

²If there appears among you a prophet or a dream-diviner and he gives you a sign or a portent, ³saying, "Let

בְּיָיִקוֹם בְּקִרְבְּךָ נָבִיא אֹ חֵלֶם חֵלֹם וְנָתַן אֵלֶיךָ אֹת אֹ אוֹ מוֹפֵת: ³ וּבָא הָאוֹת וְהַמוֹפֵת

scribes, and messengers who must faithfully report what they have been told.⁵ The placement of 13:2-6 after 13:1 implies that 13:1 was also understood as a warning against the falsification of God's message by prophets who would claim that He has said more or less than He really said.

The simple case of individuals who worship other gods appears later, in 17:2-7. That case would fit well here, but, because it also contains rules of judicial procedure, it appears in a separate section dealing with that subject (16:18-17:12). See Excursus 13.

INSTIGATION BY A PROPHET OR A DREAMER (vv. 2-6)

The first case is one in which the instigator's proposal is hard to resist because he seems to have divine authority for what he proposes. Moreover, from verse 6 it appears that he even claims that the proposal comes from the Lord Himself, not another god. The law puts a rational limit on the authority of prophecy and miracles. It indicates that the prohibition against worshiping other gods is an absolute, eternally binding principle, and that even prophecies and seemingly miraculous proofs to the contrary are to be disregarded.⁶ Keeping in mind that a prophet is God's envoy (see Comment to v. 2), it is noteworthy that in a Hittite treaty, the suzerain tells his vassal that when he sends him messages, if there is a discrepancy between the written text of a message and the oral version given by his envoy, the written message is authoritative and the envoy is not to be believed.⁷ Here in Deuteronomy the discrepancy is between the written text of the Decalogue and the oral claims of the false prophets.

2-3. The clauses of these two verses should be understood in the following order: "If there appears among you a prophet or a dream-diviner saying, 'Let us follow and worship another god whom you have not experienced,' and he gives you a sign or a portent, even if the sign or portent that he named to you comes true . . ."⁸

2. Prophecy and dreams are two of the regular means by which God communicates with man in the Bible (see 1 Sam. 28:6).⁹

prophet Hebrew *navi*. The prophet is God's spokesman or envoy (see 18:18). This is indicated by the fact that prophetic speeches frequently begin with "Thus says the LORD," since "thus says so-and-so" is the standard formula with which messengers introduce the words of those who send them.¹⁰ The prophet's role as spokesman is reflected in Exodus 4:16 and 7:1, where Aaron is alternately termed Moses' *navi* and spokesman (lit., "mouth"). The cognate term *nabiu*, referring to a type of prophet or diviner, appears in a West-Semitic letter from Mari, Syria.¹¹ Literally, *navi* probably means "proclaimer," to judge from Akkadian and Arabic cognates in which the root *n-b-* means "call," "proclaim," and "announce."¹²

dream-diviner A person—either a prophet or a lay person—who claims to have received a message from God in a dream.¹³ The translation "dream-diviner" implies a functionary who regularly seeks and receives revelation through dreams. However, the Hebrew means simply "a dreamer" (lit., "one who dreams a dream") and does not necessarily have professional connotations.

It is not clear whether the prophet and dreamer here are people who had already performed these roles legitimately in the past and had now become corrupted, or new and false claimants to these roles. In practice the law would undoubtedly have been applied to both.¹⁴

gives you a sign or a portent As Moses did in Exodus. Hebrew *ot* and *mofet* refer to portentous signs shown by the prophet to demonstrate that his message really comes from God. The terms refer to marvels beyond human capability, such as a staff turning into a snake, which could only have been brought about by supernatural power (Exod. 4:1-9). As indicated by verse 3 ("comes true"), such signs are usually announced in advance. God armed Moses with such marvels to convince the Israelites and Pharaoh that He had really spoken to him. Similarly, the altar at Bethel broke apart to authenticate the words of a prophet, and the shadow on the steps of a sundial receded to authenticate a prophecy by Isaiah.¹⁵ Such signs are used only when those addressed by the

13 Be careful to observe only that which I enjoin upon you: neither add to it nor take away from it.

י"ג הִדְבַר אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם אִתּוֹ תִשְׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת לֹא-תִסְף עָלָיו וְלֹא תִגְרַע מִמֶּנּוּ: פ

wrong, and he cites it as an extreme and shocking example of Canaanite abominations.⁶⁵ The literary and archaeological evidence about Canaanite child sacrifice is discussed in Excursus 15, along with the question of whether this practice is related to the cult of Molech and to the practice of passing children through fire mentioned in 18:10.

