

Deuteronomy 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 13 And you shall serve him and hold fast to him.

But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has taught rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt and redeemed you out of the house of slavery, to make you leave the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk.

So you shall purge the evil from your midst. If your brother, the son of your mother, or your son or your daughter, or the wife you embrace, or your friend who is as your own soul, entices you secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known, some of the gods of the peoples who are around you, whether near you or far off from you, from the one end of the earth to the other, you shall not yield to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him, nor shall you conceal him, but you shall kill him.

Your hand shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. You shall stone him to death with stones, because he sought to draw you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

And all Israel shall hear and fear, and never again do any such wickedness as this among you. If you hear in one of your cities, which the Lord your God is giving you to dwell there, that certain worthless fellows have gone out among you, and have drawn away the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which you have not known, then you shall inquire and make search and ask diligently.

[2 : 0 9] And behold, if it be true and certain that such an abomination has been done among you, you shall surely put the inhabitants of that city to the sword, devoting it to destruction, all who are in it, and its cattle with the edge of the sword.

You shall gather all its spoil into the midst of its open square, and burn the city and all its spoil with fire, as a whole burnt offering to the Lord your God. It shall be a heap forever.

It shall not be built again. None of the devoted things shall stick to your hand, that the Lord may turn from the fierceness of his anger, and show you mercy and have compassion on you, and multiply you, as he swore to your fathers.

If you obey the voice of the Lord your God, keeping all his commandments that I am commanding you today, and doing what is right in the sight of the Lord your God.

Deuteronomy chapter 13 continues to explore themes broadly related to the second commandment, concerning false forms of worship.

Chapters 6 to 26 unpack the ten commandments of chapter 5. We see the core principles of the law refracted in many situations, and in the process we get a much better sense of how expansive their principles are, and we see more clearly how they touch upon different specific situations.

[3 : 2 4] Chapter 13 seems to come under the material concerned with the second commandment. However, it doesn't seem to fit very neatly on the surface of it. This happens on a number of occasions in these chapters in Deuteronomy.

The general pattern seems to hold quite strongly, but there are many particular parts that seem to strike a jarring note. One might imagine that the material of chapter 13 would fit more neatly under the category of the first commandment, as it is concerned to ensure that Israel aren't led to serve other gods than the Lord.

What could this chapter have to do with the second commandment? On such occasions, we need to beware of trying to force passages into patterns. There is always the temptation to see a nice pattern and to impose it upon unwilling texts, like someone hammering two puzzle pieces together.

Our reading must always be attentive and responsive to the guidance of the texts themselves. However, some of that guidance is found in the patterns themselves that emerge from the texts, and that can help us to push our attention in specific directions.

There are a number of ways in which we could respond to this situation. First of all, we should provisionally weaken the strength that we attribute to the pattern. The pattern must arise from the text and it must be confirmed by the text.

[4 : 42] It is very important that we make such patterns vulnerable to challenge from the text. When reading scripture, we often focus a bit too much simply upon whether something is right or wrong, and we fail to consider the strength of certain connections and patterns.

Some connections and patterns are genuinely present, but they are weak. Others are very strong. Others are uncertain and should only be weighted as weak.

We wouldn't have to worry about brakes so much upon our readings if we were much more cautious about our use of the accelerator. Second, we should hold it up to question.

Perhaps the pattern isn't there at all. Perhaps the problem is that much material can be connected to one of several different commandments, for instance, in this particular part of scripture. And we, having presumed that the connection must be with one specific commandment, are over-determining texts that are actually more ambiguous.

This is a trap that is very easy to fall into. Much of the material in these chapters could have been classed under one of several commandments, and the fact that it is classed under one particular commandment, presuming for the sake of argument that our pattern is correct, provides little evidence for the truth of the pattern itself.

[5 : 55] Perhaps the pattern is a weaker or more general one, and we are mistaken in expecting it to follow through exactly in every single passage. Third, we should consider the possibility that the pattern is real, but that a meaningful divergence from it is taking place.

Scripture is musical, and its motifs are seldom played out exactly. Many people think that scriptural patterns are merely about the similarities between passages. However, the similarities are often there to highlight important differences.

They almost invariably involve variations, divergences, and other surprises. The patterns are real, but they occasionally set up expectations precisely in order to confound them.

Fourth, we should consider the possibility that the pattern is real, but that it needs some tweaking. Perhaps in this particular instance, the material related to the first and the second commandments are mixed together.

Perhaps they overlap. There is another possibility. Holding the pattern lightly, open to the possibility that it doesn't apply in this particular instance, or may even be undermined by it, we should tentatively explore the possibility that a pattern that seems to be borne out elsewhere might fruitfully direct our attention at this particular, less obvious juncture.

[7 : 12] Perhaps if we follow where the pattern is directing our gaze, we'll notice something that we might not otherwise have done. It's my belief that this occurs at several points in these chapters of Deuteronomy.

There is material that is placed at points where we would not naturally have placed it. But when we think about why it's placed there, we find illumination. Maybe that's what's happening here. But we should suspend judgment until we see where the closer examination of the text itself bears this out.

Deuteronomy chapter 13 deals with three different cases in which Israelites might be tempted to forsake the Lord. Following from chapter 12, which requires Israel to uproot idolatry from the land, it ensures that it is never allowed to take root in the land again.

However, it might try to insinuate itself into the life of the people. It must be fiercely and uncompromisingly resisted. And the first case is that of a false prophet with lying signs.

The second is in the private statements of a close friend or relative. The third is in the apostasy of an Israelite city. They are warned about being led astray to gods that they and their fathers have not known.

[8 : 24] In essence, gods that Israel has not experienced in the way that they have experienced the presence and salvation of the Lord. They are warned against straying from the path that God has placed his people on.

And there is, in each of these cases, an emphasis upon strong, decisive and merciless judgment with reasons attached. Geoffrey Tugay observes that within the reasons, we see the lineaments of a broader theory of punishment.

They must remove evil from the community. They must deter wrongdoing. They must guard the relationship between the Lord and his people. The first case is that of the false prophet.

And the false prophet is a challenge because he appears to have divine validation. He is a prophet or a dreamer of dreams. These two ways in which people might come up with prophecies and messages purportedly from the Lord.

His signs, which seemingly would have been declared in advance, seem to demonstrate the truth of his message. Now this might be a real prophet who has apostatized.

[9 : 27] Or it might be a prophet who always has been a false prophet. The signs themselves might be tricks. They may be demonically empowered. Perhaps they're produced through natural knowledge and abilities that others mistake for supernatural.

We might consider the signs of the Egyptian magicians here. In opposing Moses and Aaron, they perform actual signs. How are these signs performed? We don't know.

They might have been performed through actual demonic activity. They might have just been magic tricks. They might have been exploiting the knowledge of lesser known natural phenomena. We don't know.

Maybe, in some occasions, these things might even be produced by God himself. There seem to be occasions where God is involved, at the very least, in giving some persuasive power to false prophets.

And allowing people to be deluded by them. In 2 Thessalonians 2, verses 11-12 Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

[10 : 30] Moses declares that in such an instance, God may be testing his people. See an example of this in 1 Kings, chapter 22, verses 19-23 And Micaiah said, Therefore hear the word of the Lord.

I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him, on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead?

And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, I will entice him. And the Lord said to him, By what means? And he said, I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.

And he said, You are to entice him, and you shall succeed. Go out and do so. Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets.

The Lord has declared disaster for you. Perhaps the interesting thing about this is that Micaiah is telling this to Ahab himself. He's being warned that there is this lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.

[11 : 32] And so he needn't be blind to the situation. If he's blind to the situation, it's because he wants to be. God tests his people with false prophets on a number of occasions. This seems surprising and even shocking to us.

An especially unsettling example of this, perhaps, is found in the story of the man of God from Judah in 1 Kings chapter 13, who ends up being killed by a lion for believing a false prophecy purporting to be from the Lord.

