

Idolaters Do Hear from God

James Coke / 2008

Many Jews and Christians believe that only the Hebrew indigenous people heard from God and enjoyed covenant with him. They see the Judeo-Christian Bible as the sole inerrant word of God revealed on earth for all people. Further, they believe that the Holy Spirit only performed his ministry of revelation through the Hebrews and followers of Yah'shua (Jesus) as the Hebrew Messiah. The Apostolic writer Paul said as much in his letter to the gentile church in Rome:

...to whom (Hebrews) belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh...
[Romans 9:4-5]

Paul does acknowledge earlier in the same letter that other people groups had some understanding of God's laws apart from the Hebrew Scriptures.

...that which is known about God is evident within them (unrighteous people); for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. [Romans 1:19-20]

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.
[Romans 2:14-15]

His words suggest that God's communication to indigenous peoples other than the Hebrews is manifest primarily through both the awesome display of creation, and the divine spark of God's holiness that is innate in persons formed in his image. He does not, however, suggest that they might hear from God directly.

There is a wide body of spiritual literature from many faiths and belief systems that contain echoes of God's words to the Hebrews. Some pre-date the Bible, such as the tablets from Akkad, and some follow it, such as the Qur'an. All view the Almighty in varying ways and likely contain a mixture of truth and error. Yet we do not necessarily need to consider the merits of these documents to be convinced that God could have spoken to their authors. The Bible itself indicates that the Hebrew people were not alone in hearing from the true God. As this paper will show, God did (and does) speak directly and clearly both to idolaters and to God-fearers who have broken covenant.

Idolaters

Terah

Terah was the father of the patriarch Abraham. He lived with his children and their spouses in Mesopotamia, south of Babylon, and participated in the prevailing religious rituals of their culture. This likely included honoring the God Merodach and Goddess Ishtar, along with a host of lesser gods.

From ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, {namely,} Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods. [Joshua 24:2]

We know from the Torah that the LORD (YHWH) spoke to Abraham in Genesis 12 and instructed him to leave Mesopotamia and travel to Canaan where he would receive his blessing and become a blessing to future generations. But it was Terah, as head of household, who appears to have first heard God calling the family to Canaan.

Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there. [Genesis 11:31]

The family did not get beyond Haran under Terah's leadership. It may have been too much of a trip for the elderly Terah, or he may have had second thoughts about leaving his culture. In any case, Abraham did not leave Haran until after his father's death, when he heard from YHWH directly. So Terah must have been the first to get the call. The implication for us is that Terah, despite serving other gods, nevertheless heard the voice of YHWH.

Melchizedek

We are introduced to the King and High Priest of Salem (Jerusalem) in Genesis 14. Melchizedek's name means "king of righteousness". Salem ("peace") was an important city in Canaan before the arrival of Abraham in Bethel, and its people served the Canaanite gods Baal and Asherah, among others. Melchizedek knew God as El Elyon, or "God Most High". The name El and its variations appear with regularity in the Tanakh as alternative Hebrew names for YHWH.

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." He (Abraham) gave him (Melchizedek) a tenth of all. [Genesis 14:18-20]

We know from writings found in Ugarit that Melchizedek and the Canaanites knew the true Creator "El", but not in the same way that Abraham knew YHWH. If Melchizedek had known YHWH, it is possible he could have been chosen by God as patriarch of the Hebrews rather than Abraham. Notice the difference in Abraham's reference to YHWH when talking with the king of Sodom.

Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth..." [Genesis 14:22]

Yet despite the fact that Melchizedek practiced what we today would call religious syncretism, he apparently heard the voice of the true God, and Abraham honored him with a tenth of all he owned. Bear in mind this occurred long before Moses recorded the Levitical tithing regulations of the Siniatic Law. Further, Melchizedek is honored by the writer of the Apostolic letter to the Hebrews as a prototype for Jesus' eternal priesthood.

Balaam [Num. 22-24, 31:8]

Balaam was a prophetic diviner or "seer" from the Mesopotamia who was called upon by king Balak of Moab to curse the Israelites after they left Egypt. Balaam's spiritual authority and reputation preceded him. King Balak said to him:

"I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed." [Numbers 22:6]

Yet despite serving a variety of spirits in ways that clearly violated God's will for his servants, it is clear from the scriptures that Balaam heard the authentic voice of YHWH.

He (Balaam) said to them (Balak's messengers), "Spend the night here (in Mesopotamia), and I will bring word back to you as the LORD may speak to me." And the leaders of Moab stayed with Balaam. Then God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent {word} to me, 'Behold, there is a people who came out of Egypt and they cover the surface of the land; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I may be able to fight against them and drive them out.'" "God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." [Numbers 22:8-12]

In these stories of Terah, Melchizedek, and Balaam, we see examples of indigenous people, including Holy men and shamans, who intermediated with the spirit world and with the true God. They heard accurately from God and followed his commands. YHWH was able to use and work his will through them. This may be surprising to those of us today who are familiar with scriptures that speak of God's distaste for such syncretistic belief.

The objection may be raised that in these three examples God had neither specified his Siniatic law, nor revealed salvation through faith in the Christ, and therefore was prepared to withhold judgment and use the idolaters for his purposes. Certainly Paul writes that God was willing to overlook sinfulness before an appointed time.

...in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed... [Romans 3:25]

Yet we continue to see a pattern of accurate prophecy given by unholy people even after the law was received. The following are examples of persons who ministered under the Siniatic law, violated that law, and incurred God's wrath. Nevertheless, they continued to hear YHWH correctly – just as we saw with the pagans.

