

Deuteronomy 18:9-22

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“When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you [which He owns, Lev 25:23], you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations [don’t be negatively influenced by the pagan cultures].¹⁰ “There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer,¹¹ or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. [these were pagan practices to manipulate deities or to perceive the future in order to gain wealth]¹² “For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you [the Canaanites were judged because they did all these things].¹³ “You shall be blameless before the LORD your God [by listening only to His voice].¹⁴ “For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do so [Israel was to be holy].¹⁵ “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen [i.e., a fellow Israelite], you shall listen to him [for spiritual direction].¹⁶ “This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.’ [when Israel was afraid to hear God speak directly]¹⁷ “The LORD said to me, ‘They have spoken well.’¹⁸ ‘I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him [the voice of the prophet was the voice of God].¹⁹ ‘It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require *it* of him [because God’s prophet spoke with divine authority].²⁰ ‘But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak [i.e., assuming authority God did not give], or which he speaks in the name of other gods [idols], that prophet shall die [because he is advocating treason].’²¹ “You may say in your heart, ‘How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’ [i.e., how do we identify the false prophet?]²² “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true [i.e., a short term prediction and fulfillment all could observe], that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him [because he has no divine authority].

Summary

This unit of Scripture is part of a larger section in which Moses addresses four leadership offices God would assign in Israel, namely, **judges** (Deut 16:18-17:8), **priests** (Deut 17:9-13; 18:1-8), **kings** (Deut 17:14-20), and **prophets** (Deut 18:15-22).

These four leadership offices were bound by the Mosaic Law, which legitimized their authority and was the guide for their rulership. In this pericope, Moses warns his people about the spiritual dangers they will face as they enter Canaan and directs them to listen only to God's voice which He would continue to provide through a prophet of His choosing.

Moses had previously instructed his people to right-living, saying, "Righteousness, and only righteousness, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you" (Deut 16:20). But Satan has his traps to lead God's people astray, and God warns His people about these dangers that they might avoid them. For this reason, Moses said, "When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations" (Deut 18:9). God owned the land (Lev 25:23), so He had the right to give it to whomever He pleased. God had previously promised the land to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 15:18; 17:7-8), Isaac (Gen 26:3-4), and Jacob (Gen 28:10-14), and He was fulfilling His Word to them by bringing their descendants into it. Once in the land of Canaan, Israel was to avoid being negatively influenced by the pagan cultures around them. God had instructed them on how to live holy lives and it was their responsibility to obey (Deut 11:26-28).

Moses continued, saying, "There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, ¹¹ or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead" (Deut 18:10-11). God had previously warned Israel not to practice child sacrifice (Deut 12:31; cf., Lev 18:21; 20-1-5), and here repeats His message (Deut 18:10a). Some Canaanites sacrificed their children, burning them alive, in order to invoke the favor of a pagan deity, to ascertain knowledge of the future, or to obtain power or wealth. Other prohibited acts of occultism were condemned as well (Deut 18:10b-11), though the terms are not easy to define. *Divination* (קֶסֶם *qesem*) sought to determine the future by examining stellar bodies, communing with the dead, or inspecting animal organs. The meaning of *one who practices witchcraft* (אָנָן *anan*) is uncertain, but seems to refer to reading cloud formations to determine the future. *One who interprets omens* (נֶחָשׁ *nachash*) refers to interpreting the movement of birds, rainfall, or the flicker of fire. A *sorcerer* (קַשָּׁפִּי *kashaph*) is one who casts spells on others. *One who casts a spell* (חָבַר *chabar*) literally means *to tie a magic knot* (BDB) and refers to curses that bind people. A *medium* (שָׂאֵל *shaal*) is one who claims to be able to consult the dead, but actually consults demons. A *spiritist* (יִדְדְּוֹנִי *yiddeoni*) is someone who pretends conjure up the dead. Though the exact meaning of these terms is uncertain, they are all condemned by God as detestable, because they lead people away from the Lord and into demonism.

The appeal of the occult is to have power to live as one pleases, the freedom and ability to manipulate people and circumstances for one's own selfish purposes, even if it destroys the innocent. But these cultic practices were an affront to God, and it was because of them that He was judging the Canaanites who lived in the land. Moses said, "For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you.¹³ You shall be blameless before the LORD your God" (Deut 18:12-13). Other *detestable* practices by the Canaanites included all forms of incest (Lev 18:1-20; 20:10-12, 14, 17, 19-21), homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13), sex with animals (Lev 18:23; 20:15-16), and violence toward parents (Lev 20:9).¹ Yet these were the values and practices of the Canaanites, and God was judging them for their sin. Moses said, "For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners" (Deut 18:14a). God prohibited His people from adopting these pagan practices, saying, "but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do so" (Deut 18:14b).

Naturally, an Israelite might ask how they can know God's will for them or what the future might hold. God would not leave His people guessing. Moses said, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him" (Deut 18:15). That is, God would raise up a prophet to lead His people, and he would be a fellow Israelite who would arise from among their midst and not be an outsider. Furthermore, he would talk and behave like Moses, always in agreement with Scripture.

God's prophet would also serve as a mediator between Him and the people. And this arrangement had been settled by a former agreement at Mount Sinai/Horeb. Moses said, "This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.'¹⁷ The LORD said to me, 'They have spoken well'" (Deut 18:16-17). Remember that the people had become frightened when they heard the Lord speaking directly to them, so they'd requested Moses talk with the Lord directly and then they would listen to Moses, and God agreed to the arrangement (see Deut 5:22-33).

God would not leave His people without clear direction, saying, "I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you" (Deut 18:18a). God's true prophet would not speak his own words, but the words of God Himself. The Lord said, "I will

¹ Unfortunately, we know from Israel's history they did not heed God's warning and adopted these practices. As a result of not obeying God's Word, the conquerors became the conquered, and Israel was removed from the land by divine judgment. This was avoidable, as Israel could have been blameless before the Lord if they'd maintained a singular focus on Him and walked in His ways.

put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him” (Deut 18:18b). Moses does not provide the mechanics of how God would place His word into their mouths, but simply promises to do so. Similarly, God said to Jeremiah, “Behold, I have put My words in your mouth” (Jer 1:9). And God’s prophet would carry His authority when he spoke. This is why the Lord said, “It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require *it* of him” (Deut 18:18). Failure to follow God’s prophet was a failure to follow the Lord Himself, and this would come with consequences. Later generations interpreted the “prophet” mentioned in Deuteronomy 18:18-19 as referring to an eschatological Messiah, whom some identified as Jesus (John 6:14; 7:40).

But there would always be false prophets whom Satan would use to mislead God’s people. God said, “But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die” (Deut 18:20). Here, the false prophet who presumptuously spoke in the Lord’s name would naturally be difficult to verify (needing to be tested), whereas a prophet who spoke in the name of another god could easily be identified as false. False prophets were guilty of treason and were to be killed for trying to lead God’s people into rebellion, and this because Israel was a theocracy and Yahweh was their King (Isa 33:22; 43:15). Jeremiah dealt with false prophets who were actually speaking “a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the LORD” (Jer 23:16; cf. Jer 14:14; 27:9-10).

Moses naturally anticipates an interlocutor, saying, “You may say in your heart, ‘How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’” (Deut 18:21). This assumes an objective way of knowing and not a mystical approach. Moses then answers his questioner, saying, “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him” (Deut 18:22; cf. Jer 28:9). Apparently, the prophet would be able to predict a short-term event that everyone could see for themselves and verify. 1 Kings 13:1-5 provides an example of a true prophet who spoke against the worship of false gods in agreement with written revelation (Deut 13:1-5; cf. Ex 20:1-5a), and validated himself by performing an observable short-term prophecy for others to witness (Deut 18:22). Once the short-term prophecy was fulfilled in exact detail, the prophet’s long-term prophecies could be accepted and relied upon as valid. Remember, Jesus adhered to this test, providing short-term prophecies that came to pass (Mark 11:12-14, 19-20), which validated His long-term prophecies which are still pending (Matt 24:3—25:46).

