

THE PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCE OF KNOWING GOD

REFLECTION ON THE CHRISTIAN PROPHETIC TRADITION

Number 403

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Reflection on the practical consequence of knowing God must begin with consideration of the story of Abraham in the Old Testament Bible. He was, of course, a great man. God said:

*“ . . . Leave your own country, your kinsmen, and your father’s house, and go to a country I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you and make your name so great that it will be used in blessings . . . And so Abram set out as the Lord had bidden him . . . ”*¹

There were other ancient heroes. Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees, near modern day Baghdad, circa 1900 BC. He was predated by Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, also near modern day Baghdad. Though Gilgamesh had been a king about 2700 BC, the stone tablets inscribed with his story dated about 2000 BC,² and oral tales were told of him before and after the stone tablets. It was said of Gilgamesh:

*“Supreme over other kings, lordly in appearance,
he is the hero, born of Uruk . . .
Gilgamesh is strong to perfection . . .
Gilgamesh is awesome to perfection . . .
it was he who crossed the ocean, the vast seas, to the rising sun,
who explored the world regions, seeking life . . .
two-thirds of him is god, one-third of him is human . . .
beautiful, handsomest of men . . . perfect . . . ”*³

¹ Genesis 12:1-4, New English Bible

² Richard Hooker, Washington State University, <http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/MESO/GILG.htm> .

³ Maureen Kovacs, “Tablet I - The Gilgamesh Epic,” <http://www.unf.edu/classes/freshmancore/halsall/gilgamesh-kovacs.htm>

The contrast between the two great men was evident just two paragraphs into the story of Abraham. He was portrayed as afraid and in need of his wife's support.

“There came a famine in the land, so severe that Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while. When he was approaching Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, ‘I know very well that you are a beautiful woman, and that when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘She is his wife’, then they will kill me but let you live. Tell them that you are my sister, so that all may go well with me because of you and my life may be spared on your account.’”⁴

Years later Abraham still had no children and began to fret over God's promise, “I will make you into a great nation,” and complained to God:

“I have no standing among men, for the heir to my household is Eliezer of Damascus . . . Thou hast given me no children, and so my heir must be a slave born in my house.”⁵

God invited Abraham to count the stars in the sky and then affirmed his descendants would be as numerous. Nevertheless both Abraham and Sarah doubted God and took matters into their own hands.

“‘You see that the Lord has not allowed me to bear a child. Take my slave-girl, perhaps I shall found a family through her.’ Abram agreed to what his wife said; so Sarai, Abram's wife, brought her slave-girl, Hagar the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife . . . he lay with Hagar and she conceived; and when she knew that she was with child, she despised her mistress.”⁶

God did indeed honor his promise, but Abraham and Sarah's doubt created a schism in their descendants. The descendants of Abraham and Hagar, the slave girl, and the descendants of Sarah and Abraham. The schism persisted into the modern period, but that only meant the story of Abraham remained part of the sacred history of Israel, Islam and Christianity. The inclusion of Abraham's thoroughly human fears and missteps gave him substance and believability. He was a real person. Men of all ages could identify with his weaknesses and fears and still see the fruit of God's promise to him. It made God believable . . . history believable.

How did it come to pass that Abraham's story was observed, recorded and transmitted through the Ages without exaggeration and/or embellishment? Gilgamesh may have been a great king of Uruk, but the layer after layer of exaggeration and embellishment transformed him into an unbelievable figure . . . “*Gilgamesh . . . two-thirds of him is god, one-third of him is human . . . beautiful, handsomest of men . . . perfect . . .*,” and incapable of inspiring humanity.

Perhaps Abraham made certain his extended household knew his every weakness and indiscretion. More likely his household discerned the truth of his character and passed

⁴ Genesis 12:9-13

⁵ Genesis 15:2-4

⁶ Genesis 16:1-4

that truth to succeeding generations either in the belief that the fruition of God's promise would not be thwarted by their actions, or their actions were a necessary element of God's plan. In either case it could not have resulted from the decision of a single scribe or story-teller. It had to represent the attitude of his entire household, and the households and people descendent from him. So the real focus must not be Gilgamesh or Abraham, but the people who surrounded them, believed in them, and sought to preserve their memory for posterity. Who were they? . . . and what caused them to see their respective situations differently? To answer the questions we must look beyond Gilgamesh and Abraham to King David of Israel and then to Alexander the Great.

