

The ministry of interpretation

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In the Talmud, there is a story of a group of rabbis arguing over the status of a particular clay oven. Is it clean or unclean? Rabbi Eliezer stands alone against the interpretation given by his fellow sages, and he begins to call upon nature to confirm him.

He asks that a tree get up and move if he is right. The tree, pulling itself up by the roots, moves farther down the lane.

The sages are unmoved, and they continue to reject Eliezer's interpretation. "This time," he says to the rabbis, "if I am right, let the walls of the House of Study bend inward." The walls begin to bend, yet the sages don't change their ruling.

Finally, in exasperation, Eliezer calls upon God's own voice to weigh in on the matter of the clay oven. The heavens open, and a voice declares that Eliezer is indeed correct.

Rabbi Joshua responds with words from Deuteronomy: "It is not in heaven."

Puzzled by this audacity, another rabbi wonders what Joshua could possibly mean. Rabbi Jeremiah explains: "He meant that since the Torah has been given already on Mount Sinai, we do not pay attention to a heavenly voice, for You have written in Your Torah, 'Decide according to the majority.'"

The heavenly voice responds to this by laughing. “My children have defeated me!” the voice says.

This midrash reminds me of God’s intention to bring the scripture down from heaven and give the interpretation to God’s people. It’s in the back of my mind as I read Mark’s account of the conflict between Jesus and a gentile woman. The woman asks for a miracle, but Jesus maintains that the good news for the Jews takes priority. Instead of backing down she pushes back, offers another interpretation.

It is freeing and hopeful to see in the Talmud a God who does not meet us with clenched fists but instead laughs at the scuffling and rigor of biblical interpretation. It is a God who sees that we are capable of the work we are given to do.

As our churches continue to seek the scriptures in each new generation, I’m reminded that Jesus, too, welcomes us to the ministry of interpretation, to the priesthood of all believers. This can be a messy and difficult task, one that requires us to be vulnerable to one another, to reveal our wounds. But we are also assured that, as the body of Christ, we are given everything we need to discern the word: we are given the Holy Spirit, and we are given one another.