

Called to order: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

## **It's been said that the lessons of history are never clear, and when they are they're usually wrong.**

by [Paul Keim](#) in the [January 25, 2003](#) issue

Holy Moses! The first surprise in this passage from Deuteronomy is that the biblical lawgiver par excellence is also the prototypical prophet. In 21st-century America, prophets are not so easily disguised as senators and members of Congress. What does Washington have to do with Waco? Law, or the codification, enforcement and interpretation of community mores, does not usually appear in the same sentence as prophecy, the impassioned oraculation of the divine word. We tend to think of these two matrices of authority as in tension or opposition to one another. *Vox populi* on the one hand; *vox Dei* on the other.

But in the context of Deuteronomy, the biblical passage reflects a revolutionary program of centralized and perhaps domesticated religious authority. All law and prophecy were to be associated with the offices of prophet, priest and king in Jerusalem. Previously acceptable forms of divination and worship were to be focused on “the place where Yahweh shall choose to cause his name to dwell . . . .”

The magical practices of the original inhabitants of the land were rejected not only as “Canaanite,” but also as illicit soothsaying and divining happening outside the confines of formally sanctioned religion. In place of these practices, a prophet like Moses would be raised up to mediate God’s word. Within the order of the ethos of Torah—also conceived of as divine word—the prophet would give voice to the moral imperative.

Within the delimitations of Torah there is accountability for both people and prophet. If the prophet faithfully delivers God’s spoken word to the people, the people are held responsible to follow its dictates. If, however, the prophet presumptuously speaks a word that God did not speak, the prophet is held accountable.

How do listeners know when the word spoken by the prophet in the name of Yahweh is not commanded by Yahweh? The answer: If the word turns out not to be true or the prediction does not come to pass, then it is evident that it was not a true word of Yahweh, but only prophetic *hauteur*. The people are not to be cowed by such a soothsayer.

It's been said that the lessons of history are never clear, and when they are they're usually wrong. Whereas the principle set forth in Deuteronomy may provide some means of measuring the accuracy of the predictions of an astrologer like Jeane Dixon or the lucrative prognostications of a dispensationalist like Hal Lindsey, it is less well suited to discerning the reliability of a call to moral judgment and decisive action. We may still be left with the dilemma of how to tell the true word from the false.

We are not left, however, without resources for this task. Does the call to moral discernment accord with the ethos of Torah? Scripture can provide tools that help us detect the true texture of history and the interwoven inclinations of God's saving acts. This is something less than blessed assurance. But it does provide an ordered framework within which we can exercise our capacity for moral judgment.

There are, of course, well-known dangers associated with all sanctioned and centralized moral orders. They may become self-legitimizing thickets of power that co-opt the moral prerogative of people and prophet and are no longer open to the living word. But biblical tradition refuses to allow God's law to become identified with the king's law. Israelite prophecy could embrace the contemplative order of Mosaic law to call the nation toward faithfulness. The inherent tensions between law and prophecy were not resolved, but there was access to the divine word in an ordered cosmos where people could live as free moral agents.

In the poetic structure of the psalm of praise, there is a different kind of order. The acrostic poem adheres to a specific structure in which each line begins with the subsequent letter of the alphabet. Within the discipline of this poetic convention, virtually impossible to reflect in translation, the theme of praise for God's mighty acts unfolds. The construct compels the poet to paint her picture in a given frame, while the conventions of frame and phraseology help focus the attention of the reciter and facilitate memory as well as meditation. Again, freedom within order.

In Paul's teaching concerning the issue of food offered to idols, he refers to a certain kind of theological order: there is one God. The gods that the idols are supposed to

represent do not exist. Therefore it is lawful to eat food offered to such idols.

But then he weighs this “order of knowledge” against another order—that of Christian love. In this dichotomy, it is acceptable to eat the food offered to idols unless this exercise of one’s freedom threatens the conscience of another believer. Then it is sin. It is better to choose self-restraint than to violate the principle of Christian love.

The order of the law and the prophets is a theological one that rests on a foundation of faith. It is not ultimately upheld by any orthodoxy or orthopraxy, by shrill pieties or by militant fundamentalisms. Nor is it undermined by secular science, by modern alienation or by failed ideologies. Nor can the ache of its absence be felicitously replaced by the comforts of consumerism, or by a *pax Americana*. It is God’s faithfulness, rather than ours, that grounds our being. Within the ordered constraints of our physicality and mortality, we are free to respond to that faithfulness with every capacity that our miraculously evolved consciousness allows. Free to pit lives of healing and hope against a world of chaos and conflict. Free to live with integrity and die with dignity.