

11 October 2015

**Foretelling or Forthtelling?**  
Deuteronomy 18:9-20

Last week in this series dealing with the difficulties of the Bible, I talked a little bit about what we should do with the long, detailed, and often puzzling law codes of scripture. To summarize briefly, I suggested two principles. First, the more specific the laws are, the more likely they are to be obsolete, inasmuch as they refer to Ancient Near Eastern cultural matters that no longer apply to us. We don't worship in tents by means of animal sacrifice, for example, and our religious leaders are no longer the first line of defense against contagious skin disease. Second, and more important, I said we need to remember that the Bible records a long journey of faith, and the law codes reflect one (relatively early) stage in that journey. Yes, God gave the law to Israel, but that doesn't mean God was done. There was more revelation yet to come. So, when we read those legal or ritual instructions from three thousand years ago, we have to hold them up against the later, fuller, revelation that we find in the life and teachings of Christ. As Christ himself said, he came to "fulfill" the law. So his teaching and example is where we must start when understanding any passage of scripture, including those legal sections.

That leads to a question that many of you have asked me: why keep the Old Testament law at all? Since we have Jesus' teachings now, do we even need the law? Can't we just dump it? Well, it's a fair question. And let me just say, if you're only going to read part of the Bible, let it not be Leviticus. Let it be the gospels. That *is* the foundation for us as Christians. Nevertheless, it's going too far to say that the Old Testament laws no longer have any value at all. Even where they reflect the cultural mindset of a day long gone, it is possible to learn from them some important principles. Let me illustrate with a passage from the laws of Deuteronomy, from chapter 18, verses 9-20.

*When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practises divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the LORD your God is driving them out before you. You must remain completely loyal to the LORD your God. Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the LORD your God does not permit you to do so.*

*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.' Then the LORD replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who*

*presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.'*

This passage has two parts. The first part bans divination and sorcery – all the methods that people had developed at that time to try to foretell or influence the future. And, by the way, there was a *lot* of that going on in the Ancient Near East. The Bible bears witness to witches and mediums and sorcerers and, especially, soothsayers telling the future. Archeology tells the same story. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, French archeologists uncovered the ancient city of Mari, from the time of Abraham, and in those ruins found the royal library of King Zimri-lim. In that library, along with diplomatic correspondance, they found detailed instructions on how to read the future by examining the livers of sacrificial animals. There were even clay models of livers, evidently used to teach novices how to read them. Also in those texts, we read about those who told the future in the flight of birds, in the stars, and by calling up the spirits of the dead. There were practitioners who specialized in laying curses on others, perhaps using an image of that person or something that belongs to them. The ancient world was filled with magicians and conjurers and soothsayers, and Deuteronomy categorically forbids Israel to have anything to do with any of them.

Now keep in mind that this would not have been for the reason we might ban such practices. Within our scientific worldview, we tend to regard those remnants of divination that remain – crystals and Tarot cards and horoscopes – as scams preying on the vulnerable, but nobody in Old Testament times would have doubted that such powers were real. This law is not warning people against frauds; this law is banning the use of what the people would have considered genuine magic. So, from that perspective, we should ask, “Why?” Why does God say to avoid this stuff?

Here is what lies behind this prohibition: who is in control. The one common feature of all these different practices is that they are attempts by people to be in control of the course of events. The reason people seek to know the future is so that they control the consequences and position themselves to succeed. When you know what is going to take place in the future, you have an edge on other people. You could even say that these magical practices are ways to control God, to force God either to do what we want or at least to show his hand. And God says no. God will not be summoned.

But that doesn't mean that God never reveals hidden things. That's what the rest of our passage refers to. Moses tells the people, “God will raise up a prophet – like me. Listen to that prophet. God will put words in the prophet's mouth, so make sure you pay attention and do what you hear.” See? God promises revelation to the people. But notice how different that is from the world of divination. The prophet appears when God chooses, not when we have something to ask. The prophet tells us what God wants us to hear, not what we want to know. (In the book of Ezekiel, there's an interesting scene where the elders of Israel go to the prophet with a list of questions for him to ask God, treating the prophet like a soothsayer. Ezekiel just shrugs and says, “Why would God want to tell you anything? Go away; I got nothing.”) And maybe the most important difference of all: God's message through the prophet will be about our behavior *now*, calling for an immediate response from us. It will not usually be about events to come.

Again, the difference between the Near Eastern soothsayer and the biblical prophet is who is in control. The soothsayer supposedly gives us control, which would be nice sometimes. But as much as we might want the assurance of knowing the future, as lovely as it would be to have reliable sources to consult at our convenience, God doesn't play that game. In the model of the prophet, God is in control. Our task is to listen for God's voice when God speaks, not to force God to tell us what we want. Our concern is not what may happen one day, but whether we are following God today. Our assurance is not to come from having advance knowledge, but from trusting God even when we *don't* know the future. God will not be inquired of like a horoscope. God will not be used as a tool to facilitate our plans. That's the point of this passage from Deuteronomy, and even if we no longer try to read the future in sheep livers, that basic message is just as relevant now as it ever was.

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Now some of you may be wondering what all this has to do with our current sermon series, on how we should and should not approach the Bible. Excellent question. Let me tell you.

This book is not a tool for telling the future. It was never intended to be used as a code for charting future events. There are plenty of people who do that. From John Nelson Darby, who invented the idea of the "Rapture" in the 1830s, to William Miller who forecast the end of the world in 1848 by means of the Book of Daniel, to William Scofield of the Scofield Reference Bible, to Hal Lindsey of *The Late Great Planet Earth* and Tim LaHaye of the *Left Behind* franchise, all the way to Harold Camping of "Wait, I'm sure I got it right *this* time!" and the eBible Fellowship that used scripture to forecast the complete annihilation of the earth last Wednesday, people have treated the inspired word of God like a sacrificial liver to be pried at and poked until it yields a forecast. Ignore those people. Those people go to the Bible already knowing what they want to find there, and sure enough they find it whether it's there or not. They approach the Bible as a tool for their plans instead of a witness to God's life-changing love and holiness. And they are wrong: this is not a ouija board, not a deck of Tarot cards, not a crystal ball, not a Farmer's Almanack, not a shaggy woolly worm forecasting a cold winter. God doesn't play those games.

And in Deuteronomy 18, God explicitly forbids us to play those games, too. The principle presented there is simple: God will tell us what we need to know, when we need to know it. When we go to the Bible, let us look for what God is telling us to do today. That will be more than enough to keep us busy without worrying about the future.