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THE LURE OF MAGIC: SOMETHING FOR NOTHING

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If there arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams, and giveth thee a sign or a wonder, And the sign or the wonder come to pass, whereof he spake unto thee, saying, Let us go after other gods, which thou hast not known, and let us serve them; Thou shalt not hearken unto the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams: for the LORD your God proveth you, to know whether ye love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Ye shall walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him (Deut. 13:1-4).

The theocentric framework of this law is the worship of God. Proper worship necessitates obedience to God's revealed law, Moses said. Worship, like wisdom, begins with the fear of God. Once again, Moses warned Israel to obey God's commandments. This is the continuing ethical theme of the Book of Deuteronomy, which constituted the second giving of the law. But the point of this obedience, given the positioning of Deuteronomy as book five of the Pentateuch, is inheritance. **Covenant-keeping is the basis for maintaining the national inheritance.**

This was a land law. It governed the nation's response to false prophets. The prophet no longer exists. The office ended with the Old Covenant in A.D. 70.

The Prophet's Judicial Role

This passage dealt with those people who claimed to be prophets. A prophet had a specific judicial function in Mosaic Israel: to declare to a God-designated audience God's direct revelation regarding the future, but more to the point, regarding the faith and behavior of that audience. The prophet delivered a **covenant lawsuit** against someone or against some group. If the listeners did not repent, he warned, God would bring negative sanctions against them. Sometimes the prophet's message was repentance. (Not always, however: Moses' prophetic role was not intended to gain Pharaoh's repentance. See below: section on "Something for Nothing.") Jonah's covenant-lawsuit against Nineveh is a representative example: repent or else be destroyed within 40 days. Publicly, he prophesied destruction only, but the possibility of their corporate repentance, and therefore their avoidance of negative corporate sanctions, had been implicit from the beginning (Jonah 4:2). Sometimes, however, the prophet's role was limited to provoking a confrontation prior to God's imposition of negative sanctions. Elijah's confrontation with Ahab prior to the drought is representative (1 Ki. 17:1-5).

The prophet was usually outside the priestly hierarchy. He

was not a member of the tribe of Levi. Samuel, for example, was an Ephraimite (1 Sam. 1:1). The prophet announced that the law of God was not being obeyed. He demanded in God's name that the existing legal order or the nation's dominant social practices be abandoned. He announced his God-given authority as superior to the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. In the name of God's law, the prophet demanded the scrapping of the existing legal and social order.

The listeners' obvious response was: "Who are you to say?" When a man came to the nation in the name of the true God and His true law, he was inescapably a revolutionary in the eyes of a covenant-breaking Establishment. The question then arose: "In God's eyes, who is the **authorized representative** of the nation's God-sanctioned Establishment?" A related question arose: "What **evidence** does this man present which testifies to his office as a prophet?" This was what the fiery competition on Mt. Carmel was all about (1 Ki. 18).

The prophet might perform signs and wonders. He might predict the future. His possession of supernatural abilities – outside the normal space-time continuum – testified to his special legal status. This was partial evidence of his special relationship with God, but it was not sufficient to prove his claim of God-given authority. **Far more important than signs and wonders was theological orthodoxy.** A true prophet had to come in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It did not matter what signs and wonders he performed if he came in the name of another god. His signs and wonders might be deceptions, or they might be authentically supernatural, but his message was itself a deception. No god other than the true God could be lawfully worshipped publicly inside the borders of Israel. The prophet's ability to perform signs and wonders – below-cost shortcuts in the normal space-time continuum – had to be accompanied by orthodox theological confession. The differentiating mark between magic and prophecy was theological confession.

