

Deuteronomy 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 12 These are the statutes and rules that you shall be careful to do in the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess, all the days that you live on the earth.

You shall surely destroy all the places where the nations whom you shall dispossess serve their gods, on the high mountains and on the hills and under every green tree. You shall tear down their altars and dash in pieces their pillars and burn their Asherim with fire. You shall chop down the carved images of their gods and destroy their name out of that place. You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way, but you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go and there you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your free will offerings and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock. And there you shall eat before the Lord your God and you shall rejoice, you and your households, in all that you undertake, in which the Lord your God has blessed you. You shall not do according to all that we are doing here today, everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes. For you have not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance that the Lord your God is giving you. But when you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the Lord your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you rest from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety, then to the place that the Lord your God will choose, to make his name dwell there, there you shall bring all that I command you, your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, and all your finest vow offerings that you vow to the Lord. And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your sons and your daughters, your male servants and your female servants, and the Levite that is within your towns, since he has no portion or inheritance with you. Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place that you see, but at the place that the Lord will choose in one of your tribes, there you shall offer your burnt offerings, and there you shall do all that I am commanding you.

However, you may slaughter and eat meat within any of your towns, as much as you desire, according to the blessing of the Lord your God that he has given you. The unclean and the clean may eat of it, as of the gazelle and as of the deer. Only you shall not eat the blood, you shall pour it out on the earth like water. You may not eat within your towns the tithe of your grain, or of your wine, or of your oil, or the firstborn of your herd, or of your flock, or any of your vow offerings that you vow, or your freewill offerings, or the contribution that you present, but you shall eat them before the Lord your God in the place that the Lord your God will choose, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, and the Levite who is within your towns.

And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God in all that you undertake. Take care that you do not neglect the Levite as long as you live in your land. When the Lord your God enlarges your territory, as he has promised you, and you say, I will eat meat because you crave meat, you may eat meat whenever you desire. If the place that the Lord your God will choose to put his name there is too far from you, then you may kill any of your herd or your flock which the Lord has given you, as I have commanded you, and you may eat within your towns whatever you desire. Just as the gazelle or the deer is eaten, so you may eat of it. The unclean and the clean alike may eat of it. Only be sure that you do not eat the blood, for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the flesh.

You shall not eat it, you shall pour it out on the earth like water. You shall not eat it, that all may go well with you and with your children after you, when you do what is right in the sight of the Lord. But the holy things that are due from you, and your vow offerings you shall take, and you shall go to the place that the Lord will choose, and offer your burnt offerings, the flesh and the blood, on the altar of the Lord your God. The blood of your sacrifices shall be poured out on the altar of the Lord your God, but the flesh you may eat. Be careful to obey all these words that I command you, that it may go well with you, and with your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God.

[4 : 18] When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations whom you go in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? That I also may do the same. You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way. For every abominable thing that the Lord hates, they have done for their gods. For they even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods. Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it, or take from it.

The book of Deuteronomy lays out the law given at Sinai once again, before Israel enters into the land. Chapter 5 contains the Ten Commandments, and the chapters that follow can be read as a general unpacking of those core commandments, with passages broadly devoted to each commandment in sequence from the first to the tenth. Chapters 6 to 11 unpack the first commandment, the core commandment, the truth that lies at the very heart of the covenant, the uniqueness of the Lord and his fundamental exclusive claim upon his people. In chapter 12, however, we move into exploration of the second commandment, the prohibition on idolatry and false worship. In chapters 12 to 13, there is discussion of true and false forms of worship and religious mediation, and the need to root out all false forms. A key concern is that the Israelites don't adopt the religious practices of the Canaanites that they're coming in to dispossess. Israel must destroy the many sacrificial sites of the Canaanites, and establish just one in their place. The restriction of the site of sacrificial worship to a single location is the main subject of this chapter, and perhaps it may be a bit surprising to us, but this restriction would have very far-reaching consequences. One of the temptations that the Israelites would have faced coming into the land would be that of religious syncretism, maintaining the pagan worship sites and many of their practices, but tweaking and mixing them with the worship of the Lord. The pagan sites of worship seem to have been, for the most part, outdoor sanctuaries associated with geographical landmarks, trees or tops of hills or mountains, and these sites would often be named after the pagan deities that were worshipped there. Israel, however, is supposed to destroy these sites completely, and to obliterate their names, presumably by changing the name of the place that has been named after the pagan deity. Israel, for its part, must worship only at one location, where the Lord determines to establish his name. The Lord establishes his name in a specific spot. The Lord dwells there, but only after a kind, not in the fuller literal sense. There seems to be something of a resistance to immunization of God within this chapter, a containing of God within space, the way in which God can be located, pinpointed on a map. That's not the type of God that Israel is supposed to worship.

The Lord does dwell in the midst of his people, and in a specific location, but he places his name there, and that placing of his name is a sign of ownership and possession, but it might also warn against the idea that the Lord is contained in buildings made with hands. Later in the history of Israel, we see that they often failed on these specific points. They often established false worship, the sort of worship of pagan shrines or high places. Sometimes these had a syncretistic flavour, ostensibly dedicated to the worship of the Lord, but worshipping the Lord after a pagan manner.