King David of Israel followed Abraham by 900 to 1000 years and was a great king. The story most often told of him was his killing of the Philistine giant, Goliath of Gath, when he was still a boy with a simple sling and stone.⁷ Detractors would say that story was an example of the kind of exaggeration typified in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Perhaps. But the story of David included a very plausible explanation of how he developed a unique courage as a young boy tending the sheep, along with an explanation of how and why he had developed a remarkable skill with a sling to protect those sheep and himself. More importantly, the detailed record of his life neither began nor ended with Goliath. He was portrayed as a vulnerable young boy in the king's court who played a harp and sang psalms to comfort the depressed King. His close, meaningful friendship with Jonathan was set down in detail. Neither of those story segments contributed to his image as an awesome king and conqueror. The story segment that revealed the most about the people around David, and the people of Israel, was David's adultery with Bathsheba.⁸ David lusted after Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. He first used his position as king to have sex with her when Uriah was away. He then befriended Uriah, got him drunk in the palace and the next day sent a letter with Uriah addressed to his commander which read:

*"Station Uriah in the thick of the fight and then fall back behind him so that he may be struck down and die."*⁹

Joah, Uriah's commander, did as he was told. Uriah was killed forthwith in battle. David was abruptly confronted by the prophet Nathan and forced to publicly confess his sin.¹⁰

The sequence of sin, confrontation, and confession evident in the Bathsheba episode was repeated late in David's life in response to his sin regarding a census of Israel that resulted in the death of 70,000 people due to pestilence.

"So he (David) instructed Joab and the officers of the army with him to go round all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and make a record of the people and report the number to him. Joab answered, 'Even if the Lord your God should increase the people a hundredfold and your majesty should live to see it, what pleasure would that give your majesty?' But Joab and the officers were overruled by the king

⁷ 1 Samuel 17ff.

⁸ 2 Samuel 11ff.

⁹ 2 Samuel 11:15

¹⁰ 2 Samuel 12:1-4

and they left his presence in order to count the people.”¹¹

King David was said to have reconsidered his order after the objection of “. . . Joab and the officers . . .” and acknowledged his sin, but the most likely sequence of the events was a devastating pestilence experienced by Israel, a search for the reason for God’s displeasure, a prophetic disclosure of the census ordered by David,¹² a confrontation between the prophet Gad and King David, David’s confession, David’s subsequent atonement by initiating the construction of the first Temple on the site of the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite.¹³

Regardless of exact sequence of events in the incident of the census, David, like Abraham, was surrounded by people who accepted him as their leader and served him loyally yet had the courage and discernment to precisely observe and record inconsistent and unexpected feelings, behaviors, and strategies. And when necessary confront him with his unacceptable and/or sinful behavior. That process was diametrically opposed to the culture of Mesopotamia where a king’s propensity for delusion was eagerly justified and embellished. The significance of Israel’s mechanism for simultaneously supporting and moderating both the image and function of its leaders can be better understood when compared to the culture that produced Alexander the Great 550 to 600 years after King David.

Alexander was born to King Phillip II and Queen Olympias of Macedonia in 356 BC¹⁴. He became king after his father was murdered during a suspicious palace coup in 336 BC on the eve of a planned invasion of Persia. Alexander did not inherit a functional culture. The region was an array of city-states characterized by shifting alliances and warfare without a unifying ideology. Phillip had gained a military advantage in the region by development of the *oblique phalanx*,¹⁵ which was an important innovation in battle formation and strategy. Phillip used his newly developed military strategy to gain control of the silver and gold mines in Macedonia and that wealth was used to compensate warriors based solely on their performance in battle. Therefore Alexander did inherit from his father; 1) an important and highly effective innovation in battle strategy unknown in the regions Alexander would subsequently conquer, 2) an experienced, motivated and thoroughly professional army, and 3) an army already primed for an invasion of Persia. Alexander added to that inheritance an impulsive and unpredictable temperament that caught his own army off-guard just as often as it caught the enemy off-guard. The mix of Alexander’s temperament with a decisive

¹¹ 2 Samuel 24:2-4

¹² A census was considered a sin in Israel because the king and the people were expected to trust God to provide in advance whatever population with whatever skills would be necessary for the defense of Israel and realization of God’s plan.

¹³ 2 Samuel 24:16.

¹⁴ See <http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander.html> for an overview of Alexander and the period, and for links to references.

