

ELDAD AND MEDAD

FRED BLUMENTHAL

The Divine command to Moses to ordain 70 elders (Num. 11:16) and the ensuing events foreshadow a biblical approach to the potential role of prophets in the leadership of the Israelite nation. Prophecy often includes the foreknowledge of future historic trends and upcoming events, but it needs to be accompanied by the ability and willingness to use this superior status as a tool for effective leadership or persuasive dissemination. The stated purpose for the anointment of the 70 elders was to assist Moses and *take their place there with you* as the text calls it. Such political or cultural leadership must accompany the spiritual greatness of the prophet and must be acquired by him before he can function as a prophetically inspired leader.

The specification that exactly 70 men were to be entrusted with this task confronted Moses with the problem of equal representation for each of the 12 tribes. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 17a) and the Midrash (Num. R. XV 15-19) both report that he overcame this challenge by selecting six qualified candidates from each tribe, for a total of 72. He then eliminated two of them by a lottery, to arrive at the number 70, which God had established. The two who were passed over were Eldad and Medad, who emerged as the self-appointed prophets in the continuation of this event.

We are left wondering why the Lord would have chosen to limit this newly created group of leaders to a number not divisible by 12. Why did He create this dilemma for Moses, that forced him to bypass two individuals who were unquestionably qualified, inasmuch as they had been candidates for this honor? They, indeed, demonstrated their qualification by engaging publicly in prophesying (11:26).

Equally puzzling appears the coincidence that these two self-appointed prophets had very similar names – Eldad and Medad. This suggests that these are stage names which may shed some light on the meaning of this story.

Perhaps the events reported here can best be understood in the framework of an examination of the nature of prophecy. Maimonides in the *Guide for*

Fred Blumenthal is a retired businessman who divides his time between Jerusalem and Cedarhurst, NY. He was educated at the Samson Raphael Hirsch School and the Yeshiva of Frankfort, Germany, and has pursued biblical studies throughout his adult life.

the Perplexed devotes 16 paragraphs to this subject. Of particular relevance to the Eldad and Medad story seems the introductory chapter Part II Par. XXXII in which he delves into the fact that prophecy is never a sudden revelation to a person. Quite to the contrary, it must be preceded by study, development of character, and religious self-perfection. He states:

Accordingly, it is impossible that an ignorant person shall be a prophet; or that a person being no prophet in the evening, should, unexpectedly on the following morning, find himself a prophet, as if prophecy were a thing that could be found unintentionally. [...] For prophecy is impossible without study and training.

The 70 elders appointed by Moses must therefore have been personalities of renown before the ceremony of inauguration described here (11:24-25). When they assembled in the Tent (the Sanctuary), God's presence became apparent, and Moses, the greatest prophet ever, was present when the prophetic status was bestowed upon them.

Maimonides furthermore points out that even an accomplished prophet does have variations in his relationship to God. A person can "hear" and experience closeness to God at one time or place and then remain without inspiration for a long period. Also, the intensity of his relation can vary from time to time and from space to space. This phenomenon is particularly well described in the story of the 70 elders who at the time and place of their inauguration burst forth with their newly acquired greatness. They prophesized, but the text tells us they were not able to continue (11:25). The intensity at the time of their infusion could not be maintained when they left the Tent and were not constantly in the presence of Moses, the great leader.

Eldad and Medad, we must assume, had the same background experiences as the 70 who were chosen. They had acquired the wisdom and character traits which made them fit for prophecy. They missed out on the ceremony which confirmed the status of the 70. Yet, to quote the text, *They prophesied in the encampment* (11:26). They became the kind of prophets who could reach this enlightenment without the infusion of place, holy atmosphere, and the presence of a mentor. Their own preparations sufficed; they acquired the status of prophecy through their inner qualities and preparations.

Two types of prophets are thereby portrayed in this story. The prophet who rises to political or cultural leadership with the guidance and training of preceding prophets and leaders and, on the other hand, the searcher and thinker who like Eldad and Medad reaches the exalted status without such guidance from a mentor.

There were other prophets who ascended to their status in the manner of Eldad and Medad. Most prominent among them is Moses himself. When he encountered his Creator the first time, at the scene of the Burning Bush, a careful reading demonstrates this fact. Moses did not suddenly hear God speak to him; he saw the mysterious fire before there was any oral message. The Burning Bush, a fire which did not consume its fuel and therefore symbolizes the eternal existence of God, was seen and understood by Moses without any attention having been drawn to it. Moses was able to "see" and experience God's eternity through his thoughts and personal preparation.

Joshua, on the other hand, became a prophet through his long association with Moses: *And Joshua bin-Nun, his assistant, did not depart from the Tent* (Ex. 33:11). He was subsequently ordained by Moses in the Tent, in a ceremony similar to the ordination of the 70 elders (Deut. 31:14ff). His investiture is described once again with the words: *And Joshua bin-Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom because Moses had placed his hands upon him* (34:9).

By their reaction to the emergence of Eldad and Medad as prophets, Moses and Joshua guide the reader to become aware of the difference in prophetic personalities. The acquisition of superior knowledge and historic foresight might qualify a person for the title "prophet," but if these qualities are not combined with the training to lead and persuade, he cannot be expected fully to take on such a role. Joshua, who himself was to reach prophetic status only through the influence of his environment, opposes these self-appointed men who had grown into this status, seemingly without outside help. So he asked his mentor, Moses, to put an end to their pronouncements. Moses, in contrast thereto, having come the self-developed route himself, neither feels threatened nor opposes their assumption of prophetic status (Num. 11:29).

Were Eldad and Medad superior as prophets to the 70 elders? Did their self-education excel the accomplishment of the inaugurated leaders? The Talmud (Sanhedrin 17b) and the Midrash (both Numbers Rabba and Tanhuma) hint that the Eldad/Medad prophet is greater than his appointed col-

league. This seems inherent in the remark that the 70 elders were unable to continue their prophecies for long, whereas no such limitation appears in the report of Eldad's and Medad's advent into prophecy. Additionally, it is told that the two men survived to enter the Promised Land, whereas the 70 elders shared the destiny of their contemporaries by dying in the desert.¹

But in spite of this accolade, we must not overlook that the leadership of the Israelite nation went to Joshua and not to either one of these two. The lesson that seems to emerge from the text is that of 72 eligible personalities only 70 are likely to be leaders; two must be bypassed in spite of their great spiritual accomplishment.

This interpretation is well expressed by the translation of the Hebrew word *kelo'em* (Num. 11:28). When Joshua requested Moses to silence the two, he used this word, the exact meaning of which is unclear. Rashi quotes the talmudic translation "assign to them the burden of leadership which would silence them promptly" (Sanhedrin 17b). The idea expressed here is that such lofty prophetic status may be admirable, but it is not likely to create effective leadership, a quality usually attained through training and the influence of a mentor. This doctrine is repeated by the midrash which reports that the contents of Eldad and Medad's prophecy was the prediction that Moses would die and Joshua would be his successor for the conquest of the Promised Land. It means that they themselves were aware of their insufficient preparedness to assume leadership for which the anointment by a mentor is a prerequisite.

History supports this depiction of prophecy. This is most clearly expressed in the role of Elijah, an apparently self-appointed prophet. Elijah was instructed to anoint two kings and to elevate Elisha to prophecy (I Kg. 19:15-16) but he executed only the last of these three commands; no mention is made in the text of his anointing the kings. Political leadership seemingly was not his inclination. And in the future, according to Jewish belief, he will return to prepare the initiation of Messianic times, but he is not slated to assume the role of Messiah himself. This role is reserved for the descendant of David, the king and prophet who was anointed by his mentor Samuel.

This meaning of our story explains the names of Eldad and Medad, names that appear to be stage names. Their names seem to be found in the name Almodad, in Genesis 10:26. Almodad was the first-born son of Yoktan, who

is listed as the brother of Peleg. According to the biblical account, they lived at the time of the attempted building of the Tower of Babel and the start of the splitting of mankind into diverse nations. Peleg, a son of Eber, became a forefather of Abraham, whereas Yoktan the father of Almodad was bypassed in this significant genealogy. The meaning of the name Almodad strongly suggests "the one who does not count [*al moded*]." Perhaps Almodad was also worthy but, as in the story of Eldad and Medad, not all those who were qualified could be chosen. Our two protagonists suffered the same fate as the son of Yoktan, and like Almodad were never again to be mentioned in the annals of biblical history.

Moses, so the events of these days teach us, was so far above any other prophet of his time or the future that he could assume effective leadership as a self-made prophet. Later generations were led by prophets who had learned from their predecessors and were inaugurated by them. The achievement of Eldad and Medad can hardly be questioned, but the leadership goes to the Joshua type.

NOTES

1. Yalkut Shimoni Bamidbar, 11, Remez 737; Midrash Rabbah 15:19



ANSWERS TO QUIZ ME ON THE TORAH

1. Passover: Exodus from Egypt; Shavuot: giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai; Sukkot: the journey in the desert enroute to the Promised Land.
2. As a land flowing with milk and honey.
3. Pharaoh's daughter when she found him in the river. Because the word Moses means to draw from or fetch.
4. The story of the burning bush.

