

# WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE TELL US?

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**D**ISCUERNMENT' IS NOT A NEW PHENOMENON. The question of how we may distinguish between who or what is inspired by God, whether a person is animated by a good or evil spirit and whether they are a true or false prophet, exists throughout the Bible even if the word 'discern' is found infrequently. It is seen as a gift of very great importance in the Hebrew Scriptures, e.g. where false prophets often rose up and deceived the people, and in the New Testament within the communities of the early Church. The problems which we face today, as to whether discernment is a task for the individual or the community (or indeed both), are found already in the Scriptures. It is possible that Scripture may indeed be a source we have neglected in our search for new models of discernment.

## *The Old Testament*

A search of the Old Testament reveals that there is no one Hebrew word for what we translate as 'discern'. There are a number of words which range in meaning from 'observe' (Prov 7:7) to 'recognize' or 'acknowledge' (Gen 27:23, 38:25). If only it were as easy now as one imagines it must have been then to discern the will of God simply by asking the High Priest to cast the Urim and Thummim – in some way one was given the answer immediately.<sup>1</sup>

The gift of discernment was, however, seen as being of great importance. David, as Yahweh's representative, possesses it for his leadership of the people so that they can have confidence in him. 'The word of my lord the king will set me at rest; for my lord the king is like the angel of God, discerning good and evil' (2 Sam 14:17). Solomon asks God for it so that he may exercise his kingly role in accordance with God's will: 'Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?' (1 Kg 3:9) – and it is given to him: 'Indeed I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you' (1 Kg 3:12).

On a number of occasions Israel as a nation is faced with choices which require discernment. One of the most significant is the choice of

its first king (1 Sam chs 7–12). The text as we have it has been through a long process of redaction<sup>2</sup> and so bears the imprint of the views of the final redactor (in this case Deuteronomic). However, despite its several editors, it preserves a certain unity, which rests in the conviction of the overruling purpose of God, while preserving the diversity of the material. Reading between the lines can be helpful in our search for discerning together. The question facing the community is a very real one – should they have a king like the other nations or stay as they are? We find two main attitudes in the text, pro- and anti-monarchy, attitudes arrived at with hindsight and reflecting later experience. That is how Samuel, God's prophet, comes to be presented with assurance as the one who could see from the outset the strengths and weaknesses of monarchy, something which would have been impossible for the community to know at the time.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that Israel was thought to have a king already: God. So Israel's dilemma is the question of what God's will is in this very human situation of appointing a king from among the people. We are presented with three stories of how this dilemma was resolved, all of them closely redacted together to form one continuous narrative:

A. Chapter 9:1–10:16: Saul, the young warrior, goes in search of some lost asses. He meets Samuel and is anointed by him in private. Saul is given a sign to watch for which will confirm for him that it is God's will for him to be king. The sign occurs – he is inspired by prophetic spirit at Gilgal, and the community agree to his kingship over them.

B. Chapter 10:17–27 sees Saul, the distinguished member of the tribe of Benjamin, picked by lot to be king in response to the wishes of the people. This is portrayed as a concession made by God to the people's demands but is also seen as a rejection of God. The whole process occurs within the community.

C. Chapter 11: we have Saul, the inspired hero of Jabesh-Gilead who has shown his ability, acknowledged by the people at Gilgal in community.

In all three stories the place of discernment appears to be that of the community and it is particularly the place of confirmation.

Distinguishing between true and false prophets was another situation which required discernment, especially when false prophets and those called 'seducers' often rose up and deceived the people. There were many occasions when prophets arose and offered conflicting prophecies and/or courses of action. How then were the leaders and the

people to determine which one spoke God's word, so they could accept and follow it?

The Book of Deuteronomy gives us criteria to help distinguish between true and false prophecy (Deut 18, 20, 21, 22).

1. Authentic prophecy is confirmed by the prediction of 'signs' which actually come to pass. The prophet was one who purported to speak in the name of Yahweh. If what he foretold did not come to pass we could be sure that the message was not from God. This criterion is fine for later on, after the event, but was obviously of no help to the people at the time of the utterance of the prophecy.

