

Deuteronomy 18:9-14

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Moses discusses religious practices that are prohibited. He then describes the office of prophets who proclaim the word of their LORD. Thus, he forbade the Israelites from following the detestable practices of the surrounding nations in order to live blamelessly before the LORD in the Promised Land.

Having discussed the position of judge, which the people were to choose ([Deut 16:18-20](#)), the office of king, which God was to choose ([Deuteronomy 17:14 – 20](#)), and the office of priest, which was hereditary ([Deuteronomy 18:1 – 8](#)), Moses now described the last category of authority in Israel—that of prophet. But before handling the office itself, Moses gave a warning. He told the Israelites that *when you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations.* To *imitate* (Heb. “āsâ,” lit. “to do” or “to perform”) in this context prohibits the Israelites from making an effort to learn the pagan practices of the Canaanites and from replicating these practices in their own worship.

The words *detestable things* (Heb. “tō’ēbâ”) is a term often rendered into English as “abomination” ([Deuteronomy 7:25](#)). It denotes something (or someone) that is repulsive in the eyes of the holy God. It can refer to something that God does not approve of ([Deuteronomy 7:25](#)). Every detestable thing was prohibited, which would mean all behaviors of Israel were to be those of which God approved; behaviors that would be beneficial to the people of Israel and their communities.

Moses made it clear that the Suzerain God was the one who would give the land to His vassals (Israel). This would fulfill one of the promises God made to Abraham long ago, saying, “To your descendants I will give this land” ([Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 17:8](#)). God had granted the land to Abraham as a reward for faithful service. But the vassals (Israel) were required to live in conformity with the Suzerain’s precepts in order to possess the land and to enjoy the benefits of the land. They were called to be holy like their Suzerain God who chose them ([Leviticus 19:2](#); [Deuteronomy 7:6](#); [Deuteronomy 14:21](#)). As such, they were not to *imitate* the superstitious practices of the pagan nations.

Verses 10 – 11 list the pagan practices that were an abomination to the LORD. These practices were to *not be found among* His covenant people (v. 10):

– *Anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire.* This likely refers to child sacrifice. The practice of child sacrifice was common in the ancient Near East, especially in Canaan. In the Old Testament, it was associated with the worship of Molech, a god of the Ammonites ([1 Kings 11:7](#)). The Canaanites often sacrificed one of their children (usually by fire) when they wanted to see into the future. Usually, a sacrifice was made so that the gods would prevent a calamity or give victory in battle to the Canaanites. In the book of Leviticus, the LORD warned the Israelites not to practice child sacrifice ([Leviticus 18:21; 20:3](#)) because He [the LORD] hates “hands that shed innocent blood” ([Proverbs 6:17](#)). It is hard to think of a more twisted activity than murdering one of your own children in exchange for a promise that you can control the future. This would create two highly destructive thought patterns:

- 1) My child is mine to exploit, for my own desires
- 2) I can control the future, and other people.

The former attitude is likely why multiple forms of incest are listed in [Leviticus 18](#), where God specifies various customs of the Egyptians and Canaanites that Israel was to avoid copying.

– *One who uses divination* (Heb. “qōsēm qěsāmîm,” “a diviner of divinations”). The practice of *divination* is the attempt to manipulate the environment through mystical and spiritual means to predict or control the future. Such a practice often involves reading signs. It is an attempt to gain divine control over circumstances, essentially making oneself God. Here, it is used as a generic term for the practices listed below:

– *One who practices witchcraft* (Heb. “mě’ônēn”). This refers to the exercise of magical powers to advance one’s own desires ([Judges 9:36 – 37](#)).

– *One who interprets omens* (Heb. “měnaheš”). This refers to the practice of interpreting divine signs of events using certain objects, gaining knowledge of the future, which would allow one to gain advantage over others.

