

Deuteronomy 18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 18 And of your oil, and the first fleece of your sheep you shall give him.

For the Lord your God has chosen him out of all your tribes, to stand and minister in the name of the Lord, him and his sons for all time. And if a Levite comes from any of your towns out of all Israel, where he lives, and he may come when he desires, to the place that the Lord will choose, and ministers in the name of the Lord his God, like all his fellow Levites who stand to minister there before the Lord, then he may have equal portions to eat, besides what he receives from the sale of his patrimony.

When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination, or tells fortunes, or interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a necromancer, or one who inquires of the dead.

For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the Lord your God.

For these nations which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this. The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers.

[1 : 5 4] It is to him you shall listen, just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, or see this great fire any more lest I die.

And the Lord said to me, They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.

And if you say in your heart, How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken? When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken.

The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. Deuteronomy chapter 18 continