

Deuteronomy 13:1-5

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To enforce the second of the Ten Commandments, Moses commands the Israelites to execute any false prophet who may entice them to serve other gods, in order to purge the evil from among them.

The second of the Ten Commandments says:

‘You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. ‘You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.’

(Deuteronomy 5:8-10)

The first relevant scenario that Moses addressed was *if a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you*. The term translated as *prophet* here is “nābî,” and the primary meaning of the word is “proclaimer” or “forth-teller.” It describes a person who was a spokesman for God to His people. It can be used for true and false prophets alike (Jeremiah 6:13; 26:7-8; 27:9; 28:1; Zechariah 13:2). The fact that Moses presents a scenario where a false prophet *arises among you* [Israel] probably indicates that this prophet is an Israelite, not a Canaanite.

Perhaps one of the clearest statements on the nature of prophetic inspiration in the Old Testament comes from the book of Numbers. In this book, we read: “He [the LORD] said, ‘Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream’” (Numbers 12:6). These statements show that God revealed Himself to humans through dreams and visions in Old Testament times.

The other group mentioned here is one who was a *dreamer of dreams*. This is a further description of a prophet because the LORD communicated to prophets often through dreams (Numbers 12:6).

The scenario begins when the prophets or dreamers *give you a sign or a wonder*. A *sign or a wonder* refers to an extraordinary visible event, often in

nature, which may be perceived as the miraculous actions of the LORD within the history of the world ([Deuteronomy 4:34](#); [6:22](#)). The prophet or dreamer would *give* the sign, likely referring to a prediction. The sign or wonder coming true would authenticate both the message and the prophet's claim to be the representative of a deity ([Exodus 4:21](#); [Isaiah 8:19](#); [Acts 2:22](#); [2 Corinthians 12:12](#); [Heb. 2:4](#)).

In [Deuteronomy 18:22](#), the Lord will tell Israel that if a prophet makes a prediction and it does not come to pass, this demonstrates that he is not really a prophet, and the nation should not listen to or respect him as such. That is not the case here. In this instance, *the sign or the wonder comes true* (v. 2). This means that this is someone who deserves respect as a prophet. The question then remains "A prophet of whom?"

The test provided here is in the content of the prophet's message. If the prophet urges the people to serve the Suzerain LORD, then he or she is a true prophet. However, if the prophet's message, even when backed up with eyewitness accounts of some phenomenal event, encourages people to turn away from serving and worshipping the LORD, saying *Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them*, then he or she is a false prophet. Whether a prophet was true or false does not depend on the performance of signs alone—it also depends on the message being consistent with other revealed truth from the scripture.

This indicates that the *sign or the wonder* could occur because it was a trick of an illusionist/magician, or it could be a work of Satan ([2 Thessalonians 2:9](#)). Recall that Pharaoh's magicians were able to duplicate a few of the plagues on Egypt ([Exodus 7:11](#), [22](#), [8:7](#)) but not all of them ([Exodus 8:18f](#)). This could be very persuasive when seen with one's own eyes. It would be very tempting to follow someone who performed a *true* wonder. They would seem to be authentically ordained by God. It would be tempting to follow them even when they say *Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them*. But any prophet who teaches the Israelites to serve gods other than the LORD is a false prophet.

Moses then told the people that they should *not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams* (v. 3). Even if such a prophet performed wonders that appeared to verify his authority, the Israelites were to ignore his words if he encouraged them to fall away from the faith.

One might ask why the LORD would allow a false prophet to perform signs and wonders, knowing that it might result in the unfaithfulness of His people.

Moses answered this (unstated) question by asserting that if this occurs *the LORD your God is testing you*. Apparently in this case, the Lord is testing whether the people will trust what they heard and know to be from God, or whether they will trust something they see and might find dazzling to their eyes. The verb for *testing* (Heb. “nāsâ”) refers to an experience meant to reveal the character, or integrity of someone. In this case, Moses clearly stated that the reason for the testing was *to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul*.

The word *heart* describes the seat of intellect, will, and emotions. This would indicate that the LORD expected Israel to place His word in their hearts and act upon it. To understand intellectually and take intentional and deliberate action based on what they know to be true. In this way they would be able to discern and avoid evil.

The word *soul* (Heb. “nephesh”) refers to the invisible, spiritual part of man represented by breath ([Genesis 2:7](#)). It is the spirit of life housed within the body ([Genesis 35:18](#)). As such, the terms *heart* and *soul* could be used here to describe the entire human being, both physical and spiritual. Thus, the LORD was testing His people to see whether they would serve Him with their entire existence.

Moses then listed six specific requirements to instruct the Israelites on what it meant to *love the LORD their God with all their heart and with all their soul*. These requirements, prescribed to encourage the Israelites to live as loyal vassals to their Suzerain (Ruler) God, are given as follows:

(a) The Israelites were to *follow the LORD your God*. This can be translated “walk after the LORD your God.” To *follow* or walk is to take action. The commands of God are not limited to religious acts, they are intended to apply to all areas of our lives at all times. This is still the case in the New Testament, where believers are instructed to renew their minds ([Romans 12:1-2](#)) and walk after the Spirit ([Galatians 5:16](#)). To walk after Him means to meditate upon and decide to make His ways our ways, and to make intentional decisions in every area of life that are consistent with His directions. Since God made the world and all aspects of cause-and-effect, and since God desires the best for His own, walking in His ways will always be in our longterm best interest.