2. The prophecy must be faithful to the fundamental faith of Israel – God is faithful and cannot therefore contradict himself, so if the prophet contradicts the basic faith of Israel he cannot be moved by the Spirit of God.

3. The life of the prophet himself will also be an indication that his message is authentic – a false prophet will be betrayed by his sinful life. But this raises the question: how can you be sure that the person is not covering up something?

4. Prophecies of misfortune are more likely to be true than prophecies of good fortune; but sometimes the prophecy of peace and salvation is the right one at the time.

5. What is the intention of the prophet? Does he act in order to curry favour or win power or to convert people to the living God? This is a much harder criterion to decide upon because the inner mind cannot be seen. The external behaviour is the only thing that can be observed and intention judged on these grounds is therefore open to misunderstanding.

6. The prophet's own experience of his prophetic call: this is definitive and decisive for the prophet. We have initial 'call' stories for many of the prophets (Exod 3, Isai 6, Jer 1, Hos 1–3). It is this experience of being called by God which set them apart, made them God's spokespersons and gave them the basis for their future prophetic acts.

None of these criteria can stand on its own; they are useful in cases which are clear, where one or other of the criteria is obviously not met. But apart from waiting for the confirmation of the prophecy by its coming true, the problem remains of how the community decides, at the time the prophecy is given, what is really of God and what is false. Or is it impossible ever to make that judgement at the time, and is there never any option but to wait until the prophecy comes to pass to be sure? In the meantime, what do I or we do? What place has community

in this dilemma? Often it is faced with a choice or course of action that needs a decision to be made immediately, e.g. at a time of war, whether to give in or fight.

The recognition of true and false prophets can become even more difficult if prophetic power is inconsistent. What happens in the case of two prophets who have been proved to be true prophets in the past and who now give conflicting messages? This is the case with Hananiah and Jeremiah in Jeremiah chapters 27–29. Here we have a practical situation where the criteria of Deuteronomy do not really help. The text has been heavily edited by the Deuteronomic redactor who had already decided which prophet had the true message because that message, by the time of editing, had been confirmed by its fulfilment. The gist of the text is this:

The time is about ten years before the destruction of Jerusalem. The previous king of Judah had allied himself with Egypt and refused to pay his regular tribute to Babylon. As a punishment Jerusalem was attacked and the king's successor together with the élite of the people was taken into captivity in Babylon. A puppet king was installed on the throne. The people wanted to revolt against Babylon and were encouraged to do this by promises of help from Egypt. Jeremiah preached submission to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon; he saw the actions of Babylon as God's deliberate punishment of his people because of their corruption and failure. Hananiah on the other hand tried to strengthen their resolve to revolt by saying it was God's will and that he would save them from Babylon. It must have been hard for the people to separate their own will for their human situation from what might be God's will. This was a real case for discernment – what was real and what was illusion? We meet the two prophets in Chapter 28. Jeremiah had advised the people and the king to get used to Nebuchadnezzar's yoke for it was to be long borne; but Hananiah says in Yahweh's name that 'within two years' the exiles will return to their land and Nebuchadnezzar's yoke will be broken (28:4). Jeremiah replies 'Amen, may Yahweh do so!' (v. 6), thus putting himself in line with those ideals of covenant but at the same time knowing that wishful thinking will not make it so. Jeremiah slightly modifies the content criteria by saying that an essential theme of traditional prophetism has been that of war, not peace. The question remains – is this pertinent now? The historical signs are ambiguous and each prophet sees them differently. Jeremiah knows that probability is on his side but the final answer must await fulfilment in the future (v. 9). Hananiah, however, does not give in as easily as Jeremiah, but performs a prophetic action in breaking the

yoke worn by Jeremiah as a symbol of his words, saying 'Thus will Yahweh do'. Jeremiah has no immediate answer – he goes away to listen to God. God's word is not static and must be listened to anew in the differing circumstances. Again he hears a word from Yahweh and returns with it – this time he concludes his words with the prophecy that by the same time next year Hananiah will be dead. Later we hear this has come to pass and therefore that Jeremiah has been revealed as giving the true prophecy. However, this still does not help us regarding an interpretation at the time the prophecy is spoken. The Hebrew Scriptures give us much that is useful but they do not give us all the answers.

