The Enemy in the Household

Family Violence in Deuteronomy and Beyond

Caryn A. Reeder
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Abbreviations

'Abod. Zar.   'Abodah Zarah
Alleg. Interp. Philo, Allegorical Interpretation
ANET         Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament
ANF          The Ante-Nicene Fathers
Ant.         Josephus, Jewish Antiquities
b.           Babylonian Talmud
B. Meši’a    Baba Meši’a
Bik.         Bikkurim
Cels.        Origen, Against Celsus
Cherubim     Philo, On the Cherubim
Comm. Matt.  Origen, Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew
Confusion    Philo, On the Confusion of Tongues
Contempl. Life Philo, On the Contemplative Life or Suppliants
Creation     Philo, On the Creation
Decal.       Philo, The Decalogue
Dial.        Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho
Drunkenness  Philo, On Drunkenness
ET           English translation
Flight       Philo, On Flight and Finding
Fr. 1 Cor.   Origen, Fragments on 1 Corinthians
Git.         Gitin
Heir         Philo, Who Is the Heir of Divine Things?
Hom. 1 Cor.  John Chrysostom, Homilies on First Corinthians
Hor.         Horayot
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Hypothetica</td>
<td>Philo, Hypothetica: Apology for the Jews</td>
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<td>Joseph</td>
<td>Philo, On Joseph</td>
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<td>J.W.</td>
<td>Josephus, Jewish War</td>
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<td>Ketub.</td>
<td>Ketubbot</td>
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<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version</td>
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<td>LCL</td>
<td>Loeb Classical Library</td>
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<td>Life</td>
<td>The Life of Flavius Josephus</td>
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<td>Septuagint</td>
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<td>Moses</td>
<td>Philo, On the Life of Moses</td>
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<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text</td>
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<td>Names</td>
<td>Philo, On the Change of Names</td>
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<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
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<td>Nid.</td>
<td>Niddah</td>
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<td>NPNF¹</td>
<td>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1</td>
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<td>NPNF²</td>
<td>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<td>Posterity</td>
<td>Philo, On the Posterity of Cain and His Exile</td>
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<td>Qiddušin</td>
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<td>Rewards</td>
<td>Philo, On Rewards and Punishments</td>
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<td>Philo, On the Birth of Abel and the Sacrifices Offered by Him and by His Brother Cain</td>
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<td>Sanhedrin</td>
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<td>Targum Pseudo-Jonathan</td>
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<td>Worse</td>
<td>Philo, That the Worse Is Wont to Attack the Better</td>
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<td>y.</td>
<td>Jerusalem Talmud</td>
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<td>Yebam.</td>
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Introducing the Enemy Within

Put no trust in a friend, have no confidence in a loved one; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your embrace; for the son treats the father with contempt, the daughter rises up against her mother, the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; your enemies are members of your own household.

Mic. 7:5–6 (NRSV)

“Your enemies are members of your own household.” This is a strong, emotionally laden statement, in the context of both ancient Israel and today. You can trust no one, not even your dearest friends and family. Your spouse is a spy in your arms, and your own children rebel against you. These people are your friends and kin, living and working by your side, but they have become your enemies, those who seek your harm, not your good (cf. Mic. 2:8–9; 7:8–10). Enmity here marks the people who should be your closest companions as outsiders who have infiltrated your very home. Enmity proves itself to be a question of identity.

For biblical Israel, identity is marked by loyalty. Identifying with the people of Israel requires being loyal to the God of Israel. Identifying with a family lineage means being loyal to that family, and identifying with a household means being loyal to the relationships and common life of the household. Members of God’s people or a particular family should be loyal, obedient, and unified (e.g., Gen. 13:8; Exod. 19:3–6; Josh. 24:14–15; Ps. 133:1). Identity is fluid and changeable: when members of families are not loyal, obedient,
and unified, as indeed they are not in Mic. 7:1–6, they show that they are outsiders. They do not truly belong to the people of God or the family. They are enemies disguised as kin.

Three laws in Deuteronomy address enmity in the household. A close friend, sibling, spouse, or child counsels rebellion against the God who saved Israel from Egypt (13:6–11 [7–12 MT]). A son disobeys and rebels against his parents (21:18–21). A husband slanders his wife, and a daughter and wife shames parents and husband by her sexual indiscretion (22:13–21). In each text, apparent insiders are revealed as enemies by their disloyalty to God and family. Their behavior threatens the identity of the family and of God’s people. These enemies within are just as dangerous to Israel as foreign armies drawn up for battle.

In Mic. 7:1–7 enmity in the household is cause for lamentation and awaiting God’s salvation. In Deuteronomy the response to the enemy within is rather different: the very family members who have been tempted to idolatrous worship or dishonored by a rebellious child bring the enemy—their own brother, wife, son, daughter, or dear friend—to judgment and execution. Emphasizing the household’s role in the action taken against the enemy, in Deut. 22:20–21 the execution takes place at the door of the house, and in 13:9–10 (10–11 MT), the family member even throws the stone that begins the execution. For Deuteronomy, identifying a member of the household as an enemy has deadly consequences.

These laws can seem abhorrent to modern readers, who are perhaps more likely to see the enemy within as family violence rather than as an errant family member. How could a husband raise his hand against the wife who lies in his arms? How could a mother betray her daughter? How could a man take the life of his brother, or the friend who is like his own soul? These questions and concerns are not new. Ancient readers from the second century BCE to the rabbis of the second and third centuries CE also struggled to understand the kind of family violence represented in Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21. Clues in the way the laws are narrated in Deuteronomy suggest that even their producers recognized their inherent offensiveness. Though for modern readers these laws are horrifying because of the emotional and nurturing significance of the family and the value of individual freedom, for their earliest readers the family was the social, economic, and theological center and source of life. In this context, laws that require violence against a family member are ever more troubling.¹

The demands of these texts sound a harsh, discordant note in ancient and modern ears alike.² Considering the value of family in the Hebrew Bible and

¹. Though ancient readers do not address this issue, for modern readers the troubling nature of these laws is exacerbated by their association with God (cf. Deut. 4:5–8; 6:1; etc.). Due to the focus of this study, the larger question of God and violence will be approached through the ethical problem of reading these laws as directives for the life of the community of faith rather than on its own.
². By “ancient,” I mean readers and interpreters from the time of Deuteronomy to the early Tannaitic rabbis. I will use “ancient” and “antiquity” throughout this book as shorthand for the
ancient Israel, how should the legislation of the execution of family members in Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21 be understood? Given a modern understanding of family violence itself as the enemy within, how should—perhaps simply, should—these texts be read today? In this book, I seek to answer these questions through an intensive study of the three laws in Deuteronomy and their ancient interpretations, adaptations, and applications. I read these texts critically, recognizing the serious ethical questions they raise, but also faithfully, recognizing their place as sacred Scripture in the traditions of Judaism and Christianity. This study of family violence in Deuteronomy and beyond is an exercise in the practice of a hermeneutic of trust.

**Preliminary Matters: Working Definitions**

Three major topics are brought together in this book: family, violence, and reading. Each of these areas has spawned its own growing library of research. Before we begin the specific study of family violence in Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; 22:13–21 and beyond, it will be helpful to set out basic guidelines for understanding each of these topics. What does “family” mean in the biblical, Second Temple, and rabbinic periods, and equally important, what does it not mean? What is violence? Can legislated punishment be properly called violence? Finally, how do we read difficult texts? What method of reading is most appropriate, in light of the power of texts to influence and even determine belief and behavior?

**Finding the Family and Families in the Ancient World**

Because of the ubiquity of family life in our world, it is easy to interpret ancient texts based on our own understandings of real and ideal families. Before we begin the study of violence in the family in the Bible and other ancient texts, then, it is quite important to survey the contours of the ancient family and families encountered in the texts.3 “The family” in the biblical worlds has become a major area of research in recent years, drawing on ancient texts, archaeology, economic and sociological models, and comparative anthropology to reconstruct the ideals and realities of family life.4 While I am not engaged

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3. Despite its presence in human society across time and space, “family” does not have a single, persistent definition. Rather, family, kinship, and the household develop naturally within and are constructed by each society in response to its needs. See further Goody 1983, 2; Casey 1989, 1; Bourdieu 1996, 19–21; R. Schwartz 1997, 78.

4. For a representative sampling, see Meyers 1988; Cohen 1993; Barton 1996; Moxnes 1997; Perdue et al. 1997; King and Stager 2001; Balch and Osiek 1997; 2003.
in reconstructing the social history of the family at the time of Deuteronomy or later interpreters, I will draw on the insights of this field to understand the practical function and theological significance of households in the focus texts. As a brief, general introduction, the following survey outlines three basic assumptions regarding what family is and is not in antiquity.

