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2004

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Recommended Citation

Suzanne L. Stone, *Truth and Illusion*, 94 Jewish Quarterly Review 19 (2004).
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THE JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW, Vol. 94, No. 1 (Winter 2004) 19–22

Truth and Illusion

SUZANNE LAST STONE

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I was invited to comment on various rabbinic texts about true and false prophecy. One text, in particular, resisted quick interpretation. The text, *bSanhedrin* 89a, begins: "Rabbi Isaac said: The same communication [*signon*, from the Latin *signum*, meaning watchword] occurs to several prophets, yet no two prophets prophesy the same communication [*signon*]." Rabbi Isaac cites Jeremiah and Obadiah, who each delivered the same message from God but expressed it with stylistic variation. Rabbi Isaac's comment on the literary record of prophecy is identified by the Talmud as the test of true and false prophecy used by the King of Judah to judge the four hundred prophets of King Ahab false. All predicted victory in battle "with one mouth," in identical language (1 Kgs 22).

Is the prophet's individual speech the work of the prophet or of God? Moshe Greenberg cites Rabbi Isaac to show that premoderns, although formally adhering to the doctrine of divine dictation, readily conceded the human contribution in prophecy when reflecting on the literary evidence. Rabbi Isaac's comment, however, recalls midrashic descriptions of the overflow of meaning in a single divine statement, which human speech cannot replicate. The varied formulations of a single message from God may be one more example of the multiplicity engendered from singularity that is a mark of divine speech. In either case, how does the Talmud understand the relationship of the prophet's speech to truth? Is individual expression a test of true prophecy or of the true prophet, pointing to the qualities of mind or character of those who are trusted to convey God's word? Or is the test, as other rabbinic texts suggest, an application of the laws of testimonial witnesses to prophets, who also claim private knowledge of the truth?

Still other questions are suggested by the continuation of this talmudic passage, which more clearly focuses on the human factor in prophecy. The Talmud searches for a legal justification for punishing Zedekiah, who

The Jewish Quarterly Review (Winter 2004)
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was among the four hundred. Zedekiah, the rabbis scrupulously note, did not utter a false prophecy with the intention to deceive. He was seduced by a lying spirit sent by God. "What could he have done?" the Talmud asks. And the Talmud answers: "He ought to have scrutinized the matter in light of Rabbi Isaac's tradition" that no two prophets deliver even the same message from God in identical language. The Talmud adopts Rabbi Isaac's tradition as a normative test of true prophecy, binding on the prophet himself. But why can't the prophet take his own spontaneous experience and sincere apprehension of prophecy as true? Ancient and modern psychology converge here. The Talmud implicitly recognizes that the human capacity to perceive the difference between a genuine external event and illusion is fragile. Here, a lying spirit deceives. Elsewhere in Scripture, false prophecy is said to have its origins in the wishes, dreams, or imagination of the prophet and is often stimulated by a need to express the agreeable (Jer 23). So, the Talmud imposes a duty on the prophet himself to search his truth claim for error, in light of objective methods the law deems truth-acquiring.

With this passage, the Talmud invites us to reflect on the human capacity and obligation to discern and convey the truth, a question as relevant for moderns as for the ancients. How do we ascertain the truth of claims of private knowledge that, as Kant said, "has its grounds in the particular character of the subject?" Whom do we trust to speak truthfully in public life and how do we understand the relationship of truth to self-expression and individuality? How do those who hold themselves out as transmitters of knowledge or true information in society resist not only external pressures such as popular sentiment but also internal forces of self-deception, wishful thinking, and fantasy?

One final question: Why does this particular talmudic text so engage the attention of a writer on Jewish and comparative legal theory? No doubt, the text appeals because it invites modern questions and because its interpretation demands the bringing together of many disciplines from the legal and literary to the epistemological and psychological. But the more complex answer lies in personal biography and begins with an encounter with three texts, unrelated to matters Jewish, that captured my imagination over thirty years ago. Two are works by the classicist Eric Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (1965) and *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1971), and the third is Hans Jonas's *The Gnostic Religion* (1970).

Each book describes a critical moment in the late antique world: the collapse of the classical Greek humanist view of a rationally ordered, neutral cosmos and, with it, the rise of a variety of magical practices and

religious attitudes, including apocalypticism and gnosticism. The "Return of the Irrational" in hellenistic society, Dodds wrote, came about from "the fear of freedom, the unconscious flight from the heavy burden of individual choice that a free society lays upon its members" (*Greeks and the Irrational*, p. 252). Dodds later wrote of the anxiety that gripped pagans and Christians, the distrust of "daylight reality" and ordinary human experience, when the sense of the withdrawal of divinity from the world became palpable. Jonas described the feeling of alienation from the world, homelessness, and near nihilism that the Christian gnostics experienced. The psychological mood of that age struck a chord of recognition, one that occurs when two ages momentarily seem to align. For both authors, the late antique age was a parallel of our own, civilizations that had become dominated by impersonal principles, technology, and materialism and lacked an organic sense of community. Dodds and Jonas strove to understand the ancients through the lens of the modern predicament and, even more boldly, to read the ancients' experience as a cautionary lesson for their own age of anxiety.

I also felt a sense of empathy with that age and intended to make Jewish religious attitudes in late antiquity the center of my work. In my all too brief days as a student of early rabbinic religion, nothing was more fascinating than uncovering evidence of "irrationalism," not only in Jewish sectarian literature but in rabbinic texts, including the persistence of prophecy, magic, and the power of dreams in the rabbinic imagination.

My fascination with both the early rabbinic period and "the irrational" persists to this day. But legal training and an academic position within a community that values the role of law in society subtly changed my focus. The goal of law is to regulate irrational forces in society and to subject them to the skeptical, sober, and reflective light of day. Law, these days, is often criticized as overly traditional, cold, and objective, preserving a past that no longer speaks to the present and putting an arbitrary end to the search for truth for the sake of order. The rule of law is, however, a normative ideal, one of critical moment in our new age of anxiety, if not terror, when irrational forces have entered into the heart of political life. Law's focus is also on truth, but it offers a different vision from prophecy or philosophy of where truth is lodged and how best to access and acquire it.

I have spent part of this stage of my academic life explicating that tense "coexistence of opposites, of prophecy and law, charisma and institution," in rabbinic thought. Now I am turning my attention to how irrational and suprarational phenomena, such as magic and prophecy, fare when subjected to rabbinic legal analysis—an analysis shaped, in turn, by a

distinct conception of human psychology. That fine legal dissection of the literary legacy of true and false prophecy, for example, led the talmudic rabbis and their successors to reflect on universal issues of truth-acquisition and to question whether prophecy, which promises ultimate knowledge of the truth, is as uncertain and unreliable, if not more so, than human reasoning. Their critique rested as much on the inherent limits of human cognition as on the frailties of human psychology. Humans have a limited capacity to distinguish truth from falsity or, as Maimonides framed it, prophecy from sorcery. Moreover, the human actors who must be trusted to convey God's words are capable of error as well as deceit, self-deception, illusion, and resistance to the world as it is. This sober yet passionate attention to human psychology links the rabbinic texts to those formative texts of Dodds and Jonas, whose works still resonate with me.