

## Fanatics and the End of Prophecy

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I've been thinking recently about fanatics. I mean the particular kind of fanatics who claim to know what God wants them to do because God spoke to them and told them.

There was a time when there were many such people. In our own tradition, they were the prophets. The Torah describes Moses speaking to God and receiving God's instructions directly, through speech and hearing. Not voices in the mind. Not as a result of prayer and inspiration. The actual voice of God.

This subject arose in the reading last week. God was furious because the Israelites were consorting with Moabite women and following them to worship their god. Then we read this: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the Lord, so that the Lord's wrath may turn away from Israel.'"

Moses obeys God's verbal command. Aaron's grandson, Pinchas, then sees an Israelite man and Moabite woman engaged in sex. Pinchas takes a spear and impales the two of them with one blow through what the Torah delicately calls "the belly." And in our reading today God rewards Pinchas for his zealotry.

That is very scary stuff. If people today claim that they heard the voice of God that made them do some terrible crime, we consider them schizophrenic. The courts usually find them either unable to stand trial or not guilty by reason of insanity.

For example, not long ago a woman chased her teenage daughter through their house where they lived together. The mother was shooting a gun at her daughter. In this way the mother killed her daughter. This mother then explained to the police that God told her to rid her home of Satan and showed her that her daughter was Satan.

Hearing the voice of God does not always result in a crime, but there are other remarkably horrendous utterances attributed to a conversation with God.

Pat Robertson is notorious for his claims to have heard the word of God. Robertson is a wealthy media mogul, television evangelist, ex-Baptist minister and businessman who politically aligns himself with the Christian Right in the United States.

He is the founder of numerous organizations and corporations, including the American Center for Law & Justice, the Christian Broadcasting Network and the Christian Coalition. He is the host of The 700 Club, a Christian TV program airing on channels throughout the United States and on CBN affiliates worldwide.

The son of a U.S. Senator, Robertson is a Southern Baptist. He was active as an ordained minister with that denomination for many years. But Robertson holds to a charismatic theology not traditionally common among Southern Baptists. His media and financial resources make him a recognized, influential, and controversial public voice for conservative Christianity in the United States.

Robertson appears regularly on his very popular daily television show, The 700 Club. During these shows he often claims to have spoken with God and then makes predictions or pronouncements based on what God has told him. And at least a million people watch Robertson daily.

For example, in January 2004, Robertson said that God told him President Bush will be re-elected in a "blowout" in November. "I think George Bush is going to win in a walk," Robertson told viewers of his "700 Club" program. "I really believe I'm hearing from the Lord it's going to be like a blowout election in 2004. It's shaping up that way." Of course, Bush did in fact win re-election, but not in a landslide. The 2004 race between Bush and Kerry was one of the closest large elections in history.

On the January 2, 2007, broadcast of The 700 Club, Robertson said that God spoke to him and told him that "mass killings" were to come during 2007, due to a terrorist attack on the United States. He added, "The Lord didn't say nuclear. But I do believe it will be something like that."

When a terrorist attack failed to happen in 2007, Robertson said, in January 2008, "All I can think is that somehow the people of God prayed and God in his mercy spared us."

On January 4, 2012, Robertson reported that God had spoken to him and "He showed me the next president," but Robertson wouldn't name who it is. He did give an indication that it wouldn't be President Obama since Robertson said God told him Obama's views were at "odds with the majority."

Speaking of the current presidential election, did you know that not just two but three of the candidates claimed in public that God told them to run for President? No, that was not either President Obama or Governor Romney. But Michelle Bachmann and Herman Cain and Rick Perry all said that God told them to run for President. I suppose that proves at least one thing: it really is true that God can change His mind about who is qualified to lead this country.

In biblical times, prophecy that involved direct communication with God by speech was a commonplace. Moses was the first prophet but by no means

the last. Our tradition is rich with the writings of men [they are all men, by the way] who claimed to know God's will because God spoke personally with them. Sometimes they added to the soundtrack a video in the form of visions. Chariots of fire. Burning wheels. Angels. Seraphim. You name it. God revealed to them commands that they had a mission to communicate to the rest of us.