CHAPTER 13

13:1. This verse complements 12:31a: Israel may worship God only in the ways He commands, no less and no more. It may not abolish His commandments or add to them. It would do both of these if it adopted any of the Canaanites' abominable practices. For further discussion see Comment to 4:2.

INSTIGATION TO WORSHIP OTHER GODS (vv. 2-19)

This section deals with three cases in which individuals urge their fellow Israelites to worship other gods.¹ In the first case, the proposal is made publicly by one who claims prophetic authority and backs up his claim by a sign that seems to authenticate it (vv. 2-6). In the second, it is made in secret by a close relative or friend (vv. 7-12). In the third, the proposal has reportedly succeeded and an entire city has been led to worship another god (vv. 13-19).

These cases reflect the concept that God is Israel's king and that worshiping other gods is high treason. There are close parallels to these provisions in laws against sedition in ancient treaties and similar texts. These laws, which require that acts of agitation against the sovereign be reported and punished, correspond to this chapter in many details. For example, they deal with instigators who may be prophets or relatives of the witness; they paraphrase the instigators' proposal in terms such as "Come let us join another [king]"; they warn against concealing the instigators (cf. vv. 2-3,7,9); and they also deal with rebellious cities.²

The theme of the chapter is expressed in terminology that appears in all three units. Each proposal is paraphrased in virtually identical terms as "Come let us worship other gods," whom, the text comments, the Israelites have never "experienced" (vv. 3,7,14), and each is characterized as an attempt to make Israel stray from the Lord or His path (vv. 6,11,14 ["subverted" in v. 14 is literally "made stray"]). The verb *shama*, "hear," "heed," also appears in all three units. In the first two, it is part of the admonition not to heed the instigator (vv. 4,9), and it frames the third unit, beginning with "If you hear" a report of apostasy and ending with the promise of renewed favor for "heeding" God (vv. 13,19).

Each paragraph gives reasons for the prescribed punishment. The first two explain why the instigator is punished (vv. 6,11), and all three state the effect intended by the punishment (vv. 6,12,18). With these statements, Moses seeks to explain the laws and motivate the people to obey them, even when it might be painful for them to do so. Most of the reasons would be appropriate to all three cases, but the text makes do with one or two for each. Its aim was not to provide an encyclopedic justification for each punishment, but to present one or two reasons that would suffice to demonstrate its appropriateness in each case.³ Together, the three reasons add up to a theory of punishment: to remove evil from the community, to deter wrongdoing, and to protect the community's relationship with God.

These cases are a natural sequel to chapter 12, which includes the command to uproot Canaanite polytheism as soon as Israel enters the promised land. Chapter 13 prescribes what is to be done if anybody tries to reestablish polytheism. Although 13:1 is the conclusion of chapter 12, it is also an apt introduction to the rest of chapter 13 (note the call to "obey *all* His commandments" at the end of chap. 13).⁴ Those who would urge Israel to worship other gods in addition to the Lord would in effect be adding to His commandments or subtracting from them (see Comment to 4:2). In fact, the first case is apparently one in which the instigator falsely prophesies that the proposal is a new commandment from God (see v. 6). Clauses about not adding or subtracting often refer to prophets,

bondage—to make you stray from the path that the LORD your God commanded you to follow. Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst.

מִצְרִים וְהִפְדֶּךָ מִבַּיִת עֲבָדִים לְהִדְיָחֶךָ מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ
אֲשֶׁר צִוָּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַבֵּת בָּהּ וּבְעֵרַת הָרָע
מִקִּרְבְּךָ:

their worship.²¹ That the Torah has such a claim in mind is also implied by 17:3, where God denies that He ever commanded Israel to worship the heavenly bodies; the need to deny that He made such a command seems to imply that someone might claim that He did.

The reasoning that might lead a worshiper of the Lord to think that He desires the worship of other beings in addition to Himself is explained by Maimonides in his theory of the origin of paganism:

In the days of Enosh [Gen. 4:26], the people [reasoned]: “Since God created these stars and spheres to guide the world, set them on high and allotted to them honor, and since they are ministers who minister before Him [see Comment to 4:19], they deserve to be praised and glorified, and honor should be rendered them; and it is the will of God . . . that men should aggrandize and honor those whom He aggrandized and honored, just as a king desires that respect should be shown to the officers who serve Him, and thus honor is shown to the king.” [The people then began to honor these objects in order] to obtain the Creator’s favor. . . . Their error and folly consists in imagining that this vain worship is [God’s] desire.²²

Maimonides’ comment refers to the worship of natural phenomena. Ramban suggests that even the worship of foreign gods might be rationalized in a similar way: “The prophet mentioned here utters prophecies in the name of the LORD saying, ‘The LORD sent me to say that you are to worship [Baal] Peor since he was associated with Him in the work of creation, or he is the greatest of all the gods in His service, and He wants you to worship him.’” See also Comment to 4:2.

If our understanding of *dibber sarah* is correct, the law does not refer to a prophet of another god, but to a prophet of the Lord who advocates the worship of additional gods. Perhaps the text assumes that proposals made in the name of other gods would not be credible and were not a serious danger. The real danger would come from a prophet who seemed loyal to the Lord and argued in effect that worshipping other gods was compatible with loyalty to Him. This would remove the stigma from polytheism and pave the way for a polytheistic YHVH-ism like that practiced by Ahab and Manasseh, who worshiped the Lord and other gods simultaneously.²³ It goes without saying that prophets of other gods who advocated their worship by Israelites would be subject to execution, as were the prophets of Baal in the days of Elijah and Elisha.²⁴

to make you stray This is a second reason for executing the instigator. Urging apostasy, the religious equivalent of sedition, is also a capital crime (see v. 11).

who freed you from the land of Egypt and who redeemed you from the house of bondage This allusion to the beginning of the Decalogue is the opposite of “whom you have not experienced” (v. 3): unlike false gods, the Lord *has* proved Himself to Israel. This underscores the gravity of the prophet’s sin, since the Lord’s redemption of Israel from bondage established its obligation to worship Him alone (see 5:6–7).

Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst This expression appears several times at the close of instructions for punishing a criminal. In every case but one it refers to capital punishment. It expresses the view that the punishment removes a palpable evil from the people’s midst.²⁵ The precise meaning of the verb rendered “sweep” (*ba’er*) is not certain (“burn,” in a figurative sense, is a possibility), but its connotations are graphically illustrated in 1 Kings 14:10: “I will sweep away the house of Jeroboam utterly, as dung is swept away.”

INSTIGATION BY A CLOSE RELATIVE OR A DEAR FRIEND (vv. 7–12)

In the second case, the proposal to worship another god is hard to resist because it comes from a close relative or a dear friend. Because of this, and because the proposal is made secretly, one may be tempted to cover it up and take no action against the instigator.

us follow and worship another god”—whom you have not experienced—even if the sign or portent that he named to you comes true, ⁴do not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner. For the LORD your God is testing you to see whether you really love the LORD your God with all your heart and soul. ⁵Follow none but the LORD your God, and revere none but Him; observe His commandments alone, and heed only His orders; worship none but Him, and hold fast to Him. ⁶As for that prophet or dream-diviner, he shall be put to death; for he urged disloyalty to the LORD your God—who freed you from the land of Egypt and who redeemed you from the house of

אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר אֵלֶיךָ לֵאמֹר גִּלְכָּה אַחֲרַי אֱלֹהִים
אַחֲרַי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַעְתֶּם וְנִעְבַּדְתֶּם: 4 לֹא
תִשְׁמַע אֶל־דְּבַרֵי הַנְּבִיא הַהוּא אוֹ אֶל־חֹזֵן
הַחֲלוֹם הַהוּא כִּי מִנְּשָׂה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֶתְכֶם
לְדַעַת הִישָׁבֶם אֲהַבִּים אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּכָל־
לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁכֶם: 5 אַחֲרַי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
תִּלְכוּ וְאֵתוֹ תִירָאוּ וְאֵת־מִצְוֹתָיו תִּשְׁמְרוּ וּבְקִלּוֹ
תִשְׁמְעוּ וְאֵתוֹ תַעֲבֹדוּ וְכוּ תִדְבְּקוּן: 6 וְהִנְבִּיא
הַהוּא אוֹ חֹלֵם הַחֲלוֹם הַהוּא יוֹמֵת כִּי דִבֶּר־
סָרָה עֲלֵי־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הַמוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם

prophet find it difficult to believe him or stubbornly refuse to do so. A prophecy calling for the worship of another god would, or should, meet such resistance, since it contradicts God’s teachings; but if the prophet produced a sign which seemingly could not occur without God’s help, the people might feel compelled to believe him.

The reliance on signs to authenticate a prophet corresponds to the way that messengers were tested in the ancient world. In an Akkadian letter, King Shamshi-Adad I of Assyria (1800 B.C.E.) says that he interrogated an envoy from the Gutians and trusted him on the basis of “signs” (Akk. *itiati*) in what he said. The signs in that case were not supernatural wonders but convincing information contained in the messenger’s answers.¹⁶

3. saying What follows is not a literal quotation of the prophet’s proposal but Moses’ pejorative paraphrase of it. An instigator would not use the vague and disparaging phrases “another god, whom you have not experienced” but would identify a specific god. See also verses 7 and 14. For the meaning of “whom you have not experienced,” see Comment to 11:28. For a similar pejorative paraphrase by Moses, see Comment to 29:18.¹⁷

let us follow Literally, “walk after.” Since this idiom frequently expresses loyalty to a king, by paraphrasing the prophet’s invitation as calling for “walking after” another god, Moses indicates that it is tantamount to proposing treason against the Lord. See Comment to 4:3.

4. the LORD . . . is testing you By allowing the sign to come true, Moses does not explain why God will test Israel, but counters the false prophet’s argument that the sign proves his prophecy true. For the concept of God testing Israel, see Comment to 8:2; for the issue of false prophecy, see 18:20–22.

whether you really love the LORD . . . with all your heart and soul That is, whether your loyalty to Him is undivided. See Comments to 6:5.

5. Follow none but the LORD . . . worship none but Him In contrast to what the false prophet urges, Moses is reiterating God’s basic demands, as in 6:13–14 and 10:20.

On the idiomatic meaning of “follow,” see Comment to verse 3. In talmudic literature the exhortation to “follow the Lord” was interpreted midrashically to express one of the cardinal principles of Jewish ethics, “following in God’s ways,” doing as He does by performing acts of kindness such as clothing the naked, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, and burying the dead.¹⁸

6. This verse explains why the false prophet is executed and the effect intended by his death.

because he urged disloyalty to the LORD Rather, “because he uttered falsehood [Heb. *dibber sarah*] about the LORD.”¹⁹ The prophet is guilty of false prophecy, a capital crime (see 18:20). It is not certain that *dibber sarah* ever means “urge disloyalty” in the Bible. There are, however, several passages where it clearly means “utter falsehood.” When describing the speech of prophets, it means to claim falsely that God said something.²⁰ Since the prophet in question has urged the worship of other gods, his falsehood “about the LORD” must have been a claim that He authorizes

put him to death, and the hand of the rest of the people thereafter. ¹¹Stone him to death, for he sought to make you stray from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. ¹²Thus all Israel will hear and be afraid, and such evil things will not be done again in your midst.