¹⁵ The *phalanx* was a very compact, rectangular formation of warriors equipped with spears, that was used in concentrated frontal attacks on an enemy force most often arrayed in a less concentrated line. The *phalanx* was first developed and used by others in the region. Phillip converted the *phalanx* to the *oblique phalanx*, which changed the shape of the formation from a rectangle to an oblique. Consequently, the leading corner of the oblique engaged the enemy first. To those unacquainted with the *oblique phalanx* that would seem to place that leading corner of warriors at risk because more enemy warriors could be shifted to the initial point of attack. However, such shifts were anticipated and gave the advantage to the oblique formation as the straight-forward, disciplined advance of the warriors engaged the weakened area in the enemy line which resulted from the initial shift of enemy troops. Often the strongest, most experienced soldiers were positioned at the leading corner of the phalanx which either forced the shift in the enemy line, or if the enemy did not shift, allowed a break-through at the initial point of attack. That in turn set the stage for various enveloping maneuvers, isolation and slaughter of sub sets of the enemy, and calvary attacks at the point of break-through that could quickly rout the enemy. Alexander’s army advanced so rapidly toward and through its objectives the opposition had no time to understand and/or effectively counter the new military strategy.

military advantage produced some stunning, almost unbelievable successes. Nevertheless, the Macedonia initiative was crippled by two systemic limitations. The first limitation was the lack of a cultural ideology. Cultural ideology herein used to mean a separate, impersonal set of beliefs accepted by the population as absolute truth from which prescriptive behaviors derived. Such prescriptive behaviors in the context of ideology defined personal and cultural identity, the function of law, the structure of economic activity, and foreign relations, et. al., and, when functioning effectively, marshaled the initiative of the whole population to common cause. The powerful philosophical tradition of the region was incapable of functioning as an cultural ideology because such knowledge was too complex and tentative to motivate the differentiated behavior essential to cultural expansion. Plato had understood that limitation after he experienced a vision of divine transcendence,¹⁶ and understood the only source of order in human affairs derived from a human soul formed by divine transcendence. In spite of his understanding the source of disorder in human affairs and the inevitable decline of the culture in which he existed, he did not have the power or authority to replicate the vision he experienced in the souls of his students. Aristotle was a student and teacher at Plato's Academy for twenty years hoping for just such a vision. The vision did not come. Aristotle subsequently developed a philosophy that stipulated an objective, self-contained universe which did not require the experience of divine transcendence. It appeared Alexander recognized Aristotle's complex thought was incapable of driving a culture into expansive growth when he graciously parted company with him,¹⁷ but that action did not establish an alternate cultural ideology and therefore did not cure the systemic problem.

The second of the two systemic limitations was the lack of an effective mechanism for moderating Alexander's progression to delusion. The region of Macedonia was already characterized by a dangerous over dependence on the heroic leader, and that condition was exacerbated by Alexander's early military victories and the greatly increased financial rewards he authorized for individual military performance. There followed a trend toward exaggeration of his abilities, accomplishments, and his relationship with "the gods," that was not counter-balanced by the insight and courage necessary to hold him accountable. The introduction of the Persian court ritual,¹⁸ that required all subjects to publicly acknowledge Alexander a god, constituted a decisive point of confluence between Alexander's need for variegated and systematic affirmation of his delusional fantasy of divinity, and a Persian ideology derived from centuries of subjugation to the delusions of god/kings. Thereafter events progressed relentlessly toward tragedy.

At the most superficial level of objective reality, Alexander was reported to have led his army out of Babylon through modern day Iran, Afghanistan, northern India, and into Pakistan. He triumphed over every military force he encountered until his Macedonian army mutinied when ordered to cross the Ganges River in Pakistan. Alexander acceded to the wishes of his army and returned to Babylon, albeit, across southern Iran, and then roughly northwest along the Persian Gulf. Shortly thereafter he died of a fever on June 11, 323 BC, at the age of thirty-three. A tragically ordinary end to the life of a great conqueror, who some revered as a god.

¹⁶ See Eric Voegelin, *Plato and Aristotle: Volume Three - Order and History*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, USA, 1957. Refer to pages 112 through 117 in particular for a discussion of the *Agathon*.