Boundaries and Prophecy

Men are creatures before God. They are under His authority. They are also under the constraints of the creation. They are not originally creative. They are re-creative as subordinates who are made in God's image. It is legitimate for men to re-work the creation by means of their knowledge of the laws governing the creation. Adam was told by God to dress the garden (Gen. 2:15). This means that God told Adam to re-work the creation. Adam was told to improve his environment. The world was originally created good, but Adam had the power and the lawful authority to make it better. He also had the responsibility to make it better. But he could lawfully exercise this authority only as a creature who acknowledged his limitations. He was

something for nothing out of Israel: slave labor and the inheritance. At the time of the exodus, this generations-long miscalculation was exposed for all to see. The Egyptians had believed that the State's coercion of Israel would remain profitable: the most efficient allocation of scarce resources. They were called to account by God at the time of the exodus. The tyranny of socialism's commitment to a world of something for nothing led to a national economic disaster, as it always does. The historical model of socialism is Pharaoh's Egypt: bureaucratic, tyrannical, and ultimately disastrous for those in charge. The events of 1989-91 in Eastern Europe and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics were merely recapitulations of the Egyptian model. The systems broke down economically, politically, and socially in a massive collapse – remarkably, without much bloodshed.

The magician seeks to gain his ends by escaping from some of the limits of his own creaturehood. The creation places limits on him that he deeply resents, just as Adam resented the boundary around the forbidden tree. He seeks to escape the requirement that in order to gain a new set of circumstances, he must give up something of value. He wishes to increase his wealth – to improve his circumstances – by holding onto his wealth and augmenting it in ways that do not threaten his wealth. He wants personal economic growth – an increase in the options available to him – without a threat to his net worth. He does not care who provides this for him. He also does not care if others in the economy suffer losses in order to provide his gains. He cares only about his own advancement and the advancement of those working with him. He is convinced that magic will provide these gains. He may even believe that his risk-free gains come at no one's expense. But whatever his belief regarding the source of his gains, he believes that he does not have to offer something of value equal to or greater than whatever he expects to receive.

Yet even he suspects that there is never something for nothing. He is at risk. He knows that if he performs his invocation incorrectly, he could lose everything. In the face of supernatural power, men know that they are at great risk. They know that the supernatural power invoked has the power to provide benefits from outside of the space-time continuum. The threat of loss is inescapable: such a power can also impose costs from outside of the space-time continuum. Thus, the extreme concern of the magician with formulas and rituals. The details of supernatural rituals become more important than the details of scientific procedure. They also become less predictable, for the outcome of magic is less predictable. The malevolent whims of the supernatural force invoked are more of a threat to the magician than the outcome of most of nature's formulas is to the scientist or the craftsman.

The magician seeks to obtain something for nothing. It is not that he seeks personal gain at minimal expenditure. We all do this. What he seeks is access to wealth or power outside the realm of ethical law. He substitutes ritual for ethics. Ritual seems cheaper than ethics. In doing so, he risks something very important for the sake of something far less important. "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36).

The Annulment of the Office of Prophet

The two-fold test of the prophetic office was this: accurate predictions of the immediate future and adherence to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The death penalty was mandatory for any prophet whose predictions failed to come true – signs and wonders (Deut. 13:1-5) or any other event (Deut. 18:22) – or who announced the sovereignty of any other god (Deut. 18:20). There was a very high risk for anyone claiming to be a prophet whose words had not been put into his mouth by God. Or so it seemed. But there really wasn't. A true prophet would come in times of apostasy. But in times of apostasy, the word of God is not honored. The false prophet is honored; the

true prophet is not. So, negative civil sanctions would be imposed on the true prophet, which was the case in Israel again and again. Then God's corporate negative sanctions would come with a vengeance.

Jesus Christ's ministry was the fulfillment of the prophetic office, which He annulled when He came in judgment in the final act of corporate negative sanctions against Old Covenant Israel: the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. He knew what was in store for Him and what would then be in store for Israel. He warned the religious rulers that this would be the case, for it had always been the fate of prophets to be put under negative sanctions by the rulers of Israel, leaving the nation exposed to God's wrath.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the tombs of the prophets, and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous, And say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye be witnesses unto yourselves, that ye are the children of them which killed the prophets. Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate (Matt. 23:29-38).