### *The New Testament*

The problem of discernment continues into the New Testament. As we look at the vocabulary for discernment, here again we find that there is no one word translated by 'discernment'. There are two Greek words which we translate as discern: *dokimazein*, from the verb to test, to try or prove, used primarily of metals (in the hope and expectation that the test will prove successful) (1 Jn 4:1; 1 Cor 2:14, 15); *diakrinein*, from the verb to separate, hence to distinguish, discriminate, discern; to settle, decide, judge externally or internally in one's mind – hence the nouns: the acts of judgement, discernment, arbitration (1 Cor 12:10; Heb 5:14).

Paul places *diakriseis pneumatōn*, the ability to distinguish between spirits (King James Version – discerning of spirits) among the spiritual gifts and on an equal footing with them: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles and prophecy.

To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. (1 Cor 12:8–10)

Discernment of spirits was thus seen as one of the manifestations of the Spirit given for the common good of the community:

All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (1 Cor 12:11–12)

Its *raison d'être* was therefore the building up of the body of believers.

The gifts are at the disposal of the sovereign Spirit who disperses them diversely as it wills. No one gift is given to everyone and no one person is given all gifts, although certain gifts, such as apostleship, implicitly include some others. 'The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works' (2 Cor 12:12). The exercise of the gifts is therefore very much seen to be a part of a whole which is necessary for the entire community. The focus of interest of these spiritual gifts is the church and the fellowship of those who are in Christ Jesus, and the primary emphasis is upon the Church's well-being and growth. Anyone receiving a gift therefore needs humility in exercising it, not just for one's own spiritual advantage but out of awareness that one is rendering service to the body of Christ (Rom 12:3-5, 1 Cor 12). Gifts may be sought in prayer (1 Cor 12:31) and may be imparted by the laying on of hands by gifted persons (Acts 19:6).

Why then is the gift of discernment thought to be so necessary by Paul? Christian tradition tells us that there are two kinds of spirit, good and evil (2 Thess 2:11, Eph 6:12). It was understood that inspired messages could come from either and that their genuineness was independent of externalities (1 Jn 4:1). However, it was thought possible to distinguish between the good and evil spirits in order to establish their validity (1 Cor 2:12-15). Separating the spirit of truth from the spirit of error (1 Jn 4:6) was seen as essential for the maintenance of Christian faith (1 Thess 5:18-21).

'Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak' (1 Cor 12:1). This implies that as pagans they were not their own masters or that they were just dominated in a general way by demons.

The 'distinguishing of spirits' is explained by 1 Cor 14:24f, according to Conzelmann.<sup>3</sup> Bruce<sup>4</sup> takes this up in his commentary and goes on to add that it produces believers. If an unbeliever hears all the community speaking in tongues, she or he will be put off because she or he will not be able to understand what is being said. However, if the unbeliever hears all the believers speaking prophecy, she or he will be impressed, the words will pierce to the heart and conscience, and the hidden things of the heart will become manifest. Is this the process of discernment? It is not a prediction of the future here but the unmasking of the person. Is it not the core of the discernment process to attain true inner freedom and knowledge of oneself? Prophetic utterance is not

necessarily true. So apart from needing to weigh carefully what is actually said (i.e. to discern literally), in order to ascertain its direct relevance another gift is needed: discernment. This will tell us whether the message is of God or some demonic agency (1 Cor 12:3). Paul therefore also gives us criteria as to how we may know whether the word is of God or not. These are different from those of Deuteronomy in that Christ has become an important element.

1. 'Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor 12:3). The gifts emanate from the exalted Jesus and will, if they are genuine, issue in a confession of him.