¹⁷ See <http://www.richeast.org/Greeks/Great/introduction.html> and http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander_t04.html

¹⁸ See http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander_z1b.html

A deeper perspective on that period, however, produced a different story line. Alexander inherited a well paid, professional army from his father, King Phillip. Probably his father's generals consented to his leadership when Alexander was only twenty years old because they believed they could use him to achieve goals of their own. But Alexander's bold, unpredictable leadership led to a series of early victories that established him as a military leader capable of dramatic success. A social contract was effectively established between Alexander and his army. The soldiers accepted the contractual obligation to pursue and achieve the strategic goals established by Alexander. Alexander accepted the contractual obligation to reward the soldiers, based on individual merit with prestige and wealth. The social contract functioned effectively and transparently through the conquest of Persia. During that period the Macedonians had no problem parroting Alexander's claims of divine lineage because his success was their success. The social contract came under increasing strain when Alexander began to look more to the Persians for affirmation of his claim of divinity. That strain between the Macedonians and Alexander was evident when it was revealed that Philotas, the commander of Alexander's cavalry and a person of high station, knew of a plot by younger Macedonians to murder Alexander and did nothing to alert or protect Alexander.¹⁹ The subsequent execution of Philotas did not address the cause of the problem.

A short time after the incident involving Philotas, a problem developed with Cleitus, who was also an important Macedonian in Alexander's court. At an evening drinking party, during which both Cleitus and Alexander drank too much, songs were sung ridiculing Macedonian generals who had performed poorly against the Barbarians. Most at the party, including Alexander, praised the songs.

*"Then Cleitus, who was already drunk and naturally of a harsh temper and wilful, was more than ever vexed, and insisted that it was not well done, when among Barbarians and enemies, to insult Macedonians who were far better men than those who laughed at them, even though they had met with misfortune." And when Alexander declared that Cleitus was pleading his own cause when he gave cowardice the name of misfortune, Cleitus sprang to his feet and said: "It was this cowardice of mine, however, that saved thy life, god-born as thou art, when thou wast already turning thy back upon the spear of Spithridates;" and it is by the blood of Macedonians, and by these wounds, that thou art become so great as to disown Philip and make thyself son to Ammon."*²⁰

Alexander ran Cleitus through with a spear, but the damage was done. Cleitus had set forth in clear, concise language, the position of the Macedonians. Alexander depended on their courage and success for his claim to divinity. Their continued commitment to his leadership depended on Alexander honoring his contractual obligation to reward the Macedonians with prestige and wealth.

Alexander personally needed the Persian infrastructure of ritual acknowledgment of the "god/king," and a well defined supporting cast for his divine persona. Therefore he

¹⁹ Plutarch, "The Life of Alexander," The Parallel Lives, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Alexander*/6-7.html, Chapter 48, and http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Alexander*/8.html, Chapter 49.

²⁰ Plutarch, "The Life of Alexander," The Parallel Lives, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Alexander*/6-7.html, Chapter 50-51.

could not carve up the Persian Empire to reward the Macedonians. The campaign into Afghanistan, northern India, and Pakistan was therefore driven by the need for wealth to reward the Macedonians, and Alexander's need to strengthen his claim to divinity. The campaign was successful on both counts until late July of 326 BC when Alexander ordered his forces to cross the Ganges River to engage the Ganderites and the Praesii.²¹ The Macedonians violently opposed him. They had just prevailed over Porus in a very difficult battle. Porus had only 20,000 infantry and 2,000 cavalry, whereas the Ganderites and the Praesii were said to have 80,000 horsemen, 200,000 footmen, 8,000 chariots, and 6,000 fighting elephants.

In the lead up to the mutiny Alexander had made two serious mistakes. He had failed to establish a clear objective for the campaign and communicate that clear objective to his army. He failed to ensure his army understood why the impending battle with the Ganderites and Praesii was essential to achieve the objective of the campaign.

Consequently, the Macedonians prevailed. Alexander was bitter but had no choice. As soon as he negated the order, the Macedonians showered him with obsequious praise, signaling thereby their willingness to continue their commitment to him. That allowed Alexander a dignified return to Babylon.

