

God's True Prophet

DAVE BAST

Deuteronomy is a book full of alternatives; warnings, but also promises; Law, but also Gospel. Deuteronomy offers its readers choices: To embrace the God of Israel of the gods of Canaan; to choose obedience or disobedience; to receive blessings or curses; to find life or death. Whenever we are presented with alternatives, we have to decide which ones to accept and which ones to reject. One of the most important choices we have to make is to whom do we listen; whose claims we accept as truth; because all sorts of people in our culture say all sorts of things they ask us to believe: Politicians, advertisers, journalists, teachers, and especially preachers. So how do you choose whom to believe? Well, let's think about that today on Groundwork.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and Scott, we have come now to the fifth of six Groundwork programs on the book of Deuteronomy; and since Deuteronomy has 34 chapters, obviously we are not covering everything; but we have tried to hit the highlights. It is Moses' farewell speech so we started out in Chapter 1 with a recap of the story of Israel to that point and the exodus, and then we moved into Chapter 6 and the Shema – the great confession of faith of Israel: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one; and then some warnings about what is going to happen when you enter the land; and then in our last program specific warnings about individualism and the challenge of syncretism, of blending the worship of God with the paganism of Canaan.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in many ways this program – and we are going to be focusing primarily on Deuteronomy Chapter 18 – this program kind of continues that, because again, all of this huge, giant review session, Moses' swan song, his last will and testament, which makes up all of Deuteronomy, these are the words to the people who are going to settle into the land of Canaan at long last; and so they are all kind of future oriented. So in the last program we focused primarily on Deuteronomy 12. We thought about worship and what would be proper worship. You cannot just do it your own way. Now we are going to think a little bit more specifically about an aspect of worship, if you want to think of this as almost like a sermon, the words of a prophet. Who do you listen to? Who is trustworthy? You are going to go into a land, Moses says, that has all kinds of, frankly, weird practices and weird ways to try to figure out what God is thinking. You want to stay away from all of that...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then eventually will want to discern: Well, then who *do* you listen to?

DAVE BAST

Yes; if you think of it this way, there were two great figures in the history of Israel – eventually a third would be added, the king – so you would have the idea of government through the king – but prior to that, the two great figures were the priest, beginning with Aaron, who was ordained even during the Exodus as the great High Priest of Israel, and then the prophet, who is actually... Moses is the first great prophet. So, you've got the idea of the priest as the one who puts you in connection with God through worship, and the prophet the one who speaks to you on behalf of God, telling you what you need to know; and last week we really kind of focused on the priestly aspect of the worship practices of Canaan, and a warning against the fertility religion of the Baals and all that; and now when we come to Chapter 18, it is more the prophetic aspect of trying to find out what God wants and what God's will is, and it begins with a warning in Chapter 18.

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁹When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. ¹⁰Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens and engages in witchcraft ¹¹or casts spells, or who is a medium or a spiritist who consults the dead. ¹²Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord. Because of these same detestable practices, the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you. ¹³You must be blameless before the Lord your God. So, all of these things: Witchcraft, omens...

DAVE BAST

There is a lot of weird stuff in there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, but it all comes down to the same thing; what is God thinking? What does God want us to do and how can we know? And so, ancient peoples, including the Canaanites, had all kinds of funny practices by which they tried to read the tea leaves or read the animal intestines or, you know, figure out what are the gods thinking? What do they want us to do? They would have séances; they would try to communicate with the dead. They would cut animals open and look at their liver to figure out if that could tell them what god wanted them to do. It seems odd to us today, but there is that real human need to say: What does God expect of us? How do we make the gods happy, and how do we know what that is? So, they would do these things to hear from God.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well; I mean, we sum it up by calling them occult practices or dark magic or black magic or something like that; and in our world today, you know, it seems pretty far removed from ordinary life, and certainly it is not the kind of fun fantasy of Harry Potter or something like that, which is basically just entertainment; but these things were actually practiced and believed in, and they were deeply sinister. In fact, God calls them *detestable* here, speaking through Moses, and very interestingly, I think, he adds the line: It is on account of these that the Lord is driving out these nations from Canaan. One of the problems we struggle with morally as we read the Old Testament is, how could God declare that Israel was supposed to wipe out these people – these different tribes? And the answer is that they had become so enmeshed in horrible wickedness that God was finally through with them and He was going to get rid of them – drive them away; including most horribly of all, child sacrifice in order to try to figure out the will of the gods or the powers that be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And appease the gods or make the gods love you. What Moses is saying... what God through Moses is saying is: All of that stuff is what is wrong with Canaan today. It goes without saying that if you want to be on the right side of God you cannot adopt any of that. There is a way for you to find out what God is thinking; there is a way by which God will get Himself revealed to you, and it is none of those ways; it will be through the words of the true prophet; and that ultimately, of course, is where this chapter is going to go.

