

Deut 18:9-22 Detestable Practices and Dedicated Prophets

Much of the book of Deut is a series of warnings about what the Israelites will encounter when they enter the PL. They should be prepared to see the religious practices of the heathen people who were living there at that time. And Moses sternly warns his people not to adopt these religious practices. The worship of the God of Israel is drastically different from the worship of the pagan gods. There must be no religious mixing—no combining with the pagans, no adoption of their religious practices.

The first part of this passage deals with pagan occultism, and the second part deals with the prophets of Israel. What these two things have in common is that both deal with communication with God. The pagans use occult methods to hear from their so-called gods; Israel hears from God through the prophets. Before entering the PL, Israel must be aware of the false, occult practices of the pagans and also be committed to following genuine, qualified prophets of the true and living God.

Many people today claim to speak for God. Some of them legitimately do speak for God, especially when they simply “preach the word.” Some believe that God is communicating directly to them outside of God’s written revelation; they claim to have heard a word from God. The danger is that they may be speaking “presumptuously” and without authority. Many of them do that.

Some people today claim to be engaged in the occult. They claim to have some kind of mystical knowledge from the unseen world. They practice witchcraft, sorcery, or necromancy. They claim that their information comes from the spirit world, but it does not come from God. This information is demonic, and we must recognize it as such and stay away from it.

Like Israel, we must listen to God and not to pagans or to false prophets. We must be very careful about to whom we listen and about the kind of religious practices in which we engage.

There is a proper, valid, legitimate way of hearing from God, and there are invalid, sinful, and abominable ways of gaining information from the spirit world. Let’s see what Moses has to say about pagan religious practices and about genuine prophets.

- I. Avoid the detestable practices of the heathen Canaanites (18:9–13)
 - A. The definition of these practices: they are “abominations.”

The word “abomination” (תועבה) describes a disgusting thing; something utterly wicked, unclean, and detestable.

B. The prohibition of these practices

1. .9b You shall not learn to follow them. i.e., you must not imitate these ways.
2. .10a None of these practices should be “found among you.” Israel must absolutely avoid such practices. They must not adopt them or cooperate with them.

App: A very clear biblical principle is that we do not cooperate with or adopt false religion. We separate from it, stay away from it, avoid it completely. We are not ecumenical; we are separatists.

C. .10 The explanation of these practices

Moses prohibits nine types of behaviors here that he describes as abominations or detestable. All of these are bad, but the first one is probably the worst of all.

1. .10b Making a son or daughter “pass through the fire.” The followers of the Canaanite false god Molech burned their children as an offering to their false god.

This would be an obvious case of the shedding of innocent blood, something God hates and prohibits.

The remaining eight practices described here pertain to ...

2. .10c-11 The practice of the occult

Each one of these seems to be somewhat related to the idea of communication with, or knowledge gained from, the spirit world. The Canaanites tried to gain knowledge through various occult practices.

.10 These practices are somewhat obscure; no one knows for sure exactly what each of these means. Probably some overlap among them.

- a) witchcraft/sorcery (קִדְּמָה)

Witchcraft or sorcery was an effort to contact the spirit world to gain some kind of information. It can refer to various occult practices like fortune telling, divination, or looking at the liver.

- b) Soothsayer – another variety of occultism, apparently associated with telling the future, astrology. It may pertain to magic, enchantment, divination, or witchcraft. E.g., palm reading, tea leaf reading, even cloud reading (the root word is “cloud” (עָנַן)—finding messages.
- c) Interpreter of omens (מְגִנֵּה) – another word pertaining to divination or enchantment. The omens tell you secret things; the interpreter can figure out these secrets, often by reading the signs, such as rain, fire, or the movement of birds.
E.g., a black cat crosses your path
- d) Sorcerer (מְכַשֵּׁף) – one who practices some kind of witchcraft, magic, or divination.
The LXX translates the word by φαρμακός (*pharmakos*), possibly one who induces magical effects by drugs or some sort of potion.¹
- e) Conjuror of spells (חֹבֵר תְּהֵר) – one who casts spells or incantations; an enchanter; one who uses charms to influence people.
- f) Medium (שֹׁאֵל אוֹב) – typically a woman who practices sorcery or witchcraft.
- g) Spiritist (יִדְעֹנִי) – the root word means “to know,” but in this context, the sense is something known through the occult. It describes a wizard, a fortune teller, a magician, a sorcerer; perhaps someone who consorts with a familiar spirit.
It could be that the “medium” is female and the “spiritist” is male—like witch and wizard.
- h) One who calls up the dead (דֹּרֵשׁ אֶל־הַמֵּתִים) – one who seeks information from the dead, a necromancer.

¹ Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 121.

Cf. 1 Sam 28:7, where the witch of Endor “calls up” Samuel.

The last three of these apparently refer to the same practice—consulting the dead, communicating with the dead, necromancy. In reality, they are communicating with demons—familiar spirits.

So most of these occult practices pertain to communication—gaining knowledge from the spirit world or from the dead. That is the primary goal of occult practice—to gain secret knowledge.

D. The evaluation of these practices

1. .12 These are all abominations to the Lord. They are detestable practices, totally forbidden for the Israelites.