The army could have returned via a northern route which would have taken them back through territories already conquered. It would have been safe, but apparently Alexander believed it would be perceived as a retreat and therefore damaging to his image. He chose a southern route through the Gedrosian desert of southern Iran. He knew that no other military leader had succeeded in crossing that desert,²² and he knew Cyrus the Great had lost all but seven of his army when he had attempted a crossing. Alexander's most important objective was confirmation of his divinity and therefore it was most likely he settled on the Gedrosian desert just as he had previously settled on a number of military objectives . . . success appeared impossible therefore success confirmed divinity. Various biographers set Alexander's manpower losses in the Gedrosian desert at somewhere between "a lot," and *seventy-five percent*. Whatever the losses, Alexander definitely judged the crossing a success as did the Macedonians, because the crossing was followed by a seven day drunken orgy where:

*"Accordingly, after refreshing his forces here, he set out and marched for seven days through Carmania in a reveling rout. He himself was conveyed slowly along by eight horses, while he feasted day and night continuously with his companions on a dais built upon a lofty and conspicuous scaffolding of oblong shape; and wagons without number followed, some with purple and embroidered canopies, others protected from the sun by boughs of trees which were kept fresh and green, conveying the rest of his friends and commanders, who were all garlanded and drinking. Not a shield was to be seen, not a helmet, not a spear, but along the whole march with cups and drinking-horns and flagons the soldiers kept dipping wine from huge casks and mixing-bowls and pledging one another, some as they marched along, others lying down; while pipes and flutes, stringed instruments and song, with reveling cries of women, filled every place with abundant music."*²³

²¹ Plutarch, "The Life of Alexander," The Parallel Lives, http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Alexander*/9.html, Chapter 62.

²² "Gedrosian Desert," http://www.livius.org/aj-al/alexander/alexander_t21.html.

²³ Plutarch, op cit, [Alexander*/10html](#), paragraph 67.

There followed in Susa²⁴ Alexander's requisite acknowledgment of the Macedonians. Much wealth was distributed along with purple tunics for some, and gold crowns for others.

Though Alexander clearly honored his social contract with the Macedonians, the most important reason for the campaign into India had been solidification his claim to be a god. That goal remained foremost in his mind. Early in the celebrations he dressed up as Dionysius, and later presided over the forced wedding of several hundred Macedonian men to several hundred Persian women in a planned strategy to become "lord of all." When his close friend, and perhaps homosexual lover, Hephaestion died of fever, he imitated the behavior of Achilles in the *Iliad* when Achilles' lover Petroklos was killed, by cutting his own hair, ordering the manes of all military horses and donkeys shorn, and venting his rage by arbitrarily slaughtering the Cossaeans.²⁵ Those events were followed by a direct order to the Greek city-states that upon his return he would be worshiped as a god.

In spite of the extended, ostentatious buildup, his actual return to Babylon was humiliating. He was first presented a warning from the astrologers that there was a bad omen, and his life was in danger if he entered the city. That forced a change of plans and Alexander had to sneak into Babylon through another gate. Hardly an entrance befitting a god.

*" . . . he (Alexander) began to be low-spirited, and was distrustful now of the favor of Heaven and suspicious of his friends." He was particularly afraid of Antipater and of his sons . . . "*²⁶

*" . . . he had now become sensitive to indications of the divine will and perturbed and apprehensive in his mind, converted every unusual and strange occurrence, were it never so insignificant, into a prodigy and portent; and sacrificers, purifiers, and diviners filled his palace . . . "*²⁷

A short time later Alexander was dead. Most say he died of a fever. Either typhoid or malaria. Others say he was poisoned by his wife Roxanne, or at the instigation of his mother with the assistance of Aristotle. The most firm and important conclusion that could be drawn from the evidence of his death was the lack of precise detail. Given that Alexander was, at the very least, king of the Macedonians, and revered by some as a god, how was it possible for such an important person to die under such vague and contradictory circumstances? Where were his loyal companions? . . . bodyguards? . . . did not those in continuous attendance report to someone in authority? In any other circumstance such fragmentary and inconsistent information would cause an investigator to suspect a coverup. But what could have motivated a sizeable number of people to participate in a coverup? Did the Macedonians conspire together to finally kill him and then hide their deed by creating confusion with innumerable conflicting accounts? Was Alexander's death a suicide that had to be hidden at all costs? In the end none of the details mattered. The following logical propositions show that

²⁴ Capital of Elam in the modern day Khugestan Province of Iran. The favorite residence of Darius I the Great, tomb of Daniel, and setting for the Biblical Book of Ester.

²⁵ Plutarch, op cit, paragraph 73.

²⁶ Ibid, paragraph 74.

²⁷ Ibid, paragraph 75.

Alexander's life progressed inevitably to tragedy.