The Bible's Prophetic Monopoly

The completion of the New Testament era of revelation with the destruction of Jerusalem completed the judicially binding revelation of God. All of the New Testament's manuscripts were written before the final revocation of the Old Covenant in A.D. 70. This includes the Book of Revelation. This means that the Bible has supplanted the covenantal authority of any man to announce formally, on threat of historically unique supernatural sanctions, the annulment of any biblical law that came prior to his ministry. Similarly, he cannot lawfully announce new universally binding laws in God's name. This means that the office of prophet no longer exists; the Bible alone is the final word of God.

The Old Covenant prophet could lawfully tell kings to change the nation's laws on threat of immediate national punishment. A true prophet's ability to perform signs and wonders verified two things: 1) his ability to invoke supernatural sanctions to enforce his covenant lawsuit; 2) his ability to see that God would defend the prophet's lawsuit by imposing specific sanctions. Such authority belongs to no man today. No man today speaks with the same authority as the completed Bible. No man can lawfully invoke publicly God's specific historical sanctions in a specific time frame. He can only invoke the general covenantal sanctions that apply to the kind of sin under consideration. He can speak prophetically only in the sense of warning men of the sanctions to come; he cannot lawfully invoke sanctions in the way that an Old Covenant prophet could: guaranteed in the immediate future in the name of God. "And Elijah answered and said to the captain of fifty, If I be a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And there came down fire from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty" (II Ki. 1:10). This power is no longer granted by God to anyone who speaks in His name. The very possession of power analogous to this is

required by God to acknowledge by his actions his belief in his own creaturehood and his subordination to God. He was not allowed to dress, touch, or eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He understood this, and he told Eve. She represented Adam, who in turn represented God. She spoke a prophetic word to the serpent: "But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die" (Gen. 3:3). Then she violated her own prophetic word. So did Adam. God then brought a covenant lawsuit against the serpent, Eve, and Adam, in the order of their responsibility, **from lower to higher**, in terms of His original prophetic word to Adam.

Prophecy concerned ethical boundaries: violate them, God warned, and predictable negative sanctions would come. Some of these sanctions would come predictably in history; all will come predictably in eternity. The prophet's job was to warn his audience of the adverse consequences of breaking God's covenant. The boundaries were enforced by God. Violate His ethical boundaries and you will experience unpleasant consequences, the prophet warned. These ethical boundaries were testified to by the prophet's ability to overcome creational boundaries, sometimes called laws of nature. The Old Covenant prophet was empowered by God to escape these conventional limits because this ability testified to his authority in announcing both the ethical boundaries and the predictability of their attached sanctions. Violating the laws of nature was the prophet's means of calling a halt to the nation's violation of the laws of God.

Boundaries and Magic

To acknowledge the lawful boundaries which God has placed around man is to worship God by obeying Him. We are not to pursue our goals by means of magic. What is magic? It is any attempt to invoke supernatural powers, asking them to alter man's environment by means of causation that are beyond temporal cause and effect. Magic is a method of calling for supernatural intervention by personal forces to alter the processes of either nature or history. Without this supernatural intervention, man's ritual manipulations and invocations are powerless. For example, the voodoo doll is a powerless implement of magical incantation apart from demonic intervention. The element of repeatability is missing because the supernatural cause is absent. The supernatural cause of the sought-for outcome is not predictably present in the way that the ordinary means of temporal causation are predictably present. The personal "catalyst" that makes possible the magical series of events is invoked, not employed.

A prophet might seek to affirm his judicial office by altering nature or by forecasting events. If Israelites who were skilled craftsmen in this particular manipulation of nature or skilled forecasters of historical trends could not replicate his performance in a statistically significant number of cases, the self-proclaimed prophet did not thereby validate his office. He may have been a prophet, or he may have been a clever trickster, or he may have been a magician. The judicially compulsory evidence of his office as prophet was his verbal orthodoxy. The crucial test of his office was not his performance of signs and wonders; it was his confession of faith.

