumran and in the New Testament (Acts 3:22; 7:37; cf. John 1:21, 45; 6:14; 7:40). On the other hand it counsels urgency, and knows that one must decide before the future proves what is the truth, between the word's articulation and its fulfillment. Both speaking and heeding the Word of God are matters of life and death.

A true prophet is, quite simply, one who tells the truth. The issues raised by this text, however, are not general and abstract, for example, "what is truth?" but specific and practical. Who is speaking the truth in this immediate situation? In our time that may occur in dramatic or mundane ways. In many cases one who simply points out certain facts speaks with an authentic prophetic voice, as in reminding the world just how many nuclear weapons exist, or giving a daily report on the air pollution count in major cities, or calling attention to economic inequalities.

The prophet in the biblical tradition will take a further step, interpreting the relationship between ordinary human realities and the will of God, weighing the present situation in the light of that biblical tradition. Such a prophetic voice will say, in the last analysis, this is or is not consistent with the will of God. A bold step, to be sure, but one that all the people of God must take, for life and death are at stake.