- ✓ Alexander believed he was a god.
- ✓ Alexander was not a god.
- ✓ Therefore Alexander embraced a progressive delusional self-identity.
- ✓ Delusional meant not connected to reality, or functioning in response to reality.
- ✓ Progressive meant that failure to realize the delusional self-identity intensified the inner need that drove the delusion, which, in turn, generated exaggerated and inappropriate strategies for fulfillment.
- ✓ The increasingly exaggerated and inappropriate strategies only ensured failure in a shorter term.
- ✓ Alexander's delusional claim to be a god failed.
- ✓ The carrier of a delusion always desired death upon failure of the delusion.
- ✓ Barring intervention of a higher power, the carrier of a delusion died.
- ✓ In Babylon, in 323 BC Alexander's dramatic change in behavior signaled that his delusion had failed, that he knew he was not a god, and consequently he wanted to die, and he was allowed to die.
- ✓ The exact details of Alexander's death were completely immaterial.

Alexander's delusional claim to be a god was given scant attention by historians. After all, such claims were common in the ancient world, and all the claimants met a similar end. Except in Israel. Abraham, David, and the intervening leaders of Israel were observed, held accountable, and the record of their weaknesses and misdeeds was made public. Since Israel succeeded where the Macedonians failed, that social process warranted more thorough scrutiny.

Clarification of Israel's mechanism for handling leaders came from the New Testament Bible. First in Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well:

"On the way he came to the Samaritan town called Sychar, near the land that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well is there and Jesus, tired by the journey, sat straight down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan woman said to him, 'What? You are a Jew and you ask me, a Samaritan, for a drink?' - Jews, in fact, do not associate with Samaritans. Jesus replied: 'If you only knew what God is offering and who it is that is saying to you: Give me a drink, you would have been the one to ask, and he would have given you living water.' 'You have no bucket, sir,' she answered, 'and the well is deep; how could you get this living water? Are you a greater man than our father Jacob who gave us this well and drank from it himself with his sons and his cattle?' Jesus replied: 'Whoever drinks this water will get thirsty again; but anyone who drinks the water that I shall give will never be thirsty again; the

water that I shall give will turn into a spring inside him, welling up to eternal life.’ ‘Sir,’ said the woman, ‘give me some of that water, so that I may never get thirsty and never have to come here again to draw water.’ ‘Go and call your husband,’ said Jesus to her, ‘and come back here.’ The woman answered, ‘I have no husband.’ ‘You are right to say, ‘I have no husband’; for although you have had five, the one you have now is not your husband. You spoke the truth there.’ ‘I see you are a prophet, sir,’ said the woman.”²⁸

There are three important points in that story. The Samaritan woman identified Jesus as a prophet based on his knowledge of her relationships with men; Jesus declared openly what he knew about her life; and the manner of the woman’s response to Jesus indicated the title ‘prophet,’ was relatively common. The title ‘prophet’ was therefore attached to the ability to discern the truth of the present reality, and declare the discernment openly. That interpretation of ‘prophet’ was reinforced by the story of woman who was a sinner.

“One of the Pharisees invited him (Jesus) to a meal. When he arrived at the Pharisee’s house and took his place at table, a woman came in, who had a bad name in the town. She had heard he was dining with the Pharisee and had brought with her an alabaster jar of ointment. She waited behind him at his feet, weeping, and her tears fell on his feet, and she wiped them away with her hair; then she covered his feet with kisses and anointed them with the ointment. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would know who this woman is that is touching him and what a bad name she has.’”²⁹

The Pharisee understood a prophet was a person with the ability to discern the truth of the present reality, and such a person would declare that discernment openly. Since the Pharisee and the Samaritan woman both had the same clear understanding of the function of a prophet, their understanding was convention in Israel. Paul likewise worked from that understanding of prophecy when he said:

“ . . . if you all were prophesying and an unbeliever or uninitiated person came in, he would find himself analyzed and judged by everyone speaking; he would find his secret thoughts laid bare, and then fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is among you indeed.”³⁰

Paul called for a pervasive expression of prophetic discernment so unbelievers would know, “ . . . that God is among you.” That was exactly the condition in Israel from Abraham through David. Prophetic discernment was so common during the period the

²⁸ John 4:5-20, The Jerusalem Bible.

²⁹ Luke 7:36-40, The Jerusalem Bible.

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, The Jerusalem Bible.

prophetic utterance was seldom identified with an individual. It also meant the word of the prophet was received, respected and preserved by the community, which, in turn, effectively thwarted delusion in its leaders. Israel had succeeded where Persia and Macedonia failed, but only through the reign of David.