Idolatry

Herbert Schlossberg has argued that there are two pagan idols: nature and history. The quest for signs and wonders is a mark of these two idols. Schlossberg says that all social idols are idols of history. This would seem to include philosophy. (There is a sense in which autonomous man regards philosophy as the mediating factor between nature and history.) Historically, after the Israelites returned from the captivity, they ceased to worship the idols of Canaan. Simultaneously, philosophy arose in Greece and spread across the Mediterranean world. Hellenism

became the preferred idol of choice among socially cultured Israelites until the fall of Jerusalem. Pharisaic legalism, which also arose in the post-exilic era, was a domestic theological error. Hellenism was clearly an imported idol. Legalism was defended in the name of Israel's God; Hellenism was defended in terms of a universal wisdom that transcended divisive supernatural revelation.

The primary covenantal issue of idolatry is transcendence. Something or someone is proclaimed as superior to God. In operation, this issue becomes ethical. An idol is any representative manifestation in history (point two) of a law-order that substitutes for God's (point three). Moses made it plain in Deuteronomy, over and over, that obedience to God's commandments is the visible test of one's confessional orthodoxy. A man who would subsequently call on Israelites to disobey these commandments, Moses said, was to be regarded as a fool. If he also named the name of another god, he was to be executed. "And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust thee out of the way which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walk in. So shalt thou put the evil away from the midst of thee" (Deut. 13:5).

Something for Nothing

For a man to escape the limits of temporal creation means that he can gain something for what appears to be nothing. By subordinating himself to supernatural powers that are forbidden by God, a man can sometimes escape the limits of temporal cause and effect. This ability to go beyond commonly repeatable causation offers to some initiates of occultism the possibility of gaining wealth, power, and influence over others. This lure is powerful. Men are impressed with magic, which seems to offer them access to a below-cost realm of human action, a realm that is in some unstated way connected to the realm of conventional causation.

The text indicates that signs and wonders were possible in the Old Covenant world. Moses himself had been in a battle of signs and wonders when he and Aaron challenged the priests of Egypt. The test was the test of the snakes. Moses' snakes ate the Egyptians' snakes. But the test decided nothing, for Pharaoh's heart was hardened. The visible test of the comparative signs and wonders did not persuade him (Ex. 7:10-14).

The message of the Bible is that while power is persuasive, confession is even more powerful. Moses' confession of faith through Aaron (Ex. 7:2) was more powerful than Pharaoh's, and this was demonstrated by the victory of Aaron's serpents (Ex. 7:12). This did not change Pharaoh's mind, because the power of God in hardening Pharaoh's heart was more powerful than the persuasive power of the signs and wonders. God kept Pharaoh from changing his mind and therefore from changing his confession. Paul wrote: "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy. For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth" (Rom. 9:14-18).

Moses, in his office as a prophet (Deut. 34:10), was not sent by God in order to change Pharaoh's mind. He was sent to provide God with an occasion to demonstrate God's power in history: predictable sanctions. The end result inside the boundaries of Egypt was the transfer of the inheritance of Egypt's recently deceased firstborn sons to Israel (Ex. 12:35-36). The Egyptians had long believed that they could get

evidence of false prophecy; it is demonic. Such power was necessary to validate a prophet's word, which was given to him by God only because God's judicially authoritative revelation had not yet been completed. The prophet was authoritatively inspired. In the world after the final replacement of the Old Covenant in A.D. 70, no one is authoritatively inspired. If he were, his words would possess formal equality with the Bible, and because of the immediate nature of his inspiration, superior operational authority.

Civil Law

The question arises: What is the lawful role of civil government in suppressing false prophecy? Is this law still in force? "And that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he hath spoken to turn you away from the LORD your God, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to thrust thee out of the way which the LORD thy God commanded thee to walk in. So shalt thou put the evil away from the midst of thee" (Deut. 13:5).

If the office of true prophet no longer exists, then what is the covenantal, judicial threat to society of a false prophet? There is none. The threat of God's corporate negative sanctions no longer exists with respect to false prophecy, since the promise of God's corporate positive sanctions no longer exists with respect to true prophecy, having been annulled by the New Covenant. Then on what basis can a civil government lawfully impose negative sanctions against false prophecy? There seems to be none. The office has been annulled. So have the related sanctions.

