

False prophet or true?: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Mark 1:21-28

True prophets have a different bottom line than false ones, but that doesn't make them any easier to recognize.

by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [January 27, 2009](#) issue

Now that paper fortunes have been lost and retirement savings have fallen through the floor, the country seems to be in a mood to stone false prophets.

There were the CEOs, to start with, who promised big annual returns but only if they were paid in stock options. And the cable TV talking heads who told investors what to buy. Several authors predicted *Dow 30,000*, *Dow 40,000* and *Why the Real Estate Boom Will Not Bust*.

You know whom I haven't seen on television lately? Carleton Sheets, who promised that you could get rich buying real estate with no money down. For that matter, there aren't so many late-night infomercials about the "Internet treasure chest" or "winning in the cash-flow business." These get-rich-quick schemes always had a testimonial from a pastor, as if to reassure us that getting rich quick really was all right.

Who knew that the prosperity gospel was headed for a little asperity? The truth is that we all should have recognized false prophets by their accent on profits.

True prophets have a different bottom line and speak of more lasting values, but for some reason that doesn't make them any easier to recognize. Rather, as today's readings suggest, we tend to recognize them only after the fact.

Consider how hard it was for the Israelites, even though making a way through the desert had become a life-or-death business. If they put their trust in the wrong person, they could die. Still, when Moses went up the mountain for a long talk with Yahweh, they quickly yielded to fear and pressed Aaron to make a golden calf.

(Did you see the Christians who laid hands on the golden bull of Wall Street, praying for God to bless the economy? A guest on Pat Robertson's *700 Club* called for prayer groups "to intercede for banks and financial institutions." "I'm not a prosperity preacher, I'm a prophet," she said. "God is saying that . . . you must connect to his economic system." On October 29, a crowd of believers fervently prayed over the golden statue.)

Anyway, after Moses came down from the mountain and found what the Israelites had done, it took 40 years before they could see things more clearly.

The book of Deuteronomy records that sober hindsight. In his farewell message to the people, Moses reminded them of their earlier idolatry. Now that they stood on the threshold of the Promised Land, wanting to know when they would come into full prosperity again, he forbade them to make use of diviners, soothsayers, augurs, mediums, oracles. Instead he declared that God would give them a real prophet.

Because he was a prophet too he could anticipate the people's question: How will we know if a prophet is true or false? They wouldn't know, he admitted, except in retrospect. "If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken."

This is a sobering thought. We would like to think that we can recognize God's messenger by the content of the message, but that's rarely so. All too often we judge things through our own desires or fears. Hindsight is always better than foresight. This means that whatever our conception of the divine, in some sense we must experience God as process; things have to play out.

I live among prognosticators and market forecasters, now wandering in their own financial wilderness. Many of them took out big mortgages in the heady days, and are trying to make sense of this strange new reality. They would like to know how it's all going to work out. But truly God only knows, and in God's larger story, early indicators lie in another realm.

Which brings us to this story from Mark's Gospel. Fifteen hundred years after the time of Moses, the age of prophets seemed to be past. God had not spoken through anyone since Malachi. Then in Galilee there appeared a man of a humble family who "taught as one having authority, and not as the scribes." That circumlocution hinted at what he might be. He might be a prophet.

Everyone must have watched to see how he would prove himself. Then he came upon one of the true unfortunates of the world, a man desperately ill. This poor soul had not asked for his condition. It had just happened to him, and the nature of his illness made it impossible for him to see past it.

The teacher from Nazareth spoke to what was deepest within him, and back came an eerie reply: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God."

Jesus said, "Silence!" as the spirit was determined to cry out more.

At last the man's body shuddered violently and the demon was gone. The crowds marveled but weren't sure what they had witnessed. "What is this? A new teaching—with authority!" And so Jesus' public ministry was launched with plenty of debate. Some would call him a false prophet or a glutton, a drunkard, a blasphemer. Some said he was Moses or Elijah come back to life. Others would suspend judgment. It was hard for anyone then to see past events of the moment and recognize the larger things he had come to do. With the benefit of hindsight, we call him the Christ.

Back then, who knew? Well, that's the delicious irony. The demon did. It knew who Jesus was.