

True and False Prophets

“If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say ‘let us follow other gods’ (whom you have not known) ‘and let us serve them,’ you must not heed the words of those prophets...” (Deut. 13:1-2).

How do you distinguish a true prophet from a false one? This is the subject dealt with in Deuteronomy 13:1-5 (NRSV).¹ The sages, and the Torah itself, acknowledge that there is no simple test. Discernment can be difficult. On occasions false prophets can make correct predictions and true prophets can be wide of the mark; and both can be associated with miraculous signs and wonders. How would you enter this conversation? Read and think about Deut. 13:1-5.

The text offers an essential guideline: listen to the foundational truths of your religious tradition! Do you recognize the God to whom the prophet is drawing you? Is it “the Lord your God—who brought you out from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery” (v.5)? Or is the so-called prophet leading you away, to entrapment in the empty promises of ‘other gods’? Our text takes us to the heart of the Torah: a call to choose the one, true living God over the worship of idols.

The sages also discuss the finer points of the matter. For instance, how is it that a false prophet can perform signs and wonders in the first place? The Talmud contains a discussion of this. Says Rabbi Yose, the Lord grants some powers to false prophets but these are meant to test one’s adherence to the Lord, “to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with your whole heart and soul” (v.3). Rabbi Akiva disagrees: the Lord would never grant wonder-worker gifts to an idol worshipper, therefore the prophet in question must have once been authentic but later gone astray.

Speaking centuries later, Maimonides (12th c.) concurs with Rabbi Yose: the false prophet has special powers (but through sorcery) that ‘test’ Israel’s faithfulness, and this fidelity offers a vital witness to the nations. The test does not prove anything to God (who knows all), but it does prove to outsiders that even spectacular spiritual powers cannot attract the Jewish people to foreign gods. From age to age, through every challenge and suffering, they ‘hold fast’ (v.4) to the God of their ancestors.

The sages are united in the view that material success and popularity are inadequate criteria for judging the authenticity of a prophet. Do you agree? Name some of the ‘other gods’ of your own culture, noting their appeal and their falsity. Who are their ‘prophets’? How do you stay focused on what is right and true?

1. Or 13:2-6

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Devarim* (New York: Lambda, 1996); Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, vol. 5 (New York, 1995); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, 2006). Scripture: NRSV.

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