First, a family in antiquity was not a mother, father, two kids, and a dog. Ancient families were household units that could incorporate relatives, slaves, and otherwise unattached people. The life cycle of a household, the needs of the wider community, and economic status would shape the particular configuration of a household at any one time, as is obvious from the range of families pictured in the Bible (Gen. 13:1–12; Exod. 20:10; Lev. 18:6–18; Mark 1:29–30; John 11:1; Eph. 5:21–6:9; etc.). In general, households were patrilocal, centered around a male lineage and inheritance. They were often multigenerational, incorporating grandparents, parents, and children. They were connected to local communities and the nation through widening circles of kinship (cf. Josh. 7:16–18). Households in the biblical worlds included much more than nuclear families or blood relations.

Second, a family in antiquity was not solely nor even primarily concerned with nurturing and emotionally supporting its members. Households were focused on and dedicated to subsistence. In ancient agricultural and market-based societies, it was essential for all members of a household to work together to provide for their common life. Everyone capable of working, from the oldest to the youngest, would have responsibilities in the house, fields, or family business. Texts like 2 Kings 4:18; Prov. 10:5; Matt. 21:28–31; and Luke 15:25 reflect this persistent reality. The necessary sharing of the burden of providing for the household has important implications. For one, childhood in the biblical world was not all fun and games; children were expected to do their part for the family. Second, the needs of the group took priority over an individual’s desires or personal freedoms. Third, the contributions of wives and children to the household would balance patriarchal power and its potential abuse: a man would find life difficult if he alienated his coworkers. Household life depended on the participation of all its members.

5. The understanding of “family” as members of a household is based on the definition of house societies in Gillespie 2000, 1; Chesson 2003, 82; see also Porter 1967, 9. Note that “house” and “household” (בַּיִת [bāyit], οἶκος [oikos], οἰκία [oikia], οἶκεῖος [oikeios]) and “house of the father” (בֵּית אָב [bīt ēb], ὁ οἶκος τοῦ πατρός [ho oikos tou patros]) are frequent identifiers for families in the Bible (Gen. 12:1; Exod. 1:21; Num. 23:6; Deut. 12:7; Judg. 6:15; Mark 6:4; Acts 10:2; 1 Tim. 3:4–5; 5:8; etc.).

6. The idea of nested households is helpful: an individual household fits into its larger kinship group, which is part of the state as a much larger kinship group, which is then part of the household of God; cf. King and Stager 2001, 4–5; Schloen 2001, 65–67.


Finally, family life in the ancient world was not private and personal, hidden away in a house surrounded by a lawn behind a hedge. Families lived, worked, and aired their dirty laundry in public. Because of the importance of individual households to the functioning of society as a whole, the public was aware of families. In the biblical worlds, the family was the foundation of society and economy. It was understood to be a microcosm of the state and, for Israel, of the national relationship with God. Households that reflected social order and lived according to traditional social expectations supported the life of broader society and were rewarded with honor; households that failed to do so were identified as threats and subjected to dishonor. The family was a public entity. Families centered life in the ancient biblical worlds. They were the social, economic, political, and theological cornerstones of existence. Their importance is emphasized by their omnipresence in ancient narratives, laws, and other texts. The significance of family life in antiquity makes violence against members of the household in Deuteronomy and other biblical texts more surprising, but it also provides a framework for understanding this violence.

Understanding Violence in the Hebrew Bible and Today

Perhaps unsurprising in light of all that has happened around the world since September 11, 2001, interest in defining, identifying, and interpreting violence in the Bible has burgeoned over the past decade. Modern scholars have categorized a range of acts and words in the Bible as violent: in addition to the obvious culprits (rape, fighting, murder, war), everything from sacrifice and circumcision to warnings of eschatological judgment and even sowing and harvesting crops has been called violent. In this study, I define violence more narrowly as action taken against a person in order to cause their injury or death. This definition is simple and flexible, able to cover a variety of situations (or perhaps a multitude of sins?), but also limited enough to keep the study helpfully focused.

My working definition of violence is broad enough to include the use of punitive force in Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21. Beatings, executions,
or other uses of physical force demanded by law as punishment for certain crimes are not always considered violence, which would consequently be limited to illicit activities. In the Hebrew Bible, violence is almost entirely the purview of the unrighteous. The words used for “violence” refer primarily to physical action and sometimes speech associated with oppression, injustice, and wickedness. Rarely is the punishment of the wicked or other injury or harm justified by the demands of God described as violence, and when it is, the punishment is on a large scale (e.g., the destruction of cities and nations).

As a general rule in biblical thought, just or holy war, beating, or stoning and other forms of legal execution are not identified or described as violent acts. I have chosen to include legislated punishment in my definition of violence for several reasons: (1) the recognition that there can be coexisting interpretations of an act as violence and as a use of legitimate force, (2) the reactions of ancient and modern readers to the demands of the three focus texts in Deuteronomy, and (3) the connection of violence with identity in modern research. First, identifying an act as violent depends on one’s viewpoint. There are multiple sides to every story (is a suicide bomber a terrorist or martyr? Is Abraham in Gen. 22 the ultimate example of devotion to God, or is he a child abuser?). What is violence from the perspective of the victim may look very different from the perspective of the perpetrator, and a third party may have a different perspective altogether (cf. 2 Sam. 18:9–15, 32; 21:1–14). The problem of perspective is exacerbated by our own distance from the texts. For modern Western readers in particular, the value of personal freedom influences our understanding of Deuteronomy’s laws. It is assumed that an individual has the right to choose what gods to worship, when and with whom to engage in sexual intercourse, or to be independent of parental authority, and this assumption of individual rights increases readers’ discomfort with the laws that deny them. The laws can be classified as examples of violence because the reader sympathizes with the oppressed victim of the system.

Second, while the concern with individual rights is not an issue in ancient interpretations developing within cultures that valued the group over the individual, ancient readers also struggled with these three texts and others like them with the understanding of “violence” in biblical texts, even though the words of violence do not appear. Other stories, including Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22), Absalom’s murder of Amnon (2 Sam. 13:23–39), and the Levite’s dismemberment of his concubine and the ensuing war against the Benjamites (Judg. 19–20), are less easy to categorize by biblical standards.

16. See, e.g., חָמָס (ḥāmās) in Gen. 6:11; Judg. 9:24; Prov. 4:16 (17 MT); or Isa. 53:9; מְרָא (mēra) in Ps. 7:17; Ezek. 18:10; לוע (lōū) in Prov. 21:7; Isa. 16:4; Ezek. 45:9; etc.

17. See לוע (lōū) in Isa. 13:6; שֹׁד (šōd) in Jer. 47:4; 51:55; etc.; and מְרָא (mēra) in Exod. 19:22; 2 Sam. 6:8; etc.

18. Of course, not every instance of violence in the Hebrew Bible is labeled as such (cf. Zevit 2007, 19). Stories like Cain’s murder of his brother, Abel (Gen. 4:1–16), and the rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1–22) clearly fit the understanding of “violence” in biblical texts, even though the words of violence do not appear. Other stories, including Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22), Absalom’s murder of Amnon (2 Sam. 13:23–39), and the Levite’s dismemberment of his concubine and the ensuing war against the Benjamites (Judg. 19–20), are less easy to categorize by biblical standards.

them. In the early first century CE, Philo’s commentary on Deut. 21:18–21 (Spec. Laws 2.232) reveals his disquietude with the demands of the law. For parents to initiate the execution of their son is a very serious, troubling matter. Several centuries later, the rabbis claim that Deut. 21:18–21 and 13:12–18 (13–19 MT) are laws that could never be put into practice (t. Sanh. 11.6; 14.1). More recently, John Calvin marks the severity of the three laws of Deuteronomy and admits that they sound cruel to readers (Harmony of the Law 2–3). Modern scholars label these laws as “ritualized atrocity,” child abuse, “disturbing,” “abhorrent,” and “draconian initiatives.” In my definition of violence, the inclusion of legislated punishment recognizes the reactions of ancient and modern readers to the demands of Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21.

Within Deuteronomy, these laws represent the just, legislated punishment and execution of errant family members; but according to many readers, the location of the punishment within the family makes the actions taken against the errant violent. The pervasive recognition of Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21 as violent texts across the millennia suggests that more is at work here than modern scruples. Readers’ reactions to the demands of these laws can be taken into account in interpretation, and the witness of the centuries, accelerated in our own day but certainly not new, is that these laws are shocking, troubling, and potentially abusive. Deuteronomy legislates family violence.

Third, describing punishment in Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21 as violence develops from the connection of violence with identity formation. Biblical texts are engaged in the construction of the identity of the people of God, and this process requires determining both what the people of God should look like and what they should not look like. Constructing identity, in other words, involves defining the identity of the group and of “others”: the Israelites are defined in opposition to the Canaanites, Egyptians, Greeks, or other people groups. In Deuteronomy, this process is apparent in the laws forbidding behavior that imitates “the nations,” including idolatry, polytheism, child sacrifice, divination, and other practices (cf. 12:2–7, 29–31; 18:9–14). The people of Israel instead find their identity in living according to the ways God has commanded: “Keep silence and hear, O Israel! This very day you have become the people of the LORD your God. Therefore obey the LORD your God, observing his commandments and his statutes that I am commanding you today” (27:9–10 NRSV).

