

Deuteronomy 18:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken?

Analysis

And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? This verse addresses a critical question for God's covenant people: how to discern true prophecy from false. The Hebrew construction suggests an internal dialogue—*ki tomar bilvavekha* ("if/when you say in your heart")—acknowledging that this question naturally arises in the mind of the thoughtful believer facing competing prophetic claims.

The verb *yada* (יָדָע, "know") appears here in its causative form, emphasizing acquired knowledge through testing and verification. God doesn't expect blind acceptance but provides discernment criteria. The phrase "the word which the LORD hath not spoken" uses *lo dibber* (לֹא דִבֶּר), the emphatic negative—absolutely not spoken by Yahweh. This implies that false prophecy isn't merely mistaken human opinion but dangerous deception that claims divine authority without divine origin.

Context is crucial: verse 22 provides the answer—if a prophet's prediction doesn't come to pass, God didn't speak it. But earlier verses (18-20) add theological criteria: true prophets speak only in Yahweh's name, deliver messages consistent with revealed truth, and face divine judgment for presumption. The test is both predictive accuracy and theological fidelity. Moses anticipated Israel's need for ongoing prophetic guidance while protecting them from deception—a pattern pointing ultimately to Christ, the Prophet greater than Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-19), whose words are life itself.

Historical Context

This passage appears in Moses' final addresses to Israel before entering Canaan (Deuteronomy 12-26 contains the detailed covenant stipulations). Israel would soon encounter Canaanite culture saturated with divination, necromancy, augury, and pagan prophecy (verses 9-14 list these forbidden practices). The ancient Near East had numerous prophetic figures—from Mesopotamian baru priests who read omens to Egyptian oracle-givers who claimed divine knowledge.

Unlike pagan prophecy rooted in manipulation, Israel's prophetic office was revelatory—God disclosed His will through chosen spokespersons. The high stakes required clear discernment standards since false prophets could lead the nation into covenant violation and divine judgment. Historical examples abound: Jeremiah confronted Hananiah's false optimistic prophecy (Jeremiah 28), while Micaiah stood alone against 400 false prophets before Ahab (1 Kings 22).

In Moses' era, the memory of Balaam's attempted cursing (Numbers 22-24) and the recent apostasy at Baal Peor (Numbers 25) underscored prophecy's power for good or evil. This law protected Israel's unique covenantal relationship with Yahweh by establishing objective verification methods—preventing prophetic authority from becoming arbitrary or manipulative. The question in verse 21 reflects the practical wisdom needed to navigate competing religious claims while maintaining exclusive loyalty to Yahweh.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. What criteria does Scripture provide for testing modern claims of prophetic revelation or divine guidance?

2. How do we balance openness to God's ongoing work with wise discernment against deception?
3. In what ways might we be tempted to accept teaching that claims divine authority without proper verification?
4. How does this passage inform our approach to evaluating preachers, teachers, and spiritual leaders today?
5. What role does fulfilled prophecy play in confirming Scripture's divine origin and authority?

Interlinear Text

וְכִי י	תֹאמַר	בְּלִבְךָ	אֵיכָה	נֵדַע	אֵת	הַדָּבָר
H3588	And if thou say	in thine heart	H349	How shall we know	H853	the word
	H559	H3824		H3045		H1697
אֲשֶׁר	לֹא	דִּבֶּר וְ	יְהוָה:			
H834	H3808	hath not spoken	which the LORD			
		H1696	H3068			

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