

Deuteronomy 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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In Exodus chapter 23 verses 15 to 17 This material also comes under the Sabbath principle then. The Sabbath is refracted into the larger cycle of feasts. So it's connected with the Sabbath year, the year of Jubilee, it's connected with the weekly Sabbath, and it's also connected with the annual feasts that come year upon year.

The Passover and the Passover and the Passover is a feast of the Sabbath.

[5 : 53] The Sabbath is a feast of the Sabbath, the Sabbath is a feast of the Sabbath, and it's called the Sabbath.

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■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■■ And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the firstfruits as a wave offering before the Lord, with two lambs.

They shall be holy to the Lord for the priest. And you shall make a proclamation on the same day. You shall hold a holy convocation. You shall not do any ordinary work. It is a statute forever in all your dwelling places throughout your generations.

And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge. Nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner.

[8 : 26] I am the Lord your God. The emphasis in Leviticus then is more upon the sacrifices.

Whereas within the context of Deuteronomy, the emphasis is upon the rejoicing in the celebratory feast in the presence of the Lord.

On these feasts, they would have to present themselves to the Lord. They would not be empty-handed. They would come before the presence of the Lord to do homage to him. Every Israelite male was expected to go to the central sanctuary each year at these three festivals.

At the very least, many of them would presumably go up on multiple other occasions. The duration of the time of these feasts varied. So for the Passover, they only had to be there for one day.

And then they could travel back and engage in the harvest. In these feasts, they would bring the firstfruits of their crop. They'd also bring the firstborn of their animals to sacrifice that they couldn't sacrifice when they were living at a distance from the central sanctuary.

If having a Sabbath every week challenges you to step outside of the normal rhythm of time and to stand outside of it and to look at it and to appreciate the reality of time in a different way, the celebration of these feasts would do things like that on a grander scale.

[9 : 34] These feasts, connected with the agricultural patterns but also with the events of redemptive history, would encourage them to reflect upon and to appreciate time on a different level, and to relate this time in its variegated character to the Lord.

On one level, this would be the seasonal pattern. Every agricultural year, they'd be relating the key events of the year to the Lord, in expectation of rain, in thanksgiving for the food that he has provided in the harvest.

And then they would also be thinking about the events of redemptive history, looking back to the Exodus and what happened in the deliverance of the people from Egypt. Whether they were thinking about God's provision for them season by season, or thinking about God's provision for them in the historical challenges that face them in the future, these feasts would direct their attention to the Lord.

And as feasts, there were times of rest and celebration. They would stand back from all of their work and rest in their labours, in the fruit of what they had created. In this way, they would share in the Lord's Sabbath.

For them, this Sabbath was connected with redemptive history. It was the Sabbath of God bringing his people into the land so that they might have rest and peace within it. It was also the Sabbath of their labours, as they do the work of the agricultural year, they can rest and celebrate and enjoy the fruit of the produce of the land.

[10 : 55] It's also a time of communion, communion with God and communion with others. All the males of the people gathering at this time would create a sense of commonality, that they are one people under God, they all belong to the Lord, he has delivered them all, and now they can rejoice together.

Some people seem to have the mistaken notion that the life of Israel in its worship was glum and joyless. But yet, there is only one day in which they are called to fast, in connection with the Day of Atonement.

And all the other days are feast days. They are supposed to celebrate, to know joy, to eat bountifully. Indeed, over the course of the year, they are probably putting aside enough food and resources for about a month's worth of festivals.

And these festivals, as extensions of the Sabbath principle, were signs of the covenant. They were ways in which God confirmed his love and his grace and his goodness to his people, not just in the past, in their history, but in the present and for the future.

From this, we move into a new section, concerned with judges and officers, priests, kings, Levites and prophets. These are all authority figures. And honouring father and mother, the fifth commandment is about submitting to authority.

[12 : 05] It's the principle that gathers all these things together at this point. We've moved then from the fourth commandment to the fifth commandment. The people are charged to appoint judges and officers.

And these figures do not seem to be so much governors as judiciary. Presumably Israel had their elders and chiefs as rulers. But they were bound to appoint judges.

Israel's government, as envisaged in Deuteronomy, is one in which the power of the executive and sovereignty is downplayed. And the task of judgment is elevated. Judgment must be an expression of truth and goodness.

It must be righteous judgment, not just an expression of the autonomous will of the sovereign. And the emphasis upon judgment and authorities here are authorities that are very clearly under God.

These are authorities who are submitted to the law, who are subject to the law, and who must enact and establish and enforce the law in the life of Israel. Like fathers and mothers, these authorities are authorities under God's authority.

[13 : 08] Ultimately, the great authority is God's alone. There must be no perversion of justice. Everyone must be given justice, no matter how poor, no matter how rich. There must be no partiality, no bribes.

Leviticus chapter 19 verse 15 At this point, we have a very surprising shift.

Following these laws concerning justice and judges and officials, we have law about asherah trees and pillars. And it seems very much out of place here. We might be led to scratch our heads and wonder why God inspired Moses to put this material at this particular point.

However, when we see things that seem to be out of place, we should usually pause over them and consider reasons why they may not actually be out of place at all. Before we do that though, let's first consider why this seems to be out of place.

The surrounding material is about structures of judgment and justice in Israel and authority figures. And the material here is about false worship. It seems like it might belong back in chapters 12 and 13, concerned with the second commandment, if we believe that that pattern holds.

[14 : 25] So what is it doing here? This isn't the only time in the book of Deuteronomy that we have such material that seems to be out of place. But yet, often when we look more closely, we'll find that although material might have been placed elsewhere, where it is invites a certain sort of reflection that can yield insight.

The effect of putting it here is to juxtapose the practice of worship with the practice of justice, showing that the two are connected. Adulterated justice and adulterated worship are similar, and the Lord abhors them both.

It also has the effect of highlighting that the Lord is our real father, and that he must be honoured. The forms of worship that are prohibited within these verses and the next verse in chapter 17 are willful forms of worship that actually dishonour God.

Whether you're setting up an asherah tree, or a pillar, or you're offering a blemished lamb, these are all ways in which people are purporting to be serving God, but actually adulterating their worship.

And ultimately, the result is that they dishonour God. Placed here, it invites us to consider the parallel between the justice that the Lord requires, according to very strict and clear guidelines, and the worship that he requires.

[15 : 41] These things are not dissimilar, and a society that takes the one seriously will usually take the other one seriously too. A question to consider.

What are some of the ways in which scripture presents the task of judgement as the central task of government?