22. This understanding of identity and violence is part of a larger academic discussion of the sociology, anthropology, and psychology of violence; see esp. Sen 2006, 1–2, 175–76.
23. Forming identity is not the only function of a text, but in the case of Deuteronomy it is a particularly important function, and particularly effective for the purposes of this study.
In addition to obeying God’s law, the people of Israel are instructed to destroy other nations. “You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the LORD your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God” (Deut. 20:17–18 NRSV; cf. 7:1–6). The destructive violence of war and the ban (חֶרֶם, herem) becomes part of the process of defining Israel’s identity. It is a tool used to create and protect identity by radical separation from others.  

Identity is fluid. Definitions of identity change through time and across texts, and identity can change within a single text. Those who are the “other” can become part of Israel, keeping the ways of Israel instead of the ways of the nations, as in the case of sojourners (גֵּר, gēr) or captives of war (Deut. 5:14; 10:19; 16:11; 20:10–14). Likewise, Israelites can become the other when they fail to keep the ways of God. As enemies within, they would thus face the destructive violence of separation. As we will see, the laws of Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21 use physical force, beating, and execution to protect Israelite identity from internal corruption. Within the larger association of violence with the construction of identity, the legislated, punitive, judicial action against family members in Deuteronomy is as violent as the annihilation of the Canaanites.

In recognition of the disconnect between the biblical view of violence and my own definition, I have adopted Robert R. Beck’s term “constructive violence” to describe the use of violent acts to punish covenantal transgressions in Deuteronomy. In Nonviolent Story: Narrative Conflict Resolution in the Gospel of Mark, Beck explores what he identifies as the myth of constructive violence in the stories of the American frontier. According to this myth, to defeat oppressive, hostile forces (the “bad guys”), the “good guys” must use violence. Any other response would be useless. Violence becomes a weapon of redemption, “civilizing” the Wild West and making it a habitable land.  

Constructive violence is, paradoxically, violence that intends good.

Beck contrasts this myth with the nonviolent response to oppressive powers he finds in Mark’s Gospel. I am instead taking over the idea of constructive violence to describe the punishments legislated in Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; 22:13–21; and similar texts. The actions demanded by and narrated in the texts are violent, intending the injury of a family member, but they are also motivated by the need to protect communal identity from threats. The “violence” in

25. See further Niditch 1993, 21–22; Sparks 1998, 235; J. Collins 2004, 11–12, 15, 17–18; Biezeveld 2005, 57. For R. Schwartz 1997, 5, the connection between violence and the formation of identity is so deep that the two can be identified as the same thing: violence is the formation of identity (cf. Kille 2007, 12–14; Frankfurter 2007, 114–15).
constructive violence recognizes readers’ reactions to the texts; “constructive,” in turn, recognizes the presentation of this violence as useful for the community within the texts. Constructive violence is a term redolent with value judgments and actually holds two discordant value judgments together. It gives the freedom to respect the place of these laws in Deuteronomy and the responses of readers to these laws through time. Both are necessary for responsibly reading the legislation of constructive family violence in Deuteronomy.

**Reading Constructive Family Violence in Deuteronomy**

The apparent mismatch between the biblical understanding of violence and the assessment of Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21 as violent texts by ancient and modern readers raises key questions concerning hermeneutics. A hermeneutic is a method of reading that determines how the reader will approach, understand, and interpret a text. We all have a hermeneutic when we read the Bible, whether we realize it or not, and it is possible to read deliberately and consciously according to a particular hermeneutic. So what hermeneutic is appropriate in approaching texts that present family violence as a legitimate, even required, response to particular situations?

**The Hermeneutic of Suspicion**

One compelling option for interpretation is the hermeneutic of suspicion. Scholars who read according to a hermeneutic of suspicion, including liberationists, feminists, womanists, and postcolonialists, among others, begin with the assumption that many, if not all, biblical texts were written and eventually granted authority as sacred texts in order to maintain particular social hierarchies. Generally the ancient writers and supporters of these biblical texts are identified as wealthy, powerful men, heads of households and key political or religious leaders, who used the text to protect and preserve their favorable positions. Words are powerful; texts, including sacred texts like the Bible, can become weapons. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a feminist scholar who champions the hermeneutic of suspicion, warns that biblical texts are “rhetorical symbol systems” that, if readers are not careful, can create the symbolic world they describe and thus implant unjust power relations in the readers’ societies. A hermeneutic of suspicion keeps readers on the lookout for these systems, thus guarding against their potential for domination and abuse. Forewarned is forearmed.

Reading the three laws of family violence in Deuteronomy through a hermeneutic of suspicion foregrounds the unequal power structures in the household and wider society. The patriarch, the male head of the family, is given complete

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authority over the members of the household, even to the point of executing them without trial in Deut. 13:9–10. The wives, children, siblings, and others are nearly voiceless in these texts. When they do speak, their voices support the patriarch’s voice (21:20), or they are heard through the patriarch’s words rather than their own (13:6–7 [7–8]). They are identified by their relationship to the patriarch, and they are seen from the patriarch’s point of view (13:6 [7]; 21:18; 22:15–17). Reading with the hermeneutic of suspicion draws attention to these characters who might be overlooked, the voices that might be drowned out. In this study of family violence in the laws of Deuteronomy, I will use some of the insights of suspicious reading to draw attention to the experiences of the apparently powerless in the texts.

Another advantage of the hermeneutic of suspicion is the necessary reminder that reading is not a neutral event. How we read matters, especially when the text is accepted as an authoritative sacred book. Readers must recognize the potential for using biblical texts to harm, as in the cases of child abuse, spouse abuse, and “sacrificial” murder that have been attributed to biblical texts (or at least interpretations of biblical texts). The potentially harmful implications of reading warn us that readers need to be careful as they interpret, teach, or embody biblical texts.30 In the case of Deuteronomy, reading with a hermeneutic of suspicion insists on the possible use of the texts to motivate or justify domestic violence, abuse, or oppression, whether intentionally or not. As Schüssler Fiorenza suggests, texts like these should come with a warning: “Caution, could be dangerous to your health and survival.”31 In this study of legislated family violence, the need to interpret with care to avoid abusive consequences will be kept firmly in mind.

The hermeneutic of suspicion is not wholly advantageous, however. It can itself be dangerous and do violence to a text, especially when it is used to predetermine the potential or even nature of each and every biblical text to oppress. As Carol Smith reminds us, many biblical texts speak on behalf of victims of oppression in often vehement critiques of unjust social hierarchies and violent power.32 With respect to family violence, the commands to punish family members to death are balanced by outrage over and critiques of family violence in other texts: Jephthah and his daughter (Judg. 11:34–40), the murder of Abel (Gen. 4:8–16), the rape of Tamar and subsequent murder of Amnon (2 Sam. 13), child sacrifice (Deut. 18:10; Jer. 7:31), and so forth. This intrabiblical tension provides a check on power in the family and, taken seriously, could prevent abusive reading practices by directing attention to the purposes, motives, and contexts of family violence. In addition, checks on seemingly absolute power arise naturally in family life. A patriarch may nominally hold the power of life and death over the members

32. Smith 2001, esp. 109–10; see also Kille 2007, 8.
of his household by law, but his wife and children have their own power as contributors to their common life. The power of a wife and mother in a patriarchal society is obvious in the stories of many biblical women, including Rebekah and Tamar in Gen. 27 and 38, Samson’s mother in Judg. 13, Abigail in 1 Sam. 25, and Jezebel in 1 Kings 21. As several ancient commentators observe, the necessary involvement of the mother in Deut. 21:18–21 and 22:13–21 balances the patriarch’s power. Reading with a stringent hermeneutic of suspicion runs the risk of minimizing or missing these key elements of biblical texts.

Another danger of the hermeneutic of suspicion represented in several recent studies of violence in biblical texts lies in the ultimate rejection of the text. If oppression, suppression, and abuse lie behind and within biblical texts, and if these texts have the potential to teach and encourage oppression, suppression, and abuse among their readers, one response is to abandon the Bible. For some, the Bible as it has come down to us is virtually unreadable, and reading it as sacred Scripture is not a viable option. Regina M. Schwartz, Carol Delaney, and Hector Avalos represent this developing trend when they identify the Bible as a danger to humanity, a violent book that teaches violence and oppression. Avalos argues that the Bible should, therefore, have no authority or value in the modern world. Both Schwartz and Delaney issue rousing calls for the creation of a new canon—a new set of “biblical” traditions that will teach “an ideal of plenitude and its corollary ethical imperative of generosity” for Schwartz, and “caring relationships” within the family for Delaney.