- A *sorcerer* (Heb. “mēkaššēp”). Sorcery is the practice whose adherents claim to have the power to perform signs using magical incantations to control circumstances.
- *One who casts a spell*. The Hebrew literally reads “one who ties a knot” (Heb. “ḥōbēr ḥeber”), implying that casting a magical spell binds people to that which is being said, such as a curse, thus effecting control over people.
- A *medium* (Heb. “šō’ēl ‘ōb,” “he who asks of a [dead] spirit”). This person was what is called a “necromancer,” one who communicates with the dead in order to obtain secret information, and gain benefits.
- A *spiritist* (Heb. “yiddě’ōnî”), “a knowing [of a spirit]”). This is similar to the medium with an emphasis on the knowledge of how to perform the magical arts. Again, the goal would be to gain advantages over others.
- *One who calls up the dead* (Heb. “šō’ēl ‘ōb”). This could be a general term for necromancers, including mediums and spiritists just mentioned.

The Israelites were prohibited from performing any of these pagan practices because *whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD*. Each of these practices did one of two things:

1. Caused people to live in denial of reality, or
2. Caused people to come under the dominion of and service to Satan.

On one hand, when people try to manipulate a wooden idol they made in order to control circumstances, it is obvious foolishness. A created thing like a statue cannot rule over nature. No matter how much people try to be God, they are not. This non-reality causes people to depart from living a good and beneficial life, and leads them on a descent into darkness. Worshipping idols quickly gives way to exploitation. The listed sorceries are intended to exploit others, fulfill desires at the expense of others, or gain special advantages for self.

On the other hand, Satan has some actual power, and when people deal with the devil, they gain the illusion of power, but in actuality become slaves. In either case, people who practice magic are living an illusion, with the result of bringing death and decay to their communities.

To emphasize how important this was, *these detestable things* were the reason *the LORD* drove those nations *from before* Israel. For example, the Bible tells us that the Canaanites—one of the nations the LORD drove out—even burned “their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods” ([Deuteronomy 12:31](#)). They were thus *detestable* to God. God destroyed the earth in the Flood because it had filled with violence ([Genesis 6:11](#)). Murdering children to gain personal advantages is the worst sort of violence, exploiting those who are innocent. God’s desire is for the earth to be filled with love and mutual service. God gave freedom to humans to make choices—without choices there can be no love. God desires the best for humans, and their best comes when they love and serve one another. The pagan practices lead people to live in ways that are exploitative.

The people of Israel were called to act differently because they were chosen by God to be His own treasured possession ([Exodus 19:4-6](#)) and to be a priestly nation, to show a better way to the other nations.

In stark contrast to the pagan practices around them, Moses told Israel that they were to *be blameless before the LORD your God*. The adjective translated as *blameless* is the Hebrew word “tāmîm.” It describes the quality of what is sound, whole, and unimpaired. This adjective was often used to describe animals without blemish, as in [Exodus 29:1](#) and [Leviticus 4:3](#). In this passage, it is used to describe the moral character of the Israelites who were in a covenant relationship with the Suzerain (Ruler) God. The vassals (Israel) were commanded to be morally well-rounded and strong in every area of godly living to reflect God’s holiness. In doing so, they would love and serve one another, rather than seeking to exploit.

Moses then summarized this section by reminding the Israelites of their obligations to the covenant relationship they had with the Suzerain (Ruler) God. He did this by presenting a stark contrast between relying on false gods and depending totally on the LORD. He once again described the current situation which had *those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners*.

He then told the people *but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do so*. The Israelites were set apart for God’s service. They were to be devoted to God alone. They were not to *listen* to, imitate, or obey anyone who practiced magic and divination to get what they wanted. The Israelites’ lives were supposed to be wholly dedicated to God, their Suzerain (Ruler). They were to listen and obey Him and only Him.

Biblical Text:

⁹When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. ¹⁰There 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, ¹¹or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. ¹²For 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. ¹³You shall be blameless before the Lord your God. ¹⁴For 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