So, let God be God, Moses is saying. Let Him speak to you as He wants to speak, and don't try to figure it out through these other creepy practices which involve scary stuff, and sometimes, as you said, Dave, the horror of actually sacrificing a child.

DAVE BAST

You know, I just think that this is not completely irrelevant for us today. I mean, there is a literal sense in which I don't think as Christians we should monkey around with things like horoscopes or fortunetellers or...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; Tarot cards.

DAVE BAST

Or reading the predictions of the prophets in the tabloid newspapers. Still sometimes you will see...

SCOTT HOEZEE

That still exists, yes.

DAVE BAST

References to Nostradamus, that medieval guy, or whenever he was. So, there is a literal sense of application here; but more deeply, I think as Christians we should not somehow mistrust the providence of God – that He will take care of us – that He holds the future in His hands and we don't need to try to find an edge somehow by figuring out ahead of time through some secret means what is going to... It is kind of like insider trading, you know, in the stock market. You try to get some secret edge so that you can come out a winner. As Christians we place our lives in His hands and we simply accept that and His care for us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And believe that God does want to communicate with God's people. He will, but even that requires some discernment, and we will think about that next.

Segment2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are thinking, Dave, in this program centered mostly in Deuteronomy 18, on how do we know the will of God? How do we find... where do we find the voice of God and how do we discern that it is a reliable representation of what God wants us to know? And that leads us, in the Israelite tradition, to the words of the prophet.

DAVE BAST

And so, in verse 19 we read Moses speaking for God – God's words: I Myself will call to account anyone who does not listen to My words that the prophet speaks in My name. So there is the key phrase: *My words* – God's words that the prophet speaks in God's name – and that is the one we have to listen to. So, make sure you don't ignore him because the God of the Bible is a God who wants to be known. He is not trying to make us guess or follow the occult in order to figure out what we are supposed to do. He is eager to tell us, and it is the doctrine – to give it its proper name theologically – of revelation – special revelation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But the thing is, for Israel, as long as anybody could remember – and we will think about that more in our final program in this series when Moses departs – there has only been mainly one prophet in Israel, and it is Moses. So, you want to know what God thinks? Listen to what Moses says; but Moses is looking to the future, beyond his death, and he knows there is going to be more than one prophet, or at least more than one

person who *claims* to be the prophet. A lot of people *claim* to speak for God today, too; we will think about that also in this program; so how do you know? Well, here is what it says in Deuteronomy 18:20 and following:

But a prophet who presumes to speak in My name anything I have not commanded, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods is to be put to death. ²¹Now you may say to yourselves, “How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?” ²²If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken presumptuously; so do not be alarmed.

So how do you know who to believe? Well, just see whose words come true.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If they don’t come true, don’t believe him; which we will see in a minute is a little bit of a backward way to get to...

DAVE BAST

A circular argument, almost, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You’ve got to wait and see?

DAVE BAST

Only believe the prophet whose words come true, so you have to wait; but yet, it does work out in practice; and in fact, there are a number of examples in the later history of the Old Testament when this sort of problem absolutely presented itself to the people: Who do we listen to? Which message, both of them claimed to be speaking: Thus says the Lord. This is the word of the Lord. Which one do we listen to? One of the great examples of that actually comes later in the book of Jeremiah, right near the end of the independent existence of the last part of Israel – the kingdom of Judah; and you may remember some of the story. The Babylonian army had come up against Jerusalem. They had taken away almost all the territory of Israel and they had carried into exile first the elite citizens of Judea, and now they were kind of closing in for the kill, and Jeremiah the prophet kept prophesying bad news; it was doom and gloom. He said: You know what? You’ve had it. This is the end...

SCOTT HOEZEE

The weeping prophet, Jeremiah.

DAVE BAST

Right; no more miraculous deliverance; but he was counteracted by another prophet called Hananiah.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, Hananiah comes along and says – I think this is Jeremiah 28: ²This is what the Lord almighty, the God of Israel says, “I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon. ³Within two years I will bring back to this place all the articles of the Lord’s house that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon removed from here.”

So Hananiah says: I have a word from the Lord. The Babylonians are finished. It is only going to be a couple of years and everything will be well again, and Jeremiah says:

⁶Amen! May the Lord do so.” He believes him.

DAVE BAST

Yes, well, he is sarcastic. So Jeremiah is kind of mocking him: Yes, amen! I hope that happens, but guess what? ⁷Nevertheless, listen to what I have to say in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. ⁸From early times the prophets who preceded you and me have prophesied war, disaster, and plague against many

countries and great kingdoms. (So Jeremiah is talking about Amos and Micah and Isaiah and all those prophets who had been news.) ⁹But the prophet who prophesies peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the Lord, only if his prediction comes true.

So, he is applying the test of Deuteronomy 18:15. You claim good news here – you claim there is going to be peace; well, let's wait and see if what you say comes true; and of course, it didn't come true.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in this case, though, with Jeremiah, he didn't have to wait because God gives Jeremiah an extra little revelation that night, saying: By the way, that Hananiah guy? He is not My man. I did not tell him to say that. So then Jeremiah goes back to Hananiah and says: The Lord didn't send you, and therefore, you are going to die. God is going to remove you, Hananiah, as Deuteronomy 18 predicted. If you presume to speak for God and you are not, then you will be banished – you will be put to death; and that is what happened because Hananiah the prophet subsequently died very soon after that; but there it is, even Jeremiah is confronted with a fellow prophet and he has to say: I am not one hundred percent sure. If it comes true we will know; if it doesn't then we will know, but most of us, though, are in that meantime part, right? So Jeremiah got a divine tip early: No, Hananiah did not speak for Me. I did not tell him to tell you that stuff. The rest of us have to figure it out a different way.

DAVE BAST

Well, and...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Most of the time.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; so here is the issue, really, for us. We have somebody who stands up and claims to be speaking for God, whether they literally say: Thus says the Lord; or whether they say something like: God sent me to tell you this, this, and the other – God gave me a message. On the one hand, we need to step back and evaluate. The New Testament says test the spirits to see whether they are from God. Just because someone makes that claim does not mean necessarily... and we shouldn't be shaking in our boots: Oh boy, I better do what they tell me to. But here is another good test: Why is it that in our Bibles today we read the book of Jeremiah but not the book of Hananiah?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

Because what Jeremiah said came true. So today we have a huge advantage over the people of Israel. The people of Israel could only listen to spoken claims, but we have the messages of the authentic prophets who have been vindicated by events that have taken place; we have them written; and beyond that, in the New Testament... a prophet really isn't just somebody who foretells the future; a prophet is someone who speaks for God and delivers the message of God, and so we have the apostles of the New Testament who are sort of the equivalent of prophets; and today we can measure someone's words against the confirmed, written word of God, which is a tremendous advantage.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, the biggest advantage of them all – and we will want to think about this in our final segment – the biggest advantage of all is we have God's ultimate prophet; we have the one who was known as the prophet, priest and king par excellence, and we will think of the difference that Jesus Christ makes next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork, where today our focus is on Deuteronomy Chapter 18, and the idea of the true prophet of God; who really speaks for God; which means whom should we listen to today in the midst of lots of different voices and claims that are being made on our attention?

In this chapter as we go back to Deuteronomy 18, now, Moses makes one of the great promises of the Old Testament, beginning at verse 14:

The nations you will dispossess listened to those who practiced sorcery and divination; but as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so. ¹⁵The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to Him, ¹⁶for this is what you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said, “Let us not hear the voice of the Lord our God nor see this great fire anymore or we will die.” ¹⁷The Lord said to me, “What they say is good. ¹⁸I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites and I will put My words in His mouth. He will tell them everything I command Him.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things that you learn in Bible college or in seminary about prophecy is that prophecy isn't really just about predicting the future in the sense of predicting one single fulfillment, but prophecy looks out toward multiple horizons of fulfillment, and sometimes to an ultimate horizon of fulfillment. So these words from Moses that God is going to raise up a prophet, that happened many times; it would happen with Isaiah, it will happen with Jeremiah, it will happen with Amos; but ultimately this is a Deuteronomy 18 arrow pointing straight to Jesus Christ as God's ultimate prophet – the ultimate prophet, priest and king – and Jesus was anointed. He is the Messiah – the Mashiach – the Christ – the one who has been anointed to do exactly that; in fact, in one of the Reformed confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism, it says: Why do we call Jesus Christ (that means anointed), and the answer is because Jesus has been ordained by God the Father and has been anointed with the Holy Spirit to be our chief prophet and teacher who fully reveals to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our deliverance.