Rejecting the Bible as an authoritative text is a seductive option, but it is not an option I am willing to embrace. The claim that a text presenting elements of violence or oppression causes violence and oppression among readers is an overstatement. Texts do not “do” things on their own; readers are the parties responsible for using texts for good or ill. Interpretations that fail to account for biblical and social balances or to counteract potentially abusive readings are the problem, not the texts themselves. The Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible, moreover, are sacred texts for Jewish and Christian communities of faith around the world. This heritage should not be abandoned lightly but should rather be struggled with as a witness to the faith of the past and an inheritance for people of faith. In this study, therefore, the hermeneutic of suspicion will be used to uncover suppression, oppression, and violence in the texts, but it will not be the only or the primary guide to interpretation.

33. Rejecting the text is not demanded by the hermeneutic of suspicion (cf. Schüssler Fiorenza 1999, 57), but it is arguably a logical progression.
36. In the terms of Fowl (1998, 64, 72–73) and A. Adam (2006, 68–71), texts do not have ideologies; readers do. Readers are therefore responsible for the effects of their reading and must guard against reading in such a way as to breed oppression or injustice in the world (Fowl 1998, 61, 74–75). Cf. M. Adam 1998, 221; J. Collins 2004, 1–2, 29–33; Kille 2007, 9.
A Hermeneutic of Trust

The hermeneutic taken in this study is a hermeneutic of trust. A hermeneutic of trust begins with the assumption that these texts have something to teach about what Eep Talstra calls the “family history” of God and God’s people. The story is not only of antiquarian interest; it is also our story when we allow ourselves to be challenged by the text. It is a struggle to read texts in which violence against family members is enjoined and even celebrated, but the effort is worthwhile.

A hermeneutic of trust requires reading sympathetically rather than antagonistically. For Deuteronomy, a sympathetic reading begins by accepting the book’s thought world and theology as the primary context for interpreting the function and purpose of constructive family violence. This method of reading does not, however, mean uncritically accepting violence as an appropriate response in particular situations. Learning from practitioners of the hermeneutic of suspicion, I will read cautiously as well as sympathetically, balancing the recognition of potential inequalities or injustices with faith in the biblical story.

A number of previous studies provide examples of sympathetic, cautious readings of troubling texts. Two that have been particularly helpful to me are Jon D. Levenson’s *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* and Susan Niditch’s *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence*. Levenson addresses child sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible and the interpretations and renarrations of the Aqedah, the sacrifice of Isaac in Gen. 22, in later traditions. Levenson’s study is a practical exercise in the redemptive reading of disturbing stories. His model of careful, generous reading, exploration, and recognition of the narrative art and theology of such texts will be followed in this study.

Niditch traces the complex, multifaceted ideologies of war and related acts of violence across the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Her study uncovers tensions in and among the texts between an implicit (and sometimes explicit) recognition of the horrors and guilt of war and a straightforward acceptance and celebration of violence. For Niditch, these tensions do not mean that the Hebrew Bible offers a critique of warfare, but they do allow modern readers space for critical reflection. In this study I also engage in reading between the lines to find potential internal tensions in Deuteronomy’s laws and critiques of constructive family violence in other texts of the Hebrew Bible.

38. Talstra 2005, 82–83; see also E. Davis 2003, 177.
39. Hays 2005, 191, 197–98, suggests approaching the Bible with trust and using the hermeneutic of suspicion on ourselves, to critique our own fallenness on the basis of its “message of grace.”
41. As E. Davis 2003, 178, comments, interpreters must recognize that texts are ethically troubling, but also that a “difficult text is worthy of charity from its interpreters.”
These critiques become more vocal in postbiblical interpretations of Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21. Ancient interpreters of biblical texts are engaged in the balancing act of reading critically and faithfully. The history of interpretation of these texts in antiquity can thus provide guidance for their faithful, critical interpretation today. The practice of reading difficult biblical texts through the eyes of their earliest interpreters is not new. My work in this book builds on the example set by John L. Thompson, who surveys interpretations of texts that “people would just as soon avoid” from antiquity through the Reformation. He notes that premodern readers, including the earliest readers of some of the texts, struggled to understand difficult texts too; their struggles are, for Thompson, an important check on our own reaction to difficult texts as well as examples of careful interpretation. The interpretations given “may make the problems in such texts even harder and more painful, but they don’t turn a blind eye.”

The history of the interpretation of constructive family violence in antiquity demonstrates that enlightened modern readers are not the first to question constructive family violence in Deuteronomy or the broader tradition it represents, or to be concerned with their potential for violence in the real world. Ancient readers from the early Second Temple to the early rabbinic periods recognized the problems with the kind of violence required by the laws of Deuteronomy. They struggled to understand and interpret these texts from the standpoint of faith. There is much for us to learn from their approaches to, interpretations of, and uses of the biblical traditions of constructive family violence.

Rewriting Deuteronomy

Beyond the Hebrew Bible, the texts covered in this study date from the second century BCE to the early third century CE. Different kinds of interpretation and application are represented, including relatively straightforward commentary on Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21, allusions to or adaptations of these texts, and narratives that incorporate the themes of constructive family violence. The interpretations covered here thus provide the opportunity to see a range of responses to and uses of biblical constructive family violence, illuminating both the interpretation of the focus laws from Deuteronomy and the developing tradition of constructive family violence in Second Temple Judaism.

The texts included in this study can be placed on a continuum of interpretation ranging from explicit exegesis of Deuteronomy’s laws to the uses of the vocabulary and themes of the laws in different settings. At one extreme, echoes of Deut. 13 appear in the New Testament’s concern with false teachers.

These echoes do not necessarily interpret Deut. 13; they rather provide a way for the reader to connect the New Testament texts with earlier traditions. At the opposite end of the continuum, Philo of Alexandria and the Tannaitic rabbis write commentaries on Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21 in which they seek to interpret these laws for their audiences. Their exegesis shows how they read Deuteronomy and also reveals their assumptions regarding the value or use of constructive family violence.

The other texts covered in this study fall between the two extremes. In the Jewish Antiquities, Josephus incorporates Deuteronomy’s laws into his retelling of biblical and Jewish history. While he uses the laws for his own literary purposes, his presentation is also somewhat exegetical, showing how he read and understood Deuteronomy. The vocabulary and themes of Deuteronomy’s laws appear in new contexts in Josephus’s Jewish War, Sirach, and 1 Maccabees. These allusions are used primarily to support the arguments of the books, but in so doing, they become part of the interpretation of the traditions of constructive family violence.

The influence of Deuteronomy’s constructive family violence can be seen in Jubilees and several New Testament texts, including Matthew, Mark, and 1 Corinthians. These texts do not explicitly comment on Deuteronomy: they rarely quote or borrow words from Deuteronomy. The themes of Deuteronomy’s laws and of constructive family violence in general are apparent, however. Jubilees and the New Testament thus participate in the ongoing development of the practice of constructive family violence, reinterpreting and at some points challenging biblical tradition in new settings.

As Michael Fishbane warns, allusions and influence are not always easy to identify. A text may use common words and ideas independently, with no attempt to interpret or respond to earlier texts in which the same themes appear. Throughout the current study, I take care to explore the possible connections of the focus texts with Deuteronomy’s laws. Whether they exegete, allude to, or simply use ideas similar to Deuteronomy, each text is part of the tradition of constructive family violence. They thus implicitly interpret, use, modify, and challenge the practices and purposes of family violence present in Deuteronomy; in so doing they give us models to follow in our own reading of these troubling texts.

Moving Forward

The journey through ancient traditions of constructive family violence begins in chapter 2 with a careful study of the three laws in Deuteronomy along

47. See further Sommer 1998, 18, on the convergence of allusion and exegesis.
with their echoes through the Hebrew Bible. The laws will first be contextualized within Deuteronomy’s instructions for family life. The theological importance of the family helps explain the violence in 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21: the family in Deuteronomy is given the weapon of violent punishment of wrongdoers precisely because it is the primary agent of the covenant and the embodiment of Israelite identity. This analysis will be supported by surveying the use of the imagery of these laws in the Prophets and Proverbs.

The study will then turn to the interpretations and applications of constructive family violence in antiquity. Chapter 3 covers three early Second Temple period texts: Sirach, 1 Maccabees, and Jubilees. These texts do not explicitly comment on Deuteronomy’s laws but rather make use of constructive family violence within their narratives and instructions. Sirach is a book of wisdom much like Proverbs; its model for the violent disciplining of sons and daughters can be read as a method for avoiding the use of Deut. 21:18–21 and 22:13–21. First Maccabees, a biased history of the Hasmonean dynasty, draws on Deut. 13:6–11 and related stories of constructive family violence to justify the civil war of the Hasmoneans against Jews who collaborated with the Seleucid government. Jubilees, on the other hand, an example of rewritten Scripture, can be read as a denial of the constructive nature of family violence. These three texts are in tension with each other on the use of constructive family violence.