(b) The Israelites were commanded to *fear Him*. To *fear* is to have significantly serious concerns about consequences such that it alters our behavior. We (properly) *fear* an oncoming truck because it can kill us. Proper *fear* includes

caring most about what God thinks and says, and whether He approves of our behavior ([Deuteronomy 5:29](#); [6:2, 13](#)).

We as humans are prone to fear most things we see and feel. For instance, we are prone to fear whether we please other people more than whether we please God. Fearing God foremost actually frees us in many ways, including freeing us from the bondage of trying to please other people (who are, by their nature, impossible to please fully). The Bible makes clear that fearing the LORD first is the foundation for wisdom, which is the skill of living life well ([Proverbs 1:7](#); [Psalms 111:10](#)). Fear applies to positive as well as negative consequences. We can fear missing out on great blessing. This is (at least) an equally prominent part of the biblical message about fear. In [Exodus 20](#), the people were told not to fear death, but rather to fear sinning. It is sin that will cause the greater loss. In [Deuteronomy 30](#), Moses will set forth a clear, binary choice for how to live: blessing or cursing. To fear God is to fear both the adverse consequences of poor choices as well as the loss of blessing.

(c) The people of God were to *keep His commandments*. To keep the commandments of God is to obey Him, to do what He requires of us. This is the means to secure both the blessings as well as to avoid the cursings. Our actions have consequences, and God tells us in advance which actions are beneficial to ourselves. The pagan way of life is exploitive of others, and seeks to satisfy our own appetites at the expense of others. This leads to societal decay as well as decay in our own souls. God's way is to seek the best for and serve others. This leads to societal benefit as well as fulfillment within our own souls.

(d) The people of God were asked to *listen to His voice*. The Israelites were privileged to be the recipients of the LORD's communication to humans. Here, they were commanded to listen (or "obey") this voice which contains His directions and His precepts. God, the Creator, made all the cause-effect relationships in the world, and is telling His people how to navigate them for their own best interest. But God's instruction yields no benefit unless it is heeded.

(e) God's people were also to *serve Him* and not the gods of the Canaanites, just as the second commandment states ([Exodus 20:5](#)). The Israelites were commanded to make offerings to God and God alone in order to serve Him as loyal vassals. By serving as His loyal vassals, they will gain the great benefits of His ways.

(f) God's people were commanded to *cling to Him*. The verb *cling* expresses emotional closeness and loyalty. This word is used in [Genesis 2:24](#) to describe when a man leaves his parents and is "joined" to his wife to "become one flesh" (see also [Deuteronomy 4:4](#); [Deuteronomy 10:20](#)). The relationship God offers has the intimacy of a marital relationship. The Bible uses marriage to describe God's desired relationship with His people ([Ezekiel 16](#), Hosea, [Ephesians 5:31-32](#)). The Bible also describes God as Father, and His people as children. His people are to *cling* to Him as a child clings to their parents.

These six requirements describe complete obedience to God's covenantal laws. Similar to the Ten Commandments, these commands emphasize the wholeness of life. They fully encompass all aspects of human engagement, including engagement with other humans.

Not only were the Israelites to reject the message of the false *prophet* or *dreamer*, they were told that *that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death*. A false prophet was worthy of such a drastic punishment *because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God* (v. 5). This was the God Who *brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery*. There was to be no tolerance for someone who possessed occultic powers to perform signs in order to lead the people astray, to their own destruction.

Israel was enslaved for over 400 years under Pharaoh and the Egyptians ([Genesis 15:13](#); [Exodus 12:40-41](#)). But God delivered them from the hand of Pharaoh, the Egyptian king who thought he was powerful. The verb translated as *redeemed* in the phrase *has redeemed you from the house of slavery* is the Hebrew word "pādâ." This word stresses the idea that a ransom price was to be paid to free a slave. In the ancient Near East, such a ransom involved presenting something of equivalent value to liberate the person. Thus, since the LORD alone had paid the price to redeem the Israelites, the false prophet is a thief who would steal away the redemption, and therefore deserves death.

Putting to death the false prophet is appropriate because his intent was to *seduce* God's people *from the way in which the LORD their God commanded them to walk*.

The verb translated as "to *seduce*" (Heb. "nādaḥ") has the idea of impelling or forcing someone to do something. In this case, the false prophet was the one who would urge God's people to disobey their Suzerain and walk away from His righteous ways. Such an act was a serious offense that needed to be

punished severely. As Moses said to Israel, *So you shall purge the evil from among you.*

The verb “to *purge*” is literally “to burn.” It connotes the idea of burning something to remove it completely from a certain place, like burning off a mole. In this context, the false prophet was to be burned out in order to be removed from the community of Israel. This would give God’s people the freedom to continue to *follow Him, fear Him, keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him.*

The purging of the false prophet is intended to help prevent the people from being led to walk in ways that will lead them to death. Therefore the death of the false prophet prevents another death—the death of the people, had they followed the false prophet’s ways. [Deuteronomy 30](#) will make this clear, stating:

“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it.”
([Deut 30:15-18](#))

The death spoken of in [Deuteronomy 30](#) is the separation of the people of Israel from their land and its promised blessing. Israel’s disobedience will cause the death of the benefits of the covenant blessings. To *purge the evil* of the false prophet *from among* the people of Israel is like purging a cancer from their midst, a cancer that would lead to death.

Biblical Text:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, ²and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’ ³you 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. ⁴You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice,

serve Him, and cling to Him. ⁵ But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you.