DAVE BAST

Yes, and it is interesting, too, that in this passage promising the ultimate prophet who would come... and as you pointed out, Scott, there would be other prophets along the way that would kind of point to Him and prepare the way for Him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

John the Baptist being the final one.

DAVE BAST

Yes; he is the last of the prophets. I remember when I was in seminary one of our professors used the analogy of a mountain range. When you are far away from the mountains you look out there and it just looks like a single mountain, but as you get closer, you see that there are multiple valleys and peaks, and so it is a little more complex than the distant view; and that is the same with the fulfillment of this prediction of the prophet who would come, who would ultimately be Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is exactly right. We said in the previous segment, too, though, that this Jesus, this ultimate prophet of God, along with the Apostles, who bear witness to Jesus, and along with God's verified prophets of old: Jeremiah we thought about in the last segment; these then become our measuring sticks by which to judge the veracity – the truthfulness – of a modern-day prophet. So, there are a lot of preachers – some of them have TV shows, some don't; some of them have big churches, some of them have small churches – but there are a lot of preachers today who are in a prophetic office of the Church now, who say: I speak for God; and some of them promise us health and wealth – the prosperity gospel; some of them try to predict Christ's return and

they say: I have a special word from God; Jesus is coming back on May 25, 2014, I guarantee it; how do you know who is true?

DAVE BAST

If it doesn't happen, maybe you shouldn't listen to them according to Deuteronomy 18.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If they have a bad track record, that right there tells you everything you need to know; but even short of that, because it is not always easy, sometimes the words of people who claim to speak for God don't have a verifiable make-or-break date that it happens or doesn't happen. What about the prosperity gospel? What about those who claim that God's number one goal is to make you healthy and wealthy and rich and comfortable in this life? Well, you stack them up against Jesus. Did He ever say stuff like that?

DAVE BAST

Did He ever *look* like that?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly, did He live like that?

DAVE BAST

Was He rich? Yes, right, exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the answer is: No. That, for the Church, should be enough; but here is the thing. We talked also in the previous program in this series, Dave, and a bit in this one about how Israel was a covenant community, and the Church today is still a covenant community. Let's admit that discerning who is speaking accurately for God – who is accurately reflecting the Bible – that is not easy, and we need each other; we need the community, right? We need each other within the Church community to discern together who is speaking for God and who we should believe and who we should disbelieve.

DAVE BAST

Yes. Getting back to the idea of Jesus being the ultimate prophet – the great prophet, there is an interesting little twist in this passage that we just read from verses 14 and following. Moses reminds the people – or God reminds the people – of their reaction at Mount Sinai when He gave the Law and how spooked they were. It was like when God spoke sort of directly to them with fire and thunder, they were scared out of their wits and they ran away and said: No more of this. We cannot handle this. You speak to us for God; and it is kind of a neat illustration of the fact that, really, communication with the Holy God of the universe has to be mediated somehow through human beings. We cannot stand directly in the presence of God. We cannot handle that. And Jesus is – one of the words we use for Him is the Great Mediator.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

We usually think of that in His priestly role as the one who makes the sacrifice that reconnects us with God; but it is also true coming the other way, as He is the Prophet of God. He mediates God's revelation to us – God's communication, and He does it not just with His words... It is true that He taught with astounding authority, as the New Testament says, but His whole person is God's word to us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is the word made flesh, we say, and for us today that means that He inspires us through the Holy Spirit, and it is the Holy Spirit who is also a mediator in a way. Jesus funnels the will of God through the Spirit, and the Spirit then speaks to our hearts... not individually only, but especially the Spirit speaks to us communally

as a covenant community; and that is why we together discern the spirits – test the spirits as the New Testament says; but also in the belief that what Jesus said at the end of John’s Gospel is true: Rely on My Spirit, who is going to dwell in you, and He will lead you into all truth.

Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always want to know how we can help you to dig deeper into scripture. We have a website, groundworkonline.com. Visit that site and tell us passages and topics you would like to dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/gods-true-prophet>

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