יִדְּךָ תִּהְיֶה-בּוֹ בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה לְהַמִּיתוֹ וְיָד כָּל-הָעָם בְּאַחֲרָנָה: ¹¹ וְסִקְלֵתוֹ בְּאַבְנִים וּמָת כִּי בִקֵּשׁ לְהִדְיֹחַךְ מֵעַל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַמוֹצִיאֲךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבַּיִת עֲבָדִים: ¹² וְכָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁמְעוּ וְיִרְאוּ וְלֹא-יִסְפּוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת כַּדָּבָר הַזֶּה הַזֶּה בְּקִרְבְּךָ: ס

the instigator and not on judicial procedure. Halakhic exegesis required the original witness to induce the instigator to repeat his proposal in the presence of two other witnesses before the case could be prosecuted.³³

the rest of the people Of his city; see 21:21.

11. Stone him to death Stoning is the most commonly prescribed form of capital punishment in the Bible. It normally took place outside the city. The witnesses to the crime cast the first stone, followed by the rest of the people.³⁴ It was used mostly for crimes that challenged God's authority or proper human authority: the worship of other gods or incitement to do so, blasphemy, divination by spirits, violation of the Sabbath, keeping the booty of idolatrous cities, insubordination against parents (including fornication by a daughter still under her father's authority), *lèse majesté*, and adultery.³⁵ Such crimes constituted acts of "high treason" against God or society. If ignored, they could cause the punishment of the entire community or undermine its stability; thus, they were viewed as threats to national safety.³⁶ Punishment of these crimes by stoning enabled the entire public to participate and thereby express its outrage against the crime and the threat it posed to society's welfare. Since Israel and parts of the Sinai wilderness are stony lands, stones are always at hand and pelting with them was a common expression of instinctive mass anger.³⁷

12. The participation of all the townspeople in the execution will deter them from committing the same crime, and news of the execution will have the same effect on the rest of the nation. Deuteronomy points out the deterrent effect of punishment in a few other cases as well, although not as often as it points out the cleansing effect (see v. 6).³⁸

REPORTED SUBVERSION OF AN ENTIRE TOWN (vv. 13–19)

The third and most serious case is one in which the instigation has reportedly succeeded and an entire town has committed the crime. Notwithstanding the severity of the crime, a thorough and careful investigation must precede punishment. If the report is confirmed, the punishment is a mass application of 17:2–7, which prescribes the execution of individual Israelites who worship other gods, although the method of execution is different. Both laws are based on Exodus 22:19: "Whoever sacrifices to a god other than the LORD alone shall be proscribed" (that is, "doomed to destruction," as the same verb is translated below in v. 16).

The severe punishment accorded to Israelites who worship other gods reflects the severity with which the Bible regards the crime. Worshiping another god is high treason against Israel's Sovereign, the Lord, hence a capital crime. It threatens Israel's continued existence as a nation (see Comment to v. 10). Those who commit it are to be treated in the same manner as the Canaanites, who are doomed to destruction so that they may not influence the Israelites to adopt their ways. Only recently this punishment had been dealt out to those who worshiped Baal-peor.³⁹

Talmudic exegesis of this law considered its severity more apparent than real. The rabbis subjected the law to a very narrow interpretation so that it applies in very few cases. They held that the subverters must be at least two adult males from the town itself and from the tribe to which the town belongs; the town must not be on the border; the majority of the population must have been subverted; its population must be at least one hundred persons but less than the majority of the tribe; every single individual must have been warned that the action was illegal and punishable by death; the townspeople are to be reasoned with and given a chance to reform; and the investigation must include all the procedural limitations which made executions rare in other capital cases. In the absence of any of these conditions the town as a whole is not destroyed, and those who worshiped

⁷If your brother, your own mother's son, or your son or daughter, or the wife of your bosom, or your closest friend entices you in secret, saying, "Come let us worship other gods"—whom neither you nor your fathers have experienced—⁸from among the gods of the peoples around you, either near to you or distant, anywhere from one end of the earth to the other: ⁹do not assent or give heed to him. Show him no pity or compassion, and do not shield him; ¹⁰but take his life. Let your hand be the first against him to