Remember, Moses had previously spoken about false prophets who claimed to be “a prophet or a dreamer of dreams” (Deut 13:1), and would even perform a miraculous

sign or wonder” (Deut 13:2a). Performing a sign or wonder could be used by a true prophet, such as when Moses was empowered by God to turn his staff into a serpent and make his hand leprous (Ex 4:1-9), or by means of the plagues against Pharoah (Deut 34:10-12). Supernatural signs would grab people’s attention and could be used to persuade them. However, the ability to perform a sign or wonder by itself was not enough to prove the miracle worker was from God. The false prophet revealed his true identity when he directed others to disobey God’s written Word, saying, “Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them” (Deut 13:2b). To call God’s people to serve other gods is in violation of the first commandment, which states, “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Deut 5:7), as well as the great commandment which states, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:5). Moses said, “you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut 13:3). Here was a test of allegiance, as those who loved God would remain loyal to Him (Deut 13:4). Only those who know God’s Word and live by it will guard themselves against the deceiving power of false prophets and miracle workers.

Present Application

Moses had previously instructed his people to right-living, saying, “Righteousness, and only righteousness, you shall pursue, that you may live and possess the land which the LORD your God is giving you” (Deut 16:20). Similarly, God wants the same for His church. It is Satan’s objective to get us to turn from the way of the Lord, and he will employ every pressure or pleasure to get us on to a path that leads to destruction.

Occultism is any religious system of belief and practice that attempts to manipulate the world, circumstances, or people by supernatural means for personal advantage or security. Occultism pursues things mystical or magical, is self-serving and often syncretistic. The Bible accepts the reality of the occult and its demonic powers which are able to have a real impact in the physical world. The ancient world—Egypt, Persia, Babylonia, Assyria, Greece, Rome—was steeped in magic and occult practices. It is noted that Satan and his demons are able to manufacture signs and wonders, albeit in a limited way. When Moses was executing God’s plagues upon Egypt, it is recorded three times “the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts” (Ex 7:10-11; cf., 7:21-22; 8:6-7). Luke records an event in which Paul encountered a slave-girl who had “a spirit of divination” and “was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling” (Acts 16:16). It would seem that demons can influence our world in such a way so as to manipulate economic forces. How this works is unknown. Jesus warned, “false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt 24:24). And Paul spoke of the coming

Antichrist, “whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved” (2 Th 2:9-10). Luke recorded an account of Simon the Magician who had a following of people in Samaria (Acts 8:9-10), and “had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts” (Acts 8:11). And John tells us about the coming future false prophet, who will help the antichrist by performing “great signs, so that he even makes fire come down out of heaven to the earth in the presence of men” (Rev 13:13). And this false prophet will be very persuasive, as “he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast” (Rev 13:14). Demons even play a role in political activities, for during the Tribulation we learn about “spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty” (Rev 16:14). Again, how this works is unknown, but clearly their ability to influence political rulers is plain. Christians today should test those who speak in the name of the Lord (1 John 4:1-3).

Satan is a counterfeiter. He replicates God’s true prophets and leaders and empowers them in order to deceive. The occult is one of Satan’s successful diversions to Christianity which has, in many ways, infiltrated the church with its counterfeit spiritual ideologies (e.g., yoga, acupuncture, new age meditation, white magic, labyrinth walking, etc.). The Christian today faces the same occultic pressures as believers did in the past, and God expects holiness now as much as He did then (Eph 1:4; 5:27; 1 Pet 1:15-16). Holiness is a choice we make every moment of every day, always mindful that there are supernatural forces that can harm us if step outside of God’s will and live by the values and practices of Satan’s world-system. The baby believer is the most vulnerable to Satan’s counterfeit spiritual offers because he does not have enough Bible knowledge to recognize spiritual dangers and walk away. Ignorance of Scripture creates a vacuum that Satan will always seek to fill with whatever diverts the Christian away from God, and the occult is one of his many strategies used to that end. Knowing God and walking in the light of Scripture is the only protection the Christian has against the strategies of the devil.