So what happened to prophecy? When did it end?

According to our tradition, the last prophet was Malachi. It happens by coincidence that Malachi is also the last book of prophecy in the Tanakh as we now have it, but that collection of books is not arranged in chronological order. So that's not why Malachi is regarded as the last prophet.

Rather, one reason to think so is that he himself says as much, or at least implies that there will be no more prophets after him.

Similarly, several interpreters understand the book's closing verses as a self-conscious expression that prophecy was about to end. Here's how Malachi ends:

Be mindful of the Teaching of My servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel. Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the Lord. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction.

At least four leading biblical commentators many centuries ago explained that Malachi was aware that prophecy would stop with him. The word of God would henceforth be available only through the written word of the Bible. With the end of prophecy, the Torah would sustain the people of Israel until the messianic era, at which point prophecy will resume.

The rabbis of the Talmud not only concluded that prophecy ended with Malachi. They also determined that from then on, the determination of the meaning of Torah and the meaning of Jewish traditions and indeed the answer to all questions of how we should live all involved an entirely human effort. We would no longer listen to someone who said that he or she had found the answer in something that God told them directly.

The rabbis summarized this teaching in a lovely story. I've told this story to you once before, but that was five years ago. And anyway, it's worth telling again. As a favorite cousin used to say, if you've heard this, don't stop me, because I like telling this story.

The Talmud at Baba Metzia 59b sets forth a famous Midrash. The story concerns a legal question supposedly being debated between Rabbi Eliezer on one side and the rest of the Sages on the other. The Talmud says:

On that day Rabbi Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but the Sages did not accept them.

Said he to them: 'If the halakhah agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!'

Immediately the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place.

'No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,' they retorted.

Again he said to them: 'If the halakhah agrees with me, let this stream of water prove it!'

Immediately the stream of water flowed backwards.

'No proof can be brought from a stream of water,' they rejoined.

Again he urged: 'If the halakhah agrees with me, let the walls of the bet midrash prove it,' whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But Rabbi Joshua rebuked the walls, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what is it your business to interfere?' Hence they did not fall, in honor of Rabbi Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honor of Rabbi Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined.

Again Rabbi Eliezer said to them: 'If the halakhah agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!'

Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'Why do you dispute with Rabbi Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halakhah agrees with him!'

But Rabbi Joshua arose and exclaimed: 'It is not in heaven.'

The Talmud then asks, "What did he mean by this?"

The Talmud answers its own question:

Said Rabbi Jeremiah: That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because You, God, have long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, "After the majority must one incline."

In other words, we don't accept heavenly voices. It doesn't matter whether someone claims to have heard the voice giving a command in private, such as "Run for President." The story says it doesn't matter even in the extreme case depicted in the Talmud, where everyone saw and heard three miracles and then a heavenly voice. We consider the texts we have inherited and the methodology for interpreting them and that is one of only two ways that we communicate with God.

What is the other way? Prayer.

As Rabbi Irwin Kula has pointed out, quoting Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, when we pray, we talk to God; when we study, God talks to us.

But neither our speaking to God in prayer nor God speaking to us in the texts we study involves any actual communication with God by voice.

Our religion is Rabbinic Judaism, not the religion of the Israelites. We go beyond the text of our Torah to interpret it and understand it in the world in which we live.

Our religion includes basic principles of righteousness and justice. We therefore reject the claim of the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, for example, relating to the Akeidah. He said that Abraham was right to follow God's command when God told him to sacrifice Isaac. Why was that? According to Kierkegaard, it was because Abraham's obedience was justified as the so-called "teleological suspension of the ethical."

That is, according to Kierkegaard, if God told me to do it, ethical rules no longer apply and I must obey, even if what I am doing is something I know would otherwise be wrong.

We don't believe that principle. We don't listen to heavenly voices or to messages from people who claim to hear them.

So in the modern world of Judaism in which we live, we reject the command, supposedly from God, that Pinhas followed when he killed the Israelite man and Moabite woman. Prophecy is over, and we are far better off without it.

And let us say, Amen.