2. We know from a moral and practical sense that if there is an increase in the fruits of the Spirit in the person or community we can be assured that this is of God. 'Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?' (Mt 7:15–16). 'By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' (Gal 5:22–23). He is pointing out that it is not just the pagans who can be deceived and led astray; the believing community may also be split by deception; therefore it is even more important to have and use the gift of discernment for the well-being of the community.

The first Epistle of John reminds us that discernment was also just as necessary within the community of believers in which unusual gifts were common, and where the messenger of Satan was sometimes transformed into an angel of light, and false apostles, under the outward appearance of sheep, concealed the sentiments of ravenous wolves. John therefore warns the community: 'Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world' (1 Jn 4:1).

This takes up the warning against false teaching that was given in 1 Jn 2:18–27 and underlines it – 'do not believe every spirit'. Any power which promises results is seductive and so the readers must be warned to test the spirits to see whether they are of God. With Brown<sup>5</sup> I agree with the view that here the author is talking in a literal sense of the necessity of believing and testing spirits because he is interested in what lies at the root of a person's action. He means 'do not believe every spirit to be the spirit God gave us. There are two spirits, divine and diabolic, that can manifest themselves in human behaviour and specifically in true and false confessions of faith.'

Distinguishing between the spirits is necessary in view of the false prophets but it is also made possible by the confession of Christ. John gives us this criterion:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world. (1 Jn 4:2-3)

The true confession comes from the spirit of God, the erroneous confession indicates not only the absence of God but also the presence of the wicked spirit of deceit. However we can have hope and be reassured because:

Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error. (1 Jn 4:4-6)

There is a renewed warning against the heretical teachers which seems to arise from the concern that the believers are not 'sensitive' enough to resist their seductive talk. The Letter to the Hebrews picks this up and develops it:

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil. (Heb 5:12-14)

This suggests that the gift of discernment is not for the very new Christian and that it needs also to be used and developed by practice in order to become sharper. The community that discerns will become even more discerning.

### *Conclusions*

I think that we can draw the following conclusions from our brief look at discernment in Scripture:

Firstly, this is not a new phenomenon. It is a gift of God of equal importance with the other spiritual gifts and it is given for the building



up of the community rather than the individual (1 Cor 12:10). No one person has all the gifts nor is one gift given to all. It is therefore very important and necessary to exercise the gift of discernment within the community in order that members are not deceived by false spirits and consequently either follow their own inclinations or actively fall away from the will of God (1 Jn 4:1).

Second, discernment is a process and therefore takes time; there are no instant answers from latter-day Urim. It is an ongoing process which needs to test whatever new circumstances or information occur. The results then need to be confirmed, as Jeremiah confirmed his, by listening again to God. *The* place of confirmation is understood to be the community; however, this presupposes that the community itself consists of people who are able to discern.

Third, therefore, discernment is not an easy process and help is needed in the form of some criteria. The lessons of the Scriptures can help us in that they give us concrete examples of situations where discernment has taken place. The criteria they give, however, are not adequate nor are they foolproof in themselves. This is why new perspectives are necessary which will help clarify better each fresh situation. We can draw hope from looking back to the Scriptures which remind us of concrete examples where community discernment has taken place, thus keeping us rooted in the knowledge that we need each other for discerning together. This is especially true in today's age where the problem of individual freedom versus the common good is such an issue. The Scriptures help us to realize that actually these two sets of interests can come together, providing that both parties discern the will of God in freedom and that what they discern is confirmed by the wider community.

#### NOTES

All biblical references are taken from *The New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>1</sup> The Urim and Thummim were oracular devices described as being carried in the breastplate of the High Priest (Exod 28:30). It is probable that they were two objects carried in a pocket; the drawing of the object at random was a form of the lot by which questions could be answered in the affirmative or the negative.

<sup>2</sup> Redaction criticism is the study of the contribution made by the final editor of the biblical material. It builds upon the other forms of biblical criticism and emphasizes the creative role that the author or authors had in the shaping of the material they inherited. This gives us clues as to the specific concerns of the editor and his or her community.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia, 1975), p 209.

<sup>4</sup> F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, New Century Bible Commentary (London, 1971), p 133.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John* (London, 1982), p 486.