Quote: Both the objects and the methods of Canaanite religious life were to be abhorred totally and rejected completely.²

No cooperation, no adoption of these practices. These practices are absolutely forbidden and prohibited.

2. .12b, 14a the Lord is driving out the Canaanites because of these abominations. God would use the Israelite conquest of Canaan to drive out those who engaged in these practices.

E. The prohibition of these practices

1. .13 Israel must be “blameless” regarding these practices.

The word here (טָמֵא) actually means “perfect,” in the sense of morally upright and sound, correct. Not even a hint of these practices should be found in Israel. Israel must totally avoid these occult practices. This calls for absolute separation from pagan religion.

2. .14b The Lord has prohibited Israel from these practices. They must not use or adopt any of these practices.

These were capital crimes for the Israelites.

² Earl S. Kalland, “Deuteronomy,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 120.

Leviticus 20:6 *As for the person who turns to mediums and to spiritists, to play the harlot after them, I will ... cut him off from among his people.*

Leviticus 20:27 *Now a man or a woman who is a medium or a spiritist shall surely be put to death. They shall be stoned with stones, their bloodguiltiness is upon them.*

App: It should go without saying that Christians must totally avoid and shun all occult practices. We should have no interest or engagement with any kind of divination, sorcery, witchcraft, omens, spells, or ouigee boards, or interaction with the dead. We must not seek any kind of occult knowledge.

People today often think that occult involvement is just another form of entertainment, but it's really demonic. Astrology, palm reading, fortune telling, tarot cards, Ouija boards, and all such things are strictly forbidden for Christians. We should have absolutely no contact with anything pertaining to the occult. We should have no interest in any of the occult practices mentioned here. These things are not mere superstitions; they are demonic.

Ephesians 5:11 *And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.*

Trans: The occult is a pagan means of communication with the spirit world which Israel must absolutely avoid. But there is a genuine way of communicating with God.

II. Allow genuine prophets to communicate the Word of God. 18:15f

In contrast to the pagan Canaanites and their occult practices, Israel was to communicate only with the true and living God. They were to rely on the Lord alone and not seek any kind of occult experience. The God of Israel is the one and only true and living God, and he communicates to Israel primarily through their prophets.

A. Expect a prophet like Moses (18:15–19)

1. .15a The Lord will raise up a prophet like Moses from Israel.

a) What is a prophet?

- (1) A prophet is someone who speaks for God. Cf. vs. 18end.
- (2) He receives revelation from God and conveys it to others. He's a spokesman for God.

b) How will this future prophet be like Moses?

(1) .15 He'll be an Israelite.

(a) Moses was a Jew.

(b) "from your midst"

(c) "from your brethren"

(2) .16 He'll be a mediator between God and man like Moses was.

Back in 5:23-27, we find that the people asked Moses to act as a mediator for them. They did not want to hear the voice of God directly. God could talk to Moses, and Moses would talk to them.

(3) .18 As a prophet, he'll receive communication directly from God. He'll be God's authoritative spokesman.

Ex 33:11 And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.

c) Who historically fulfills this prophecy? Who is "that prophet" like Moses? Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy.

John 6:14 Then those men, when they had seen the miracle that Jesus did, said, This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world.

John 7:40 Therefore many from the crowd, when they heard this saying, said, "Truly this is the Prophet."

2. .15b "Him you shall hear." Israel was obligated to listen to and obey the prophets God sent to them.

3. .18 God will choose and inspire this prophet, and he will speak for God.

a) God will "raise" him up. God will choose him.

b) God will put his words in his mouth. He'll say what God wants him to say. That's what a prophet does.

c) He will speak all that God commands. He'll say everything God wants him to say.

4. .19 God will hold accountable anyone who fails to hear this prophet.

- a) To “hear” a prophet is to listen and obey what he says.
- b) Notice “hear my words which he speaks in my name.” That’s what a prophet does—speak the word of God; he’s God’s representative.

This is one of the reasons we believe that the Bible is the inspired word of God—“holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the HSp” (2 Pet 1.18-20).

- c) .19end If they fail to listen/hear/obey, “I will require it of him.” I.e., God will hold him accountable for disobeying a legitimate prophet.

App: We are still obligated to listen to and obey the word of God. We don’t expect to hear it from prophets, but we do expect to read it in the Bible and to hear it proclaimed from preachers. We are responsible to hear and obey. God holds us accountable for listening to God’s word as it is proclaimed and taught.

And because Jesus is “that prophet” like Moses, it is especially important that we listen to him and obey his commands.

B. Evaluate other prophets. (18:20-22)

Moses transitions from a future particular prophet like Moses to any prophet who might arise and claim to speak for God. Israel can expect a prophet to take the place of Moses, but they might also expect other people to arise, claiming to be prophets.

1. .20a He may claim to speak in God’s name.

- a) This may be a presumption. For someone to claim to speak for God when God has not spoken to him is presumptuous.

The word “presume” (נָשָׂא) means “to be proud, arrogant, self-important.” A proud, self-centered person assumes the authority to speak for God without the authority to do so.