7 כִּי יִסְתִּיךָ וְאָחִיךָ בֶן-אִמְךָ אֹבֶבְךָ אֹבֶבְתְּךָ אִם | אִשְׁתְּ חֵיקֶךָ אִם רַעַךְ אֲשֶׁר כְּנַפְשֶׁךָ בְּסִתְרָה לְאָמֹר נִלְכֶה וְנַעֲבֹדָה אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַעְתָּ אֹתָהּ וְאֲבֹתֶיךָ: ⁸ מֵאֱלֹהֵי הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹתֶיכֶם הַקְּרֹבִים אֵלֶיךָ אִם הַרְחֻקִים מִמֶּנִּי מִקְצֵה הָאָרֶץ וְעַד-קְצֵה הָאָרֶץ: ⁹ לֹא-תֵאָבֵב לוֹ וְלֹא תִשָּׁמַע אֵלָיו וְלֹא-תִחַסּוּ עִינֶיךָ עָלָיו וְלֹא-תִחַמְל וְלֹא-תִכַּסֶּה עָלָיו: ¹⁰ כִּי הָרֵג תִּהְרַגְנִי

7. The verse lists four categories of people, in descending order of kinship and closeness: brother, children, wife, and friend. "The text specifies those who are dear to you; others, all the more so" (Rashi).

your brother, your own mother's son This phrase refers to the most closely related brother, just as the fourth category is the closest friend. Therefore, it probably means "your full brother, who is the son of your mother as well as your father."²⁶

the wife of your bosom That is, your wife, who lies in your bosom.²⁷ In other words, the instigator is someone toward whom one feels particularly affectionate and would be reluctant to prosecute. Cases in point are Solomon's foreign wives and Ahab's wife Jezebel, who enticed their husbands to worship other gods (see 1 Kings 11:3 and 21:25).

in secret Public instigation is not exempt but, as Rashi notes, "The text refers to what usually occurs." Given the stigma and punishment that were to befall those who worshiped other gods, it was expected that they would make their proposals secretly. Similarly, 27:15 refers to one who makes an idol and sets it up in secret.²⁸

9. do not assent or give heed Verse 4 says only "do not give heed" to a prophet or dreamer. The additional verb here reflects the fact that family and friends can exert sustained pressure, and greater effort is required to resist their importunings.

show him no pity or compassion Do not spare him, as you might be tempted to do out of love.²⁹ The danger to public welfare posed by these instigators requires the stifling of normal feelings: "harshness toward these [instigators] . . . is compassion toward the world" (Torah Temimah).

do not shield him By keeping his proposal secret.

10. take his life On the face of it the text seems to be calling for summary execution of the instigator caught *in flagrante delicto*, much as Phinehas executed Zimri and Cozbi during the Baal-peor incident (Num. 25).³⁰ However, this is not consistent with verses 13–19 and 17:2–7, according to which even those who actually worshiped other gods are executed only after a thorough investigation. Presumably, then, our verse means "not only must you not protect your loved one [v. 9], but you, as witness, must take part in his execution" (cf. 17:7), or: "see to it that he is executed" by reporting the incident to the authorities and taking part in the stoning that will follow their investigation. The investigation is not mentioned here because the present paragraph does not focus on the role of the court but on the duty of the person approached by the instigator.³¹

In place of "take his life," the Septuagint reads "you must report him," contrasting with "do not shield him" in the preceding verse. This reading avoids the suggestion of summary execution and is consistent with clauses in ancient Near Eastern treaties that require people to report plots against the king.³² However, since this clause introduces "Let your hand be the first against him to put him to death," the Masoretic text's "take his life" may be preferable. The requirement to report the instigator is implicit in "do not shield him" or in "take his life."

According to 17:6, at least two witnesses are required to convict a person of worshiping another god. The present law gives the impression that, in the case of secret instigation, the testimony of the person approached by the instigator would suffice. Conceivably instigation to idolatry was regarded as so serious a threat to public safety that normal judicial safeguards had to be set aside. It may be, however, that the text is elliptical, since, as noted, it focuses on the duty of the person approached by