The tension between these texts remains present in the first and second centuries CE. Chapter 4 looks at the commentaries of Philo and the Tannaitic rabbis and Josephus’s rewritten biblical narratives and explanations of Jewish life. Each source supports some uses of constructive family violence while denying others. Their evaluations of Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21 reveal their discomfort with violence against family members; their choice to reinforce the use of violence in some situations indicates its importance to their constructions of Judaism.

Finally in chapter 5 we turn to the New Testament. There are few explicit references to Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21 or general constructive family violence in the texts of the New Testament, but the few that are present show two developments in the use of the traditions. Jesus warns the disciples that they will be subject to constructive family violence on account of their witness to him. These teachings in the Gospels provide a unique look at constructive violence from the perspective of its victims. The victims then adapt the practices of constructive family violence for their own use within the church. Once again, identity is key in understanding the presentation of constructive family violence in the texts of the early church.

The concern with understanding the constructive nature of family violence is present through the entire study, along with the question of how to read texts that demand violence against family members. Some basic conclusions on these
underlying issues are broached in the last chapter. This chapter also addresses
the implications of the biblical tradition of constructive family violence for
the biblical view of the individual, the family, and the community. The final
question to be raised is the significance of this study for modern readers. Do
the laws of Deuteronomy in the end have an abiding message?
Understanding Constructive Family Violence in Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy tells the story of the last days of the forty years spent in the wilderness before the people of Israel enter Canaan. Moses, who will not be going with them on the final journey, gathers his people together to exhort them once again to be obedient to the covenant. He calls on each of them, from the leaders of the people to their children to the aliens in their midst, to keep faith with their God (Deut. 29:10–13). The covenant therefore concerns the people as a whole and also every individual Israelite. In Deuteronomy, Moses is forming the group that stands before him into the united people of God.

The family has a central place in Deuteronomy. Families keep the covenant together. They weave the covenant into the life of the household. They teach the covenant to new Israelites. To some extent, families are responsible for embodying and passing on Israel’s identity as the people of God. To protect this responsibility, many laws in Deuteronomy address the proper functioning of the family, including three laws that demand the life of an errant family member. The law about a member of the household who tempts others within the household to worship idols (13:6–11 [7–12 MT]), the law about the disobedient son (21:18–21), and the law about the slandering husband and foolish daughter (22:13–21), as shocking as they are, support the book’s overarching goal of creating and inculcating the identity of God’s people.

In this chapter I examine these three texts within Deuteronomy and reread them in light of their echoes in the Hebrew Bible. The depiction of family
life in Deuteronomy provides one context for interpreting constructive family violence. This context receives support from Deuteronomy’s understanding of Israelite identity. For Deuteronomy, the centrality of the household in society and religion is not a good in itself, but serves the greater good of the covenant community, a state of affairs sustained by the use of the language of Deuteronomy across the Hebrew Bible. By reading Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; and 22:13–21 within Deuteronomy’s construction of Israel as the people of God, we can understand these laws as a distressing but also unsurprising outworking of the covenant.

Introducing Deuteronomy

In canonical context, Deuteronomy brings the story of the exodus and wilderness wanderings in the Torah to a close. The people of Israel stand on the banks of the Jordan River, looking across at Canaan, the goal of their long journey (1:5). The forty years of the exodus are at an end, and the era of the conquest is about to begin. This shift is accompanied by a change in leadership as Moses passes his authority to Joshua. The narration of Israel’s story in Deuteronomy, through a series of speeches that Moses gives the people, emphasizes the sense of transition. Moses reminds the people of their recent past and of the covenant, the way of life given to them by God. He looks ahead to instruct them in the methods of conquest and how to live in the land. He also warns them of the consequences of their eventual disobedience. The final chapters of the book stress the uncertainty of the future. Will Israel remember God’s law, given to them by Moses? Will the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob finally be fulfilled? Or as Moses foresees, will the people fail and therefore suffer the punishment of the covenant curses?

The people of Israel in Deuteronomy stand at the crossroads of identity. As they prepare to settle in God’s land, they have a choice to make. They can turn away from Yahweh, becoming the faithless idolaters that Moses fears they will eventually be, or they can be Israel, God’s faithful, obedient, blessed people (30:15–20). In the transitional place on the banks of the Jordan,

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1. This discussion focuses on the literary context and content of Deuteronomy. Historically, Deuteronomy is most often associated with the reforms carried out by Josiah, king of Judah, in 2 Kings 22–23 (Tigay 1996, xxi; Sparks 1998, 225; Wilson 2005, 122; etc.). Alternatively, G. Wenham (1985a, 16–19; 1985b, 15–17) argues for a much earlier date reflecting the narrative time established within Deuteronomy, and others (Blenkinsopp 1995, 50, 86; Seters 1997, 359–60; and Noll 2007, 344) suggest that Deuteronomy, though based on earlier traditions, was only completed in the postexilic Persian period.


between wilderness and promised land, the laws of Deuteronomy form the identity of the ideal Israel as a community of people who fear Yahweh, even as the retelling of Israel’s story with a focus on the people’s failings and the prediction of future failures implicitly establishes the antithesis of the ideal. In a sense, because of the liminal setting of the narrative, Deuteronomy is timeless: supported by the authority of Moses’s voice, this is the identity of Israel. The vividly depicted consequences of obedience (divine blessing) and disobedience (disruption and destruction) encourage the Israelites in Moses’s audience and, through them, the real-world audience to implement the book’s vision for the life of Yahweh’s covenant people.

The Family in Deuteronomy

At the heart of Deuteronomy’s vision for Israelite identity lies the family. Households are the epicenter of the covenant, the arenas in which Israel’s national identity is instituted and taught. The members of a household speak about the law and worship together. Their interrelationships are a living metaphor for the relationship between God the Father and the people of Israel, God’s children. In its historical particularity and theological significance, Deuteronomy’s Israelite family is the embodiment of Israel, the people of Yahweh.

The Family in the Covenant

In Deut. 29, Moses calls Israel into covenant with God. The heads of the tribes, the elders, the officials, and all the men of Israel with their wives, children, servants, and sojourners—entire households, in fact—are involved (vv. 9–10; cf. 31:12–13). Furthermore, the people present at that moment in Deuteronomy’s story represent their fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and also Israelites yet to be born (29:13–15). “The revealed things belong to us and to our children forever, to keep all the words of this law” (v. 29): Deuteronomy, the book containing the revelation of God through Moses, is an inheritance for all the people of Israel. The inclusion of all members of the household in the covenant ceremony gives every Israelite the responsibility of keeping the law, now (within the narrative) and forever.

The household’s involvement in the covenant with Yahweh in chapter 29 is perpetuated by the family’s responsibility for passing on the covenant to each new generation. Parents teach their children to fear Yahweh by telling them the

5. See also Miller 2008, 54–55.
stories of their salvation from Egypt and the giving of the law at Horeb (Deuteronomy’s name for Sinai; 4:9–10; 6:20–25). When the people keep the law as instructed by Moses, their children will learn to keep the law as well (6:1–2).7 According to the Shema in Deut. 6:4–9, the law should be part of the sights and sounds of a household: the words of the covenant are to be inscribed on the heart, taught to children, spoken of in the home and on the road, bound on the hand and forehead, and written on the doorposts of houses and gates (cf. 11:18–21).8 For Deuteronomy, the covenant is preserved by being woven into the daily life of the family, firmly placing Israel’s relationship with God at the very center of social existence.

**The Family in the Cult**

The household provides the context for regular and special cultic activities. The fourth commandment allows rest on the Sabbath for “you,” your son and daughter, your male and female servants, your ox and donkey, and the sojourner with you (5:14).9 When sacrifices are made to Yahweh, the head of the family, sons and daughters, servants, and resident Levites all share in celebrating and eating (12:12, 18; cf. “you and your household” in 14:26; 15:20). All these people and any additional strangers, widows, or orphans in the community also celebrate the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles together (16:11, 14). The various festivals commemorate Israel’s salvation from slavery by their faithful God (see 5:12–15; 16:1–8, 12): by participating in these celebrations, family members live out the central message of the covenant. As they rest, sacrifice, feast, and celebrate together, the family embodies “Israel.”