However, the Lord has already proved himself to his people. He delivered them from Egypt. He protected them and provided for them in the wilderness. He's going to bring them into the promised land. The problem is that people want to go astray.

And when they want to go astray, they will desire these false prophecies. And in judgment, the Lord lets them fall prey to the delusion. He allows people to believe what they wish to believe and makes the error really convincing to them.

This is worth bearing in mind when dealing with some people. Some people are confirmed in their willful blindness by the Lord as a sort of judgment upon them. God allows them to believe what they want to believe and to really believe it.

[12 : 41] There's a second case, and that's the friend in secret. There are a number of examples of the person that this could be. It could be your brother. It could be your son or daughter. It could be your wife. It could be your closest friend.

All of these people who are nearest to you that you have the strongest attachment to. The pull here isn't that of signs and false religious authority, but of love and intimacy.

This is a different sort of temptation. It's an enticing. It occurs in secret. It's likely an ongoing thing. We're told you shall not yield to him or listen to him.

Yielding suggests something of the personal pressure that's being exerted over time. And you feel that pressure building up over many, many days. And you should not yield to that pressure.

The person is a traitor to the covenant, and they must be reported. All of the natural attachments, love, empathy, and pity that we feel for those who are closest to us, must be resisted.

[13 : 38] People must be merciless in these sorts of situations. The apostasy must be declared and dealt with publicly and decisively. They must report the person and deal with the issue publicly.

Even if it were your own child, who you cared about more than anyone else in the world, or your own spouse, you would be expected to play the part of the witness and take responsibility even for enacting the judgment that came with that.

The secret enticement leads to a public stoning, as all of the people participate in the judgment of removing that person from their midst. The third case is that of the apostate city.

And this is the most serious case in many respects. It's an entire city that has apostatized. Such a case must be responded to with a thorough investigation of the claim, diligently establishing whether it is in fact the case.

If it is the case, the entire city is subject to the ban. They suffer the same fate as the Canaanites that went before. Israel is not immune on account of their ancestry.

[14 : 39] If they commit the same idolatry as the Canaanites, they will suffer the same fate. Something like this happened in Numbers chapter 25 to those who yoked themselves to Baal Peor. All of the chiefs had to be put to death, unless they decisively disassociated themselves from their idolaters.

I think that in reading these verses, we might also get an indication of what the judgment of the Canaanites could have involved. Any who abandoned their idolatry could be saved and could be made part of the people of Israel, could move out of the land or could be sojourners among Israel in the land.

However, any who held on to their idolatry would be destroyed. So, what are we to make of the question that we started with? How does this fit into the broader pattern of the commandments?

First, we should note that it continues on naturally from the previous chapter. The previous chapter is about uprooting idolatrous worship, and this chapter is about ensuring that it never takes root again.

Also, the second commandment covers the actual practice of worship, whereas the first focuses upon its proper and exclusive object, the Lord. The second commandment itself is a way in which the first commandment is enacted in practice.

[15 : 52] After treating the exclusivity of our relationship to the Lord, we are taught how to relate to the worship of the Lord. These are principles in this chapter for maintaining the purity of the practice of worship, and so it seems appropriate that they come under the second commandment.

Perhaps we could also see false prophets, family members and friends and cities of the land as potential false mediators, things that could get between us and God and lead us astray, if we become wrongfully attached to them.

I wouldn't put too much weight upon that particular explanation. Rather, I think that the answer is found in its relationship with the previous chapter, and in the way in which the second commandment focuses upon the actual practice of worship.

Unlike chapters 6-11, the focus of this chapter isn't directly upon the God-Israel relationship. It is indirectly upon that, but its more direct focus is upon the relationships within Israel itself to ensure that the true worship of God is maintained, and in that recognition I think we have moved some distance towards understanding why it might appropriately be classified under the second commandment.

A question to consider. What might we learn about the potential dangers of our natural attachments with others from this chapter?

[17 : 07] How can we practice such attachments in a healthy way, without them threatening our proper relationship with God?