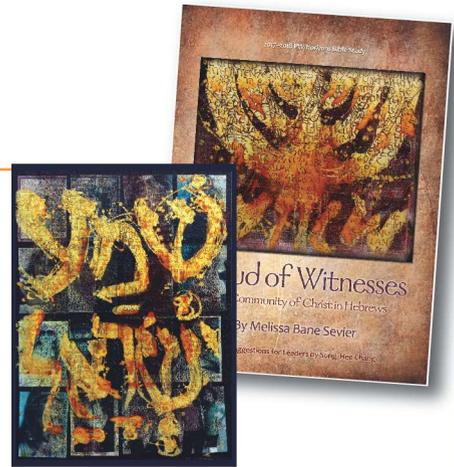


Would That All Were Prophets

BY PATRICIA K. TULL

For use with Lesson Two of the 2017–2018 PW/*Horizons* Bible study, *Cloud of Witnesses: The Community of Christ in Hebrews* by Melissa Bane Sevier



Scripture: Hebrews 1:1–4; Exodus 3:1–7; 19:16–25; Hebrews 12:18–24; 8:10; Jeremiah 31:31–34

Circumstances often forced early Christians into defensive stances. They had to defend their beliefs not only before Romans, who considered monotheism wrongheaded or even ungodly, but also before fellow Jews who saw the claim that God had a “begotten” son as heretical. God was one God, according to the book of Deuteronomy, not two or three, as Christians appeared to claim.

Defending themselves on two fronts, Christians sometimes overstated their case in ways that verged on claiming exclusive access to God. But the very fact that they included the Hebrew canon as the largest portion of Christian scripture means that, behind the bravado, they acknowledged other ways of knowing and worshiping God.

This history of early relations among Christians, Jews and Romans raises the question of how controllable the living God actually is.

So does the book of Numbers. Numbers 11 tells the story of 70 elders who receive God’s spirit and begin prophesying. Two of the 70 are not present at the appointed place when this miraculous outpouring occurs. They happen to be back in the Israelite camp instead of with Moses and the others at the tent sanctuary when this befalls them, and they, too, begin prophesying.

We aren’t told what they or the other 68 new prophets said. But their actions are disturbing enough to alarm some people. According to the story, a young man (no doubt a Presbyterian, willing all things to be done decently and in order) goes running out to Moses to tell him. Joshua (evidently another Presbyterian) says in alarm, “My lord Moses, stop them!”

The reason all this happens in the first place is that Moses was overwhelmed by his job and was looking for assistance. But when God empowers others to prophesy, two people demand that Moses control it, adding to his to-do list. Even Moses’ helper Joshua, who should be making his job easier rather than harder, is caught up in anxiety. Moses, perceiving abundance where others saw chaos, responds, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!” (Num. 11:29). Weary with serving as God’s sole mouthpiece in the wilderness, Moses welcomes help in any form he can find it, even if it comes in unexpected ways.

The long list of faithful forebears in Chapter 11 of Hebrews bears witness to the presence of the living God with many people throughout history long before Christianity came along, people who made themselves available to God and expressed their faith in a wide variety of ways—ways that later Christians would sometimes judge unorthodox, if not downright wrong. Yet the living God is not subject to control by the creedal standards of other times and places.

Old Testament prophets often found themselves surrounded by political rivals and enemies. They would have agreed with Moses’ preference for more people to show signs of God’s indwelling. Many prophets no doubt longed to see God’s law written on the hearts of all, as Jeremiah expressed (Jer. 31:31–34). Yet it’s easy for contemporary people to read the Hebrew Bible, fail to comprehend it in all its foreignness, and judge its stories to be wilder and stranger than the stories of Jesus. It’s easy to become alarmed, as the young man running to Moses did, about things we do not understand.

Not the author of Hebrews. He sees in the faith of ancestors—expressed in various and sundry ways—a cross section of faithfulness from which he and his audience can learn. He would have had no truck with later Christians who placed firm boundaries between those who know God through Jesus Christ and those who know the living God in other ways. He found and celebrated faith wherever it was manifest, since, in his words, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”

When students beginning their language studies at Louisville Seminary had absorbed enough Hebrew vocabulary to recognize a few words on flash cards, I would often take them to a local synagogue to experience Hebrew as a living language in worship. Very few students had ever entered either a synagogue before. They were often intrigued by similarities to worship practices that were familiar from their churches.

One Friday evening the young woman sitting next to me wept through the entire Shabbat service. I

assumed something distressing had happened to her that day and, before we rose to leave, I asked her if she were all right. “More than all right,” she replied, looking as if she had just woken from a dream. “Tonight was like finding out I had relatives I never knew I had.” She woke up to a whole world of faithful believers in the living God, believers she never knew were there. Would that all God’s people were prophets. This young woman learned there were a lot more of them than she had previously known.

Not all who worship the living God worship as we do, or even as we understand. But Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits” (Matt. 7:16)—that is, by how they live before God and others. May God grant us an openness to other expressions of devotion to God that both expresses our humble hospitality and allows us to gain wisdom through witnessing the faith of others.

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1. In interfaith circles, the feeling of awe in the presence of a living faith that is not our own is sometimes called “holy envy.” We can only stake ourselves in one faith, but we can still admire or envy aspects of other religions. Do you know someone who does not share the same faith as you, but whose devotion you respect and learn from? What do you notice or admire about their faith?
 2. What stories from the Old Testament in the passages for today or in Hebrews 11 do you find expressing a different faith or practice from yours? What understandings have you found even in the New Testament—or in Hebrews in particular—that you find different from your own norms? What do you do with such awareness?
 3. What does the idea of God’s writing God’s laws in the minds and hearts of all mean to you? How do you find this happening in your own community?

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