Solomon, David's son, succeeded him on the throne. It was said of Solomon:

*“Yahweh gave Solomon immense wisdom and understanding, and a heart as vast as the sand on the seashore. The wisdom of Solomon surpassed the wisdom of all the sons of the East, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other . . .”*³¹

Solomon was occupied with the construction of the Temple commissioned by his father for the first twenty years of his reign. During that period he appeared to be a focused and devout man. When the Temple was completed Yahwah blessed his efforts.

*“When Solomon had finished building the Temple of Yahweh and the royal palace and all he had a mind to build, Yahweh appeared to Solomon a second time, as he had appeared to him at Gibeon. Yahweh said to him, ‘I grant your prayer and the entreaty you have made before me. I consecrate this house you have built. I place my name there for ever; my eyes and my heart shall be always there. For your part, if you walk before me with innocence of heart and in honesty, like David your father, if you do all I order you and keep my laws and my ordinances, I will make your royal throne secure over Israel for ever, as I promised David your father when I said: You shall never lack for a man on the throne of Israel. But if you turn away from me, you or your sons, and do not keep the commandments and laws I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut Israel off from the land I have given them, and I will cast out from my presence this Temple that I have consecrated for my name, and Israel shall become a proverb and a byword among all the nations. As for this exalted Temple, all who pass by will be astounded; they will whistle and say, ‘Why has Yahweh treated this country and this Temple like this?’ And the answer will be, ‘Because they deserted Yahweh their God who brought their ancestors out of the land of Egypt, and they adopted other gods and worshiped them and served them; that is why Yahweh has brought all these disasters on them.’”*³²

Once the Temple was completed Solomon quickly succumbed to delusion. He acquired great wealth as a trader and squandered the fortune on conspicuous consumption . . . elaborate gold shields . . . a throne of ivory plated with refined gold.³³

³¹ 1 Kings 5:9–11, The Jerusalem Bible.

³² 1 Kings 9:1-9, The Jerusalem Bible.

³³ 1 Kings 10:14-20, The Jerusalem Bible.

He lusted for foreign women and was said to have had seven hundred wives of royal rank and three hundred concubines.³⁴ When he grew old the foreign wives used his lust for sex to sway him to their gods and to build shrines for their false gods.

Solomon's progression to delusion was not at all unique. Indeed, the consequence of his success was very similar to that of Alexander the Great. But the larger question was the people of Israel . . . what happened to their unique ability to publicly confront their leaders and force confession and atonement? What happened to their ability to prevent the very self-destruction, characteristic of Persia and Macedonia, that followed Solomon's reign? The prophetic voice of the people was silenced. How? The only possible explanation was the construction of the Temple. Whereas the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob . . . the God of the Exodus . . . who led his people out of Egypt and destroyed the Pharaoh's army by his own hand . . . the God who appointed the Judges, Saul, and David . . . all on his own initiative and according to his own counsel . . . became a God confined to the Temple and dependent on the initiative of humans. Or that was what the people of Israel presumed, to their great misfortune.

God did not punish Solomon. It was the people of Israel that suffered the consequence of their foolish presumption of control over God. Solomon was followed by his son, Rehoboam, a violent and abusive man. All but the tribe of Judah rejected Rehoboam and rebelled. Israel became the "Northern Kingdom" under the leadership of Jeroboam. The Northern Kingdom was subsequently conquered by the Assyrians and degenerated into the region known as Samaria. Judah remained intact for a couple hundred years, but was then conquered by Babylon and its leaders taken into exile. The great prophets that were called forth by God during that period of cultural degeneration expressed God's anger for his people. They were responsible to God and could not hide behind king, priest, or Temple.

Did the mandate to surround every divinely appointed leader with prophets that would discern and proclaim their every sin and weakness end with the demise of Solomon? Certainly not. In Jesus' mission to reestablish God as king over the people of God he was clearly tempted by delusion and then shadowed by Judas Iscariot. Consider the following points:

1. In the wilderness, Jesus was first tempted to use his divine power for his own gratification, "*If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to turn into a loaf.*"³⁵ Then he was tempted to pursue worldly power, "*Then leading him to a height, the devil showed him in a moment of time all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, 'I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms . . .'*"³⁶ And lastly he was tempted to use his divine standing to prove he could avoid pain and sacrifice, "*If you are the Son of God . . . throw yourself down from here, for scripture says: 'He will put his angels in charge of you to guard you,' and again: 'They will hold you up on their hands in case you hurt your foot against a stone.'*"³⁷ Jesus had successfully resisted the same delusions to which Alexander the Great succumbed, Solomon succumbed to after

³⁴ 1 Kings 11:3ff, The Jerusalem Bible.