It would be easy to discern if a prophet stood up and began speaking in favor of a pagan god. But it may be difficult to discern if a prophet claimed to be speaking for the God of Israel. Prophetic utterance could be legitimate and valid. On the other hand, it could be false and presumptuous. So they had to be careful.

App: Many people today presume to speak for God, and we have to be careful about to whom we listen. Many charlatans and frauds are in the world today, claiming to speak for God, when they do not. God did not send them; they are speaking presumptuously—without God’s authority. We should not be gullible to such claims.

It’s a very serious thing to claim to speak for God. Every time I stand up to preach, I take it very seriously. If I claim to speak for God, yet I say something that God has not said, then I am in deep trouble.

- b) .20b God has not commanded him to speak.
 - (1) A genuine prophet speaks what God has commanded him to say.
 - (2) A false prophet speaks even though God has not commanded him to say anything. He claims that God has spoken when God has not spoken.

App: We deny that God is speaking through modern prophets. When people claim that God has spoken to them outside of the Bible, we can disregard them.

- 2. .20c He may claim to speak “in the name of other gods.”
 - a) It’s very bad to claim presumptuously that God has spoken when he has not.
 - b) It’s far worse to claim to speak for a false god. If that happens...
- 3. .20end He is worthy of capital punishment. “That prophet shall die.” Cf. 17:5—stone such a person to death.

Promoting idolatry was a capital crime because Israel had made a covenant with God. They were God’s chosen people, and they must remain loyal to him. If someone exhorts the people to follow a false god, he is worthy of death under the OT system.

4. .21 How can Israel tell the difference between a true and false prophet?
 - a) It's easy to *claim* to be a prophet. Anyone can claim that he has heard from God.
 - b) The primary evidence of a false prophet is that...
5. .22 The prophecy of a false prophet will not come to pass. Failure to predict perfectly is the sign that "the Lord has not spoken" through that prophet.
 - a) A prophet whose predictions do not come true has spoken presumptuously. He has proudly claimed to speak for God, but he did not. He assumed authority for himself that God did not give him.
 - b) .22end Don't fear presumptuous prophets.
 - (1) In vs. 21, a prophet speaking for a false God is to be put to death.
 - (2) In vs. 22, if a prophet who claims to speak for God, yet the prophecy did not come to pass, then you know that the person is a false prophet—a fraud, a phony.
 - (3) Don't pay any attention to such a person; don't worry about his predictions.

[**Note:** In chapter 13, Moses warned the people about the same issue—a prophet or a "dreamer of dreams" who exhorts the people to follow other gods, and his signs and wonders come to pass. He is able to do genuine miraculous signs, apparently through demonic power.

Moses in that passage tells the people not to listen to such a false prophet even if his predictions happen, even if he is able to do miraculous signs. Don't listen to anyone who leads you astray from God.]

Quote: Adherence to the Lord and his written word is the highest law; one is not to be afraid of any false prophet or of his predictions.³

App: We should take that advice still today—don't listen to those who claim to be prophets when they are not. If they make a prediction that does not come to pass, then it proves that they are false prophets, not sent by God. Don't listen to them.

In fact, I would disregard anyone who claims to be a prophet in the OT sense of the word. Virtually all people today claiming to be prophets are speaking presumptuously and without authority.

We no longer have apostles or prophets. We have preachers and teachers of God's word, those who teach the word and exhort us to obey it. But we don't have prophets who receive direct revelation from God. If anyone claims to be a prophet, he must be 100% accurate in his predictions.

If someone claims to be a prophet but is not 100% accurate, then he is no prophet of God. But I don't believe that the office of prophet is still functioning in the same way it did in the OT.

And in our setting, we don't put false prophets to death, even those who claim to be speaking for a false god. We simply disregard them and do not believe them.

You may have noticed that this whole section focuses on supernatural knowledge. The pagans claim to have supernatural knowledge through their occult practices. They supposedly gain their knowledge through witchcraft, sorcery, and divination. Moses utterly rejects such supposed knowledge, and Israel must reject it as well.

But there is a legitimate source of supernatural knowledge. God will raise up a prophet like unto Moses and speak through him. The final fulfillment of that prophecy is Jesus. He is the final and full revelation of God. Heb 1:1

³ Earl S. Kalland, "Deuteronomy," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 122.

We should have no interest in any kind of occult knowledge. That kind of thing is either totally fraudulent or it's demonic, and we should have no engagement with it whatsoever. No fortune telling, no palm reading, no astrology, no horoscopes, no attempts to contact the dead or anything like that. Any spiritual knowledge we seek must come from the true and living God, and that knowledge is found in God's word.

We should pay attention only to those who are proclaiming God's word accurately and with proper authority. In our setting, we are not looking for new information from a prophet. We are expecting to hear God's word proclaimed and explained—that's all. Our final authority is God's written word, not the claims of any so-called prophet or apostle.

We should also test those who claim to be speaking for God. Cf., Acts 17:11.

Our highest loyalty should be to "that Prophet" like Moses whom God will raise up. In fact, God has raised him up—that was Jesus.

Mr 9:7 And there was a cloud that overshadowed them: and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him.