On other occasions, however, they were simply the worship of idols and false gods. In 2 Kings chapter 17 verses 9 to 11, we have an example of this failure of Israel.

And the sons of Israel did things secretly which were not right against the Lord their God. Moreover, they built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city. And they set for themselves sacred pillars and asherim on every high hill and under every green tree. And there they burned incense on all the high places as the nations did, which the Lord had carried away to exile before them. And they did evil things, provoking the Lord. Why would the site of worship be limited to a single location only? Private altars, perhaps, can be a temptation to a domesticated God, a God who's placed at our own disposal. Perhaps a territorial God tied to various locations, rather than the one creator God over and above all. Territorial deities are a feature of polytheism. Often these would be deities with a specific portfolio. A God of the sea, or a God of this particular river, or a God of these particular mountains, whatever it is. And worshipers can bargain with these gods. Israel's centralised worship and single site of sacrificial worship was connected to their firm monotheism. There was one God, and worship must be unified. The worship of polytheism was typically characterised by varying customs and rituals that were changed from place to place, each shrine projecting a God suited to the needs of the worshippers in that specific location. All of Israel's sacrifices, however, have to be brought to the central sanctuary, and presumably this would mostly occur during the pilgrimage festivals. This chapter presents feasting before the Lord as a key feature of Israel's worship. It's easy to call out to the Lord in our distress. That's the time when we think about the Lord. It's something different to rejoice in the Lord's presence, to enjoy his gifts before him. And celebratory meals are a very important part of the religious worship presented by Deuteronomy.

[10:04] This sort of festal worship is a worship that will protect Israel from forgetting the Lord in times of prosperity. It's worship that guards against decadence. And in these times of festivity, it's important for them to include the Levite. Within every single one of their locations, there are Levites who are dependent upon them, who do not have the same stake in the land as they do. Rather, they are God's servants.

And the attitude of the Israelites towards God's servants is expressive of their attitude towards God himself. If they honour the Lord, they will honour his servants. And the Levites, because of their dependence upon the charity and the hospitality and the tithes of the people of Israel, are associated with the poor of the land. The change to the sanctuary here is a movement from a situation that verse 8 describes as everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, to one of everyone doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God, in verse 28. Everyone doing what is right in their own eyes is not presented as a positive thing. We have that as a refrain within the book of Judges. There's no king in the land. There's no one to unify the land under a single principle of behaviour. And so everyone does what is right in their own eyes. Once Israel is securely established in the land, the current situation, where they seem to be sacrificing in various locations, seemingly against the instructions of Leviticus chapter 17 verses 1 to 9, that would change. Perhaps the situation had become one of the

Israelites being semi-settled in the Transjordanian territory, and they're sacrificing animals for meat on private altars, as the tabernacle was now too far away from many of them. The requirement for centralised worship was emphasised in the kingdom period, mostly against the practice of the people, which was a reversion to the habits of paganism. Israel is judged for setting up local shrines and high places and sites of sacrificial worship, most notably that set up at Bethel by Jeroboam the son of Nebat. With the removal of these various sacrificial locations, there would need to be a change to Israel's eating practices. While they were in the wilderness, it wasn't too hard for them to sacrifice in the tabernacle if they needed to sacrifice. But when they became much more spread out, they either had to have these private altars, or they would have to go a long distance to sacrifice.

And so there needs to be a change to the practice. They could formerly kill and eat non-sacrificial animals, but had to sacrifice the sacrificial animals first. Now this was no longer necessary.

They could eat the meat of animals that would be of the kind that could be offered, without having to offer them. If they were going to give a sacrifice, they would have to eat that in the presence of the Lord, and this would include voluntary sacrifices. So that meant that they couldn't have voluntary sacrifices on their own private altars. They had to go to the altar of God at the temple, or the tabernacle, and offer there, and then they could have it in the presence of the Lord, in that location. The result of all of this is that much of their meat-eating, which formerly would have been religious, they would have to sacrifice the animal to the Lord first, and then they would eat the meat as a sort of peace offering, is now secularised. They don't have to offer that in order to eat it as meat, but if they are going to offer a peace offering, they have to eat it in the presence of the Lord. Moses charges Israel utterly to reject the religious practices of the Canaanites.

[13 : 25] They were being wiped out of the land for these things. They should not inquire about the sort of ways in which the Canaanites worshipped their gods. It is not an example for them to follow. The most egregious practice, of course, is child sacrifice. They must not adopt such practices, but must worship the Lord only as he commands. The centralisation of sanctuary worship is an important part of the reforms of figures such as Josiah and Hezekiah. We read of Hezekiah in 2 Kings chapter 18 verses 3 to 4. And he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done. He removed the high places, and broke the pillars, and cut down the Asherah, and he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it. It was called Nehushtan. Part of the impact of all of this teaching is to establish a sense of orthodoxy in worship. Worship is not this superstitious thing, nor is it a matter of practice that is vernacular to a particular location, something arising out of the customs, the needs, the habits, and the traditions of a specific location. No, there is a single site of sacrificial worship, and there is a single mode of sacrificial worship. God must be approached on his own terms, not in terms of each location's customary religious traditions and practices.

A question to consider. How do you imagine that the centralisation of the sanctuary would have caused the average Israelite's experience of his faith to differ from those of the surrounding pagan nations?