A false prophet was judicially analogous to a private citizen today who makes a policeman's uniform, dons it, and then tells people what to do in the name of the law. This is illegal: the assertion of civil authority not ordained by a lawful government. The false prophet in Israel made a similar assertion. The sanction against this illegitimate assertion was execution. If there were no office of policeman today, there would be no need of civil laws against imitating one. If every police uniform were regarded as merely a funny costume, there would be no justification for imposing civil sanctions against someone who wears such a costume and then announces his authority in the name of the law. If a costume does not imply sanctions-bearing authority, it is judicially harmless. If it is judicially harmless, it is beyond civil sanctions. (A trademarked costume is protected by civil law, but only as a matter of torts: private party vs. private party. The threatened sanctions are a matter of restitution.)

The Bible is now complete. It serves as the prophet that tells people what is required of them. The voice of God is in print. No other voice can claim equal authority. Thus, there is no judicial role for a prophet in the post-A.D. 70 New Covenant era. There have been no false prophets since A.D. 70 because there have been no true prophets. Today, there are only misguided or corrupt people who claim to be prophets. Their claim is to be dismissed, not by civil law, but by ecclesiastical law. Church members who make such claims, and who demand that Christians do what they say rather than obey lawfully constituted church authorities, are to be placed under negative church sanctions. If they persist in their claims, they may have to be excommunicated. They are not to be executed.

Conclusion

There is no way to gain something for nothing apart from the grace of God. Even here, the covenantal limits of creation are still in force. God extends grace to individuals and societies because He revoked grace from His Son, Jesus Christ, in the latter's sacrifice on Calvary. The payment was made by Jesus Christ. By grace, Christ's representative victory over sin and death is extended by God to men. "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit" (1 Pet. 3:18). That which is a below-cost benefit for the recipients of God's grace has been paid for. Some men gain something valuable for nothing because Jesus Christ suffered something terrible for righteousness. Thus, the Bible testifies to the covenantal illegitimacy of the economic quest for something for nothing.

The magician can perform signs and wonders. What distinguished him from the prophet under the Old Covenant was confession. The prophet warned men that they should not expect something for nothing. They should not expect to keep the fruits of righteousness apart from the continual investment required to sustain it: covenantal faithfulness. The prophet warned men that they should not expect something (fruits) for nothing (sin). If men persisted in the pursuit of something for nothing, they would reap judgment. The day of reckoning would come. This was the prophet's message. It was a covenantal lawsuit based on an orthodox confession of faith. That a true prophet might perform signs and wonders – what appeared to be something for nothing – was in fact a confirmation of the fact that there is never something for nothing. When men gain something for nothing, they do so only because they are recipients of grace, which rests judicially on supernatural payment by a representative.

The magician also was beyond conventional historical limits, but his message was different. He performed his miracles in terms of a different confession. He promised more of the same – power on demand – for those who conformed to another god. Such a god could not bring permanent below-cost benefits, Moses warned. God would bring negative corporate sanctions on Israel if the nation believed such a prophet. More than this: God would bring negative sanctions on Israel if Israel's civil government failed to execute false prophets. This covenantal connection between widespread law-breaking and predictable corporate negative sanctions was the justification of civil sanctions: the threat of God's corporate negative sanctions if a public evil was not brought under the threat of civil sanctions. The magistrate acted as a surrogate for God, imposing Bible-mandated negative sanctions on specific covenant-breakers as a way to head off God's corporate negative sanctions. This is equally true in New Covenant times.

The reason why this Mosaic civil sanction is no longer mandated is because the office of prophet has ceased. The Bible has replaced the prophet under the New Covenant. No man speaks with authority equal to, and therefore superior to, the Bible. The threat of false prophecy is no longer civil. No one lawfully commands civil rulers in the name of God on threat of God's immediate negative sanctions. The office of prophet has no judicial authority today. Neither does the office of false prophet. The State does not need a penalty in order to defend its authority from false prophets.