God-Fearers in Covenant Violation

Saul

Saul was the first king of Israel. He was selected by God and anointed by the prophet Samuel. We see evidence of his spiritual authority in the following passage:

When they came to the hill there, behold, a group of prophets met him (Saul); and the Spirit of God came upon him mightily, so that he prophesied among them. It came about, when all who knew him previously saw that he prophesied now with the prophets, that the people said to one another, "What has happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets?" [1 Samuel 10:10-11]

Unfortunately, Saul on multiple occasions failed to fulfill God's explicit instructions to him as conveyed by Samuel. As a result, he lost both his calling and his spiritual authority.

Now the Spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD terrorized him. [1 Samuel 16:14]

Despite this, Saul continues from time to time to hear and deliver God's authentic word.

He (Saul) proceeded there to Naioth in Ramah; and the Spirit of God came upon him also, so that he went along prophesying continually until he came to Naioth in Ramah. He also stripped off his clothes, and he too prophesied before Samuel and lay down naked all that day and all that night. Therefore they say, "Is Saul also among the prophets?" [1 Samuel 19:23-24]

Two Prophets

1 Kings 13 contains a difficult story about two prophets, both of whom heard accurately from God. One deceived the other with a false word that led to the latter's death. No motive is given for the deception, and one cannot help but feel as though God does something terribly unfair to his honest servant. Regardless, YHWH subsequently gives the deceiving prophet an accurate word.

He (deceiver) said to him (deceived), "I also am a prophet like you, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the LORD, saying, 'Bring him back with you to your house, that he may eat bread and drink water.' " {But} he lied to him. So he went back with him, and ate bread in his house and drank water. Now it came about, as they were sitting down at the table, that the word of the LORD came to the prophet who had brought him back; and he cried to the man of God who came from Judah, saying, "Thus says the LORD, 'Because you have disobeyed the command of the LORD, and have not observed the commandment which the LORD your God commanded you, but have returned and eaten bread and drunk water in the place of which He said to you, "Eat no bread and drink no water"; your body shall not come to the grave of your fathers.' " [1 Kings 13:18-22]

Caiaphas

Caiaphas was the high priest appointed by the Roman procurator Valerius Gratus to serve over Israel during much of Jesus' lifetime. He participated in a plot to frame and crucify Jesus to protect the priestly political establishment from any Messianic intervention. Despite his unholy service, he too prophesied correctly.

Now he (Caiaphas) did not say this on his own initiative, but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad. So from that day on they planned together to kill Him. [John 11:51-53]

The Hebrew people were specially blessed to hear and record the voice of YHWH and to see his hand moving in their midst. Yet still they took on pagan idolatry in their worship. They began trusting terrestrial spirits to give them their desires rather than their God. When they willingly chose not to listen themselves to the voice of God, he sent prophets they could not avoid. God did this despite the Hebrews having become no different than the pagans from which Abraham was separated. Listen to the words of the Hebrews exiled to Egypt following the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem. Jeremiah has been exhorting them to leave their Canaanite practices and turn back to YHWH. They respond by telling Jeremiah of the benefits of their idolatry.

"As for the message that you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD, we are not going to listen to you! "But rather we will certainly carry out every word that has proceeded from our mouths, by burning sacrifices to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, just as we ourselves, our forefathers, our kings and our princes did in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem; for {then} we had plenty of food and were well off and saw no misfortune. "But since we stopped burning sacrifices to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have met our end by the sword and by famine." [Jer. 44:16-18]

Even some of God's priests and prophets had begun to minister in the name of the Canaanite god Baal. YHWH reveals the following to Jeremiah:

The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?' And those who handle the law did not know Me; The rulers also transgressed against Me, And the prophets prophesied by Baal And walked after things that did not profit. [Jeremiah 2:8]

Despite having become as pagan as any other culture, God faithfully continues to speak to the Hebrews through his prophets so the people will have no excuse for not hearing him. Why should we expect God to respond differently to any other people group on the planet that is in need of correction?

All Hear His Voice

From beginning to end, YHWH as loving Father speaks to all his children, whether atheist, believer, or backslider. But we also see from the scriptures above that there are more voices out there than just YHWH. There are terrestrial spirits like Baal and the Prince of Persia. We are deceived by our own flesh warring against the things of the Holy Spirit. We are influenced by the mores of our culture and its ways of conceiving God's relationship to his creation.

In most cultures, decisions about faith are made by the group, not the individual. The combination of all these inputs is weighed and some compromise acceptable to the group is reached. Thus syncretism becomes the norm in religion.

YHWH understands this. We are, after all, blind to most of what happens in the spirit realm. Regardless of whether a person is Babylonian, Egyptian, Muslim, or Chinese Buddhist, he can hear God's authentic voice if he wants to do so. He just needs to know to listen. We who know this truth have an obligation to those that do not. We also have an obligation to face the syncretism in our own religion, including idolatry of money, power, independence, or entertainment. Our own shortcomings should humble us in dealing with persons that do not share our scriptures.

Finally, we owe it to God to acknowledge the various ways that he has communicated with other people groups who were not Hebrews. While syncretism and deception may be alive and well everywhere, we likely will find a kernel of truth too, and one that was revealed in a different way. How many others like Abraham and Jeremiah may have been sent through the ages with words of truth that were delivered to cultures having only an oral history?

Notes

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