³⁵ Luke 4:4, The Jerusalem Bible.

³⁶ Luke 4:5-6, The Jerusalem Bible.

³⁷ Luke 4:9-11, The Jerusalem Bible.

construction of the temple, and were attributed to Gilgamesh.

2. Jesus subsequently appointed Judas a disciple and allowed him to be present during the most intimate gatherings of the disciples even though he knew Judas would betray him. He did so because he understood the importance of the role of Judas vis a vis himself, and the importance of that role in the Father's plan.
3. When Judas criticized the wasteful use of a pound of very costly ointment to anoint the feet of Jesus, saying: "*Why wasn't this ointment sold for three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor?*,"³⁸ he demonstrated his intent to immediately identify and proclaim Jesus' every perceived transgression. Both Jesus and Judas understood that was Judas' role.
4. When it was said: ". . . *the chief priests and the scribes were looking for some way of doing away with him (Jesus) . . .*"³⁹ they belied there would be somebody such as Judas who was close to Jesus and knew his every fault, because that had been the case with every great leader in the history of Israel. Judas entered into an agreement with them to deliver the damaging information on Jesus because he understood the same tradition embraced by the chief priests and scribes, understood his role to be consistent with that tradition, and believed Jesus to be a leader in the manner of David and Abraham.
5. Judas became increasingly frustrated and determined to take matters "into his own hands," when it was evident there was no sin or transgression by Jesus to report. That frustration led to his betrayal of Jesus.
6. After the resurrection Judas realized Jesus was without sin, that Jesus was the Son of God, and that he, Judas, was wrong. Like all men who realize their deepest beliefs are wrong, Judas wanted to die and indeed committed suicide.⁴⁰

Judas' role was essential for Christianity because it affirmed a paradigm for true leadership established with Abraham and confirmed through the life and ministry of Jesus. All leaders truly called by God would nevertheless face delusional temptations and were therefore required to be surrounded by prophets and a prophetic tradition. Those prophets were called to discern every weakness and every sin of such leaders, and to make those intimate revelations public knowledge. The prophets and prophetic tradition did not have the authority to replace or destroy said leaders. Their purpose was to prevent the emergence and/or progression of delusion. Every leader truly called by God understood the role of the prophets and the prophet tradition and accepted an intimate relationship with them. That prophetic tradition was strongest when it was broadly understood and acknowledged to be the "practical consequence of knowing God," as described by Paul.⁴¹ The full importance of that prophetic tradition was evident by consideration of the following:

1. The actual accomplishments of Gilgamesh, though likely significant, were

³⁸ John 12:5, The Jerusalem Bible.

³⁹ Luke 22:2, The Jerusalem Bible.

⁴⁰ Acts 1:16-20, The Jerusalem Bible.

⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 14:24-25, The Jerusalem Bible.

buried under successive layers of exaggeration and the indiscriminate assignment of divine attributes.

2. The life of Alexander the Great was cut short, and the power and influence of the Hellenistic culture muted, by the Macedonian's inability to prevent Alexander's progression to delusion.
3. The people of Israel entered into a period of dramatic degeneration when they believed God was consigned to the Temple and not present in their daily affairs, and that they were no longer responsible for monitoring the conduct of their leaders.

The importance of the prophetic tradition to the health and development of the people of God cannot be overstated. It is vitally important in the modern period to understand the role and function of that prophetic tradition, especially in a culture such as America where Christians are closely allied with secular business and political leaders. Such Christians are overly eager to proclaim those leaders "godly men," or "chosen by god." The essential question in such circumstances is thus; is that leader surrounded by prophets who publicly report every weakness and transgression? . . . does that leader accept and acknowledge the importance of that prophetic role? If the answer to either question is "no" the leader does not serve God, is not called by God, and will eventually succumb to delusion. The corporate failures of WorldCom, Inc and Enron, Inc are perfect examples of the self-destruction wrought by leaders who succumb to delusion. That same self-destructive dynamic is present in the political leadership of the United States and it will produce the same ignominious consequences unless the prophetic tradition of Christianity is reasserted.