**The Family in Society**

Along with the list of offenders in Deut. 13:6 (7 MT), the lists of those who celebrate the Sabbath and the festivals together are indicative of the parameters of the family for Deuteronomy. These families are patrilocal (centered around the husband’s ancestral lineage and home). They are composed of a patriarch, his wife (or wives, in 21:15), children, and brothers. These families also include the slaves of the household and those in the community who are

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7. Cf. Targum Neofiti I Deut. 5:17–21, explaining that parents who keep the commandments teach their children not to sin.
8. Moerberly 1999, 143, suggests that writing texts at the transition points of social geography marks private and public space with allegiance to Yahweh (see also Römer 2000, 224).
9. An explicit reference to wives is strangely absent from this law (as well as the others discussed in this section). Wives are present in Deut. 29:10–11 and are implicitly addressed in the laws that directly concern their place in Israel, though, so they are likely included as an extension of the address (אַתָּה [āṭā], second-person singular, in 5:14; 12:18; 14:26; and 15:20; אַתֶּם [ātem], second-person plural, in 12:12). See further Frymer-Kensky 1996, 59; McConville 2002, 21, 26–29.
without family or land: widows, Levites, and sojourners. In Deuteronomy, identification with a family does not depend primarily on blood but on location. Those who share living space are family.

This shared space in ancient Israel would not have been expansive (more like downtown apartments than sprawling suburban homes). The traditional Israelite four-room (or pillared) house was built around a common courtyard; adjoining households were likely kin. These houses had no private bedrooms, possibly not even space reserved for single nuclear family units. Members of households worked, ate, and slept side by side, and local households interacted with each other in shared courtyards, public space, and fields. What modern Westerners think of as private life was public in ancient Israel. Family life in Deuteronomy reflects this sociocultural context.

In addition to the involvement of the household in enacting and teaching the covenant, Deuteronomy includes legislation to regulate the relationship of parents and their children (5:16; 27:16), identify proper marriage partners and divorce procedures (7:3–4; 24:1–4; etc.), control sexual relationships (22:22–30; 27:20–23), and guide inheritance practices (21:15–17). The obedient, faithful family is key to the covenant in Deuteronomy, and these laws establish and protect the structure and life of the ideal family to ensure the continuity of the covenant.

The Family, God, and Israel

The centrality of household life within ancient Israelite society and in the social and theological vision of Deuteronomy is reflected in and sustained by the family metaphor used of the relationship between God and Israel. Moses’s song of witness in Deut. 32 describes God as a father who has created (or purchased, קָנָה, qānā), made, and established Israel (v. 6). God bore and gave birth to Israel (like a mother, though this word is not used; v. 18). Yahweh found Israel in the wilderness and cared for the people as an eagle cares for its young, feeding them on the fat of the land (vv. 10–14).

The description of Yahweh’s parental care echoes the metaphor of God’s relationship with Israel as that of a man caring for his son in Deut. 1:29–31;
8:2–5. God’s people, however, fail to trust their divine parent to keep them safe, and their resultant fear and disobedience lead to their punishment (1:32–36). Moses’s song in chapter 32 likewise warns that Israel’s future rebellion will endanger the nation’s status as child of God, identifying them instead as faithless sons and daughters (vv. 5, 19–20).

Characterizing God as a parent who cares and provides for a child heightens the dramatic tension of Israel’s rebellion. This imagery also superimposes the significance of the divine relationship with the nation on the human family, thus providing a meta-incentive for keeping the proper balance of care, authority, and obedience within the household. The interdependence of family and nation is made clear in Deut. 32 when Moses instructs his audience, the children of God, to ask their fathers and elders to tell the story of Israel (v. 7), reminds them that their God is the God of their fathers (v. 17), and warns them that disobeying their divine parent will bring suffering to all the members of the household, young and old (v. 25). As the reflection of God’s relationship with Israel in human society, the family will together suffer the curses consequent upon breaking the covenant (graphically portrayed in Deut. 28:15–68).

**The Family as Protector of the Covenant**

In Deuteronomy, the family has a key place in the life of Israel. The family is an agent of the covenant, and so also of Israelite identity. Families teach, preserve, and enact the covenant together, and they embody the symbolic relationship of God as parent with Israel as child. Because of these factors, families are in part responsible for guarding against infractions of the covenant, a serious responsibility in recognition of the punishments that follow disobedience: when the family of God fails, Israelite families suffer the consequences.

Several measures proposed in Deuteronomy protect the ideal community from internal disruption. The threat of divine punishment provides a stark introduction and conclusion for the book (chaps. 1–4, 27–28, 32), and fines, corporal punishment, and execution are consequent upon the transgression of various laws (as in 17:5, 12; 22:18–19; and 25:2–3). While priests and Levites, judges, and elders often take a leading role in judging and determining restitution for wrongdoing (17:8–13; 21:1–9; etc.), the community as a whole is sometimes involved in carrying out sentences. In this general context of the judgment of covenantal transgressions, the laws of Deut. 13:6–11; 21:18–21; 14: See further Strawn 2008, 118–34. Did the family household gain its central position in the covenant and Israelite society because God’s relationship with Israel was described with family language, or was God’s relationship with Israel described with family language because of the central place of the family in society and covenant? It is a chicken-and-egg question; King and Stager (2001, 4–5) and Schloen (2001, 1, 45–46) argue that the two moves are so interdependent as to be impossible to separate.
and 22:13–21 give the family power to punish serious transgressions committed by the members of the household with death.

In light of Deuteronomy’s emphasis on the significance of Israelite family life, these three laws demanding the accusation of family members and acts of violence against them can seem discordant. However, for the same reason they are also comprehensible. The close living situations and companionship of the household give family members privileged information concerning the behavior of each member of the household. The ancient Israelite family was nearly always together. No single member could easily hide a particular infraction against the covenant, and other family members would therefore be in the position to accuse the individual of wrongdoing (whether they would want to make such an accusation, knowing the potential consequences, is another matter). Deuteronomy’s use of the family as agent of the covenant increases the household’s responsibility for maintaining the purity of the covenant for the common good. In recognition of the primary importance of the family in teaching, keeping, and guarding Israel’s identity, Deuteronomy’s laws ordaining violence against family members are both unthinkable and only to be expected.

Deuteronomy 13:6–12: Executing the Idolater

According to Deuteronomy, Yahweh is a just, impartial, righteous, loving God (e.g., 10:17–18). Yahweh is also a jealous God who demands absolute loyalty from the people who have been saved from slavery (4:20, 24; 5:9; 10:20–21; etc.). The foundation of Israelite identity is devotion to Yahweh alone. God saves the people from Egypt precisely in order for them to be a holy people in a holy land, reflecting God’s own holiness (7:6; 26:19; 28:9; etc.). Within this construction of identity, idolaters, be they Canaanites or errant descendants of Abraham, are automatically identified as outsiders simply because they do not fear Israel’s God.15 Idolatry becomes the besetting sin of Israel.

The specter of idolatry hovering over the narratives, laws, and covenant curses of Deuteronomy issues forth from the narrative setting. As Israel stands on the edge of the Jordan, the people are nearing contact with the idols of the nations of the land. The fear of their failure in the face of temptation undergirds the warnings against idolatry throughout the book. The first laws of the Decalogue prohibit following gods other than Yahweh and making or worshiping idols (5:6–10). To motivate obedience, Moses reminds his audience of their idolatrous indiscretions at Baal of Peor and Horeb and their subsequent punishment (4:3; 9:12). To prevent further opportunities to learn idolatry from pagans, he instructs them to completely

destroy the peoples of Canaan and their cultic sites, avoiding contact with either (7:1–6; 12:2–3, 29–31). And he warns that, despite these measures, their children, those who should learn the covenant from them, will worship false gods, and as a result the nation will suffer the wrath of God (4:25–28; 29:14–28; 31:16–18).

Deuteronomy is, as C. J. H. Wright has said, “uncompromisingly, ruthlessly monotheistic.” To maintain the holiness of God’s people, all things abhorrent, including idols and their worshipers, must be eradicated from the land. By divine command, the idolatrous Canaanites are to be completely and utterly destroyed, and if God’s people worship the gods of the nations, they will be treated as these nations are (as the reversals of the blessings and curses in chap. 28 suggest). This is the danger that Moses in Deuteronomy tries to avert through instructing the people in the covenant, remembering the story of Israel’s relationship with Yahweh, commanding the annihilation of the idolatrous Canaanites, and legislating the prevention and punishment of idolatry.

According to the absolutes of Deuteronomy, the only option for idolatrous Canaanites and Israelite lawbreakers is destruction. Their impurity must be purged from among the holy people (cf. 13:5 [6 MT]; 17:7; 19:19; etc.), and when the entire people become abhorrent instead of holy, they must be purged from the holy land (11:16–17; 28:20, 63). The rhetoric of destruction surrounding the disobedience of Israel, however, is tempered by a hope of future forgiveness (4:25–31; 30:1–10; 32:36, 43; etc.). Individuals are clearly connected with the nation in Deuteronomy; individual offenders are punished for the sake of the nation. If the inverse holds true, the possibility that individual offenders may be forgiven, as the nation is, must likewise be considered. The grace of eventual forgiveness for repentant idolaters running through Deuteronomy provides a key, if contrary, context for interpreting the violent punishment of idolatry within the family in chapter 13.

