HOW TO READ AN ABHORRENT TEXT:
DEUTERONOMY 13 AND THE NATURE OF AUTHORITY

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Introduction
In my previous work in deuteronomic law, Social Justice and Deuteronomy\(^1\), I investigated, among other things, the way that a biblical legal text can be used to address analogous problems in a place and time (the reader's\(^2\) present) where the actual content of that text (that is, the words of the laws themselves) no longer has any direct relevance. There, I said that the issue was one of "relevance" and the roadblocks preventing an easy resolution of that issue were those of "difference and transference," or "the whole spectrum of difficulties . . . created by the span of years and custom which lie between the present of the text and the present of the reader."\(^3\)

One difficulty which that previous study did not face was how one can resolve the issue of "difference and transference" in the face of a text which is not only different, foreign, irrelevant, obsolete, esoteric, etc., but abhorrent in the bargain. Abhorrence is not always an insurmountable obstacle. While the institution of slavery may be abhorrent to the modern American way of thinking, once the reader accepts the fact that the text before him or her (in that case, the release laws of Deut. 15), was written in a time and culture in which slavery was taken for granted, then the response to slavery that those laws offer is not in itself objectionable—indeed may even seem exemplary.

What about a text, however, which cannot be reconciled with liberal western notions of right and wrong either in its subject or in the way it calls upon its audience to act with reference to that subject? Can such a text be regarded as relevant to the contemporary reader under any circumstances of interpretation, analogizing, or translation into current terms and concerns? This is the knotty problem the reader faces in the case of such texts as the three laws dealing with apostasy found in Deut. 13:1-17 (Heb. 2-19).\(^4\)
The present study, then, is an interpretation of the laws against apostasy with this particular problem in mind. As such, many interesting aspects of the text will not be addressed—in particular the historical context of the laws. Rather, the exegesis which follows is selective, focusing on those features which strike the present reader as particularly germane to the issue of reading, finding meaning in, or perceiving in what way and to what extent authority can be granted to this text.

I. Deuteronomy 13 in the Structure of the Legal Corpus of Deuteronomy.

The laws against apostasy correspond to the Decalogue commandment against idolatry and apostasy (i.e., Deut. 5:8-10). By “correspond” I mean that they occupy the place in the sequence of laws whose order is generated by the order of the Ten Commandments of Deut. 5:6-21. By “correspond” I also mean that their occupying this place in the sequence of laws puts them in a sort of “intimate conversation” with the Second Commandment, an explicit intertextuality. In other words, the laws against apostasy in Deut. 13 serve as an exposition of and commentary on the Second Commandment of the Decalogue but they, in turn, should be read in light of that Decalogue commandment. Several observations can be made on the basis of the relationship between Deut. 13 and the Second Commandment.

A. Both the apostasy laws of Deut. 13 and the Second Commandment show a tendency to concentrate power, authority, and divinity in the one true God, Yahweh. While this may appear to modern ears to be the airing of a truism, it was by no means a foregone conclusion, or even a logical one, when first uttered. It is in fact the signal affirmation of that group within Israelite society which would eventually win out in this theological power struggle, but whose victory was by no means certain at the time. Indeed, in a time and place where political strength was seen as a reflection of the relative strength of one’s patron deity, such an affirmation by a community of marginal importance even on the small stage of the ancient Near East teeters on the edge of arrogance. The eventual normalization of Israelite religion in the years preceding and during the Babylonian Exile has been called “the triumph of Deuteronomic