**Deuteronomy 13**

The household’s joint participation in the cult of Yahweh is accompanied by the family’s presence in Deuteronomy’s anti-idolatry legislation. Since the family sacrifices and celebrates together, it also has a lead role in the fight against the worship of foreign gods in Israel. Chapter 13 addresses three situations in which missionaries of idolatry arise within Israel itself, first as false prophets or dreamers; second, within the household; and third, as “children

of Belial” who mislead an entire city. Their words and actions show that these idolaters are foreigners masquerading as Israelites. In each situation, the response of true Israelites should be violent and total. Those who counsel rebellion against Yahweh must be utterly destroyed lest the nation as a whole be led astray and in turn suffer divine punishment.

The NRSV translates the Hebrew word סָרָה (sārâ) in Deut. 13:5 (6 MT) as “treason.” The traitors in this chapter are national enemies by virtue of tempting others to rebel against Yahweh by worshiping idols. The treason of this act is emphasized by the succinct definition of an Israelite given in verses 3–4 (4–5): being an Israelite means loving God with all one’s being (heart and soul, לֶבַב [lēbab] and נֶפֶשׁ [nepes]; cf. 4:29; 6:5; 11:13; etc.). This all-encompassing love is expressed in obedience. The lover of God walks after God, fears God, keeps God’s commands, listens to God, serves God, and clings to God (see also 10:12; 26:16–17). God saved the people from Egypt (13:5 [6]), and in response they owe God their fealty.19 Idolatry and the temptation to idolatry are high treason, and those who commit these acts of unfaithfulness are the enemies of God’s people.20

Deuteronomy 13:1–5, 12–18 (2–6, 13–19)

The first act of treason described in Deut. 13 involves prophets and dreamers. Not all prophets are true prophets of Yahweh. Deuteronomy 18:20–22 warns of just such a presumptuous person who only pretends to speak in Yahweh’s name. Deuteronomy 13:1–5 (2–6 MT) is concerned with another kind of false prophecy. If prophets or dreamers teach Israelites to serve other gods, even if the message is supported by signs, they are a test from Yahweh to determine if the people will be obedient (vv. 1–3; cf. 8:2). The people must not listen to them but must kill them. In this way, the evil in Israel’s midst—the foreigners among them—will be uprooted (13:5).

The third section of Deut. 13 broadens the scope of the idolatry to include an entire city (vv. 12–18 [13–19 MT]). If the Israelites learn that “children of Belial” have seduced a city in the land to follow other gods, the report

18. On treason in Deut. 13, see esp. R. Barrett 2009, chap. 5.
20. We can profitably compare Deut. 13 with the seventh century BCE Neo-Assyrian Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon, which requires the vassals of the king of Assyria to be loyal to, love, and serve his heir (lines 1–10, 266–68, 283–301, 385–96). Lines 108–22 warn of the possibility of rebellion against the heir arising from his family, the vassals and their families, prophets, ecstatics, dream interpreters, and others. In lines 130–46, if anyone “instigates” the vassal to rebel, they should report the rebellion, seize and kill the rebels, and “eradicate their name and descendants from the country” (“The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,” trans. D. J. Wiseman [ANET 535–36]). Comparing this treaty with Deut. 13 emphasizes the problem there as treason against Yahweh, king of Israel (cf. Dion 1991, 197–204; Levinson 1995, 35–40, 58–60; Tigay 1996, 128; R. Barrett 2009, 146–50).
must be investigated. If it is true, then all living creatures in the city—men, women, and animals—must be killed. The city should be burned. The city, its inhabitants, and their material possessions are put under the ban (הֶרֶם, ḥerem), utterly destroyed because the city and everything in it belong to Yahweh. This treatment resembles the annihilation of the Canaanites and their cultic objects, carried out in part to prevent the potential corruption of Israel’s worship through proximity to idolatrous practices (7:2–5, 23–26; 12:3). In Deut. 13:12–18, Israelites are clearly turned away from pure devotion to Yahweh, and the apostate city faces the destruction enacted upon Canaanite idolaters. Perhaps more important, the city that should be holy to Yahweh has become abominable on account of its idolatry (cf. תועבַּה, tōʿēbâ, in v. 14 [15]). Just as the land is to be cleared of the abhorrent idolatrous practices of the Canaanites in order for God and God’s people to take possession, so also this nominally Israelite city must be destroyed to maintain the holiness of the land.

The judicial process outlined in Deut. 13:12–18 resembles the investigation of charges that an Israelite serves other gods in 17:2–7. In that law, on the evidence of two or three witnesses, the guilty person is taken out to the city gate and stoned to death, an act that, like the death of the prophet in Deut. 13:5 (6), rids Israel of evil. As in chapter 13, the idolater of chapter 17 can be identified as an outsider, doing what Moses has not commanded (17:3). The distinction between the idolaters of chapters 13 and 17 lies in their influence. The idolater of chapter 17 apparently commits idolatry alone; the attempt to preach idolatry to other Israelites in chapter 13 makes the prophet or dreamer and the children of Belial all the more dangerous.

The outsiders in Israel’s midst in Deut. 13:1–5 (2–6), 12–18 (13–19) are indistinct people, a faceless prophet, or even more impersonally, a nameless city full of nameless foreigners. The central section of chapter 13, however, identifies the other as someone “you” know, someone you are very close to: your brother, your child, your wife, your best friend. In the Hebrew Bible, these relationships have their own sanctity. They should not be broken; when they are broken, the resulting chaos depicts the worst that can happen in life.

21. The children of Belial (בְּנֵי בְּלִי־עַל, “worthless” people (NASB) or “scoundrels” (NRSV), are of Israelite descent, though they are clearly set in opposition to the ideal Israelites as the children of God. They can be compared to the sons of Eli, children of Belial who disrupt the proper functioning of Yahweh’s cult (1 Sam. 2:12–17, 22–36).


23. Weinfeld (1983, 92n2) suggests that Deut. 17:2–7 originally preceded 13:1 (2); Levinson 1997, 118, identifies Deut. 17:2–7 as a late revision of chap. 13. Whether one of these theories is correct or not, the points of dissimilarity between the two passages noted by Levinson indicate that the two texts are not about the same thing at all (see esp. Levinson 1997, 108; cf. Dion 1991, 162).
Deuteronomy 13:6–11 (7–12)

6 If your brother, the son of your mother,24 or your son, or your daughter, or the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is like your own self, urges you secretly, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods,”25 gods whom you and your ancestors have not known,

7 gods from the nations surrounding you,26 the nations near you or the nations far from you, from one end of the earth to the other,

8 do not give in to her.27 Do not listen to him. Do not let your eye pity her. Do not spare and do not conceal him.

9 Rather, you will indeed kill her.28 Your hand should be against him first to kill him,29 and the hand of all the people after.

10 You will stone30 her with stones until she dies, for he sought to turn you away from Yahweh, your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery.

24. Several versions read “son of your father or your mother” (4Q30 22–23, LXX, and Syriac; see also Sipre Deut. 87 and Tg. Ps.-J. Deut. 13:7). The evidence for the variant is strong. If the longer description of the brother is accepted, the text would emphasize that all brothers are included in the law.

25. The quotation of the tempter’s words may extend through verse 8. Clearly, however, the description of the gods is given from the perspective of a faithful worshiper of Yahweh, not an idolater (see Bartor 2007, 246–47). The reader is not given the opportunity to interpret the invitation positively.

26. Most pronouns and pronominal suffixes in these verses are second-person masculine singular, but “the nations surrounding you” takes a second-person masculine-plural suffix, perhaps in order to refer to all Israel. The shift from second-person masculine singular to plural is common in Deuteronomy (see McConville 2002, 27–35).

27. The pronouns and suffixes referring to the tempter in verses 7–9 (8–10) are all third-person masculine singular. I have alternated masculine- and feminine-singular pronouns in my translation to preserve the multiplicity of the possible referents identified in verse 7 in their individual identities.

28. In 13:9 (10) the LXX reads, “You will indeed report about him,” ἀναγγέλλων ἀναγγελεῖς περὶ αὐτοῦ (anangelleōn anangleis peri autou; reading παγάδ, “to announce” for ἅραγ, “to kill”), bringing this law into line with Deut. 17:4–5 (see also m. Sanh. 7:10). Reporting the attempted idolatry before carrying out the sentence makes sense judicially and also matches the order of events in 13:8 (9) and 14 (15). On the other hand, immediate execution emphasizes the judgment pronounced in verse 9 (10). Philo understands the announcement in the LXX to be an announcement of an execution, not a trial (Spec. Laws 1.315). See further Dion 1991, 154; Levinson 1995, 40–54; Aejmelaeus 1996, 20.

29. To kill here is first ἅραγ (hārag) and then ἀπό (apō). When used together, these words are interchangeable, referring to accidental killing, willful murder, and punitive execution (see, e.g., Exod. 21:14; Lev. 20:15–16; Josh. 10:11).

30. The verb is second-person masculine singular in the MT, but plural in the Syriac and Targumim; in the LXX, it is third-person plural.
11 And all Israel will hear and fear, so that they will not again do anything like this evil thing in your midst.31

The introduction of this section of Deut. 13 sets the scene with the detailed identification of some of the parties involved. The language of verse 6 emphasizes the intimacy of the addressee’s connection with the one who encourages the worship of other gods.32 It is your full brother, son of your father and your mother, a person with whom you have an especially close bond (as in Gen. 43:29; Judg. 8:19).33 It is your own child, either your son or your daughter. The tempter may be the wife you hold in your arms, a description that also appears in the horror of husband and wife turning against each other in the covenant curses of Deut. 28:54–56 (cf. Mic. 7:5). Finally, the tempter may be the friend who is like your own self. This person can be seen as part of the family (Ps. 35:14; Prov. 17:17), sometimes even as better and closer than a family member (Prov. 18:24; 27:10). Such a friend deserves the utmost loyalty (2 Sam. 16:17).

The relationships highlighted in Deut. 13:6 are privileged. They are the most intimate relationships a man would have, as the extended descriptions of the brother, wife, and friend indicate. These are the people with whom a man tells the stories of the ancestors, recites the covenant, keeps the festivals, and embodies Israel. In verse 7, however, these closest relationships are redefined as nonexistent: your brother, your wife, your child, and your friend are just like the mass of nations that are not Israel. The marker of identity here is worship. The nations that surround Israel worship gods of wood or stone or heavenly host (4:19; 28:36), gods that neither the addressee of Deut. 13:6–7 (7–8) nor his ancestors ever knew (cf. 13:2, 13; 32:17), and they worship in ways abhorrent to Yahweh (12:31; 18:9–12; 20:18). When any one of Yahweh’s people turns aside to follow other gods, that Israelite becomes like the other nations, and Israel as a whole may be infected with the evil (13:11) and in consequence suffer loss of identity and divine punishment. Once again, idolatroty endangers Israel.

The third party involved in Deut. 13:6–11 is the addressee, a man with wife and child. Since no parents are mentioned, it is possible this man’s father has died, and he has become the patriarch of the household. As the head of a household, he would have a particular responsibility to ensure that the members of the family remain true to the covenant.34 The patriarchal focus could indicate that the patriarch has absolute power over his household. He is empowered to execute them without trial, but they have no power over him:

31. The pronominal suffix is second-person masculine singular in MT but plural in the majority of LXX manuscripts, and also in the Syriac and Tg. Ps.-J. Cf. Deut. 13:5 (6); 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; etc.
34. Compare Dion 1991, 173.
the patriarch’s own actions are checked only by his brother or dear friend. A suspicious reading would highlight the power structures that subject the members of the household to patriarchal control, which has no bounds.35

Perhaps, though, the text need not be read so suspiciously. The first section of Deut. 13, after all, undermines the power of a prophet or dreamer as an authority in the community. This limitation of power structures provides an important context for reading verses 6 to 11. Furthermore, as noted above, ancient Israelite living conditions entailed nearly continual family togetherness. The accountability engendered by working and living in the presence of others would necessarily control the patriarch and limit his opportunities to engage in and proselytize for secret idol worship as much as those of the rest of the family. Since these family members can keep other laws, they may also be able to kill the patriarch, even if that contingency is not made explicit.36 The “secret” nature of the temptation, finally, would naturally allow for letting the situation slide: who would ever know? Rather than the danger of patriarchal abuse of this law, the question may instead concern its “enforceability,” to borrow from Chaya Halberstam. For Halberstam, a law like this, especially in light of the secrecy of the invitation, is not about power but about faithfulness.37 Deuteronomy 13:6–11 calls Israelites to be faithful to God by guarding the covenant even when no one would know that it has been broken.

The list of people and the descriptions of the other gods and nations in Deut. 13:6–7 provide a gentle, slow introduction to the law, contrasting sharply with the staccato clip of 13:8. The quick succession of prohibitions in this verse resembles the second half of the Decalogue. In Deut. 7, another series of do-nots calls on the conquering Israelites to destroy the Canaanites, not making a covenant with them, showing them mercy, intermarrying with them, or serving their gods (vv. 2–3, 16). Like the prohibitions in chapter 7, Deut. 13:8 protects Israel from compromising with foreign idolatry. Deuteronomy 7, however, concerns those who are outsiders by virtue of birth, ethnicity, and geography as well as cult. Chapter 13 commands similar behavior toward those who should be insiders. The intensely personal nature of the relationships listed in verse 6 increases the dramatic and emotive tension of prohibitions in verse 8: do not listen to your brother; show no mercy or pity to your child; make no attempt to save your wife.

35. It is sometimes argued that Deuteronomy limits patriarchal power (so Clements 1989, 65; Steinberg 1991, 163–65; Stulman 1992, 55, 57, 60–61; Dion 1993, 73–74, 81; see further on Deut. 21:18–21 and 22:20–21 below). The demand that a patriarch initiate the execution of a member of the household without trial in Deut. 13:6–11 (7–12) challenges this thesis.

36. Whether they would take this opportunity or not is another question. Because the life of the household depends at least to some extent on the presence and social power of the patriarch, perhaps other members of the household would be reluctant to accuse the patriarch of wrongdoing.

The prohibition of listening or obeying echoes Deut. 13:3, protecting Israelites from the dangerous power of a tempter’s words. The remaining three prohibitions in 13:8 would shock the social sensibilities of the ancient reader (a point highlighted in Sipre Deut. 89). First, the offender must not be pitied nor spared (cf. 7:16; 19:13, 21; 25:12). “To pity” (חוס, ḥûs), and “to spare” (חمال, ħāmal), are often found together in the Hebrew Bible, and their associated contexts provide an indication of normal Israelite expectations of pity. David spares Mephibosheth because of an oath made to Jonathan, his good friend (2 Sam. 21:7). The Medes will show no mercy on young men or infants nor pity children (Isa. 13:18). In Mal. 3:17, God promises to spare the faithful just as a father spares the son who serves him. In other words, the relationships highlighted in Deut. 13:6 would, in normal circumstances, be the proper arena for pity and mercy. The reversal of expectations here reflects the heinousness of the sin of idolatry in Deuteronomy.38 Deuteronomy 13:6–11 involves God’s faithful people in the merciless destruction of the idolatrous children of Israel, demanding that even nearest kin join in punishing false worship.

The final clause of Deut. 13:8 (9) prohibits covering (כסה, kāsâ), the offender. Covering can mean keeping a secret or concealing a sin, as in Ps. 32:5; Job 31:33; Prov. 11:13; 17:9. Readers often take the meaning in Deut. 13:8 to be this: if someone secretly entices you to worship other gods, do not let the matter remain secret.39 “Covering” could also be interpreted as forgiveness, as when God covers a sin (Ps. 85:2 [3]; Neh. 4:5 [3:37]).40 Hiding the sin and forgiving the sin are perhaps not so very different. For Deut. 13:8, those who encourage an Israelite to worship other gods are beyond the hope of forgiveness. Their sin must not be hidden: it must be made public by the very act of their execution by stoning.

The verbal construct in verse 9 (10), “You will indeed kill him” (ורוג תחרגנ, hārōg tahargennû) suggests the necessity and intensity of the action. Similar grammatical constructions in Deut. 7:2; 12:2; and 20:17 indicate the completeness of destruction (cf. 13:15). “You will indeed kill him” in 13:9 completes the picture of mercilessness begun in verse 8, and this mercilessness is emphasized again by the insistence that the first stone should come from the person—the husband, father, brother, or dear friend—tempted to idolatry. The rest of the people then join in. The close parallel with Deut. 17:7 identifies the protagonist of Deut. 13:6–10 as a witness against the offender.41 The first stone confirms the accusation.42

38. Compare God’s merciless punishment of idolatry in Ezek. 5:11; 9:5, 10; Jer. 13:14; 21:7; see also R. Barrett 2009, 140.
39. So most translations and Sipre Deut. 89; C. Wright 1996, 175; Biddle 2003, 224.
40. Levinson 1996, 603–18, argues vigorously for this reading of Deut. 13:8 (9).
41. A major difference between the two laws is the absence of the formal investigation and trial in Deut. 13 (see above, n. 28). The lack of a public trial in chap. 13 may be because the secrecy of enticement precludes formal investigation.
42. Girard (2001, 56–59) claims that the first stone is the hardest to throw (cf. John 8:7–9), so this demand in Deuteronomy would limit and control violence. The emphasis on the nearness of the relationship and the shock of violence within such a relationship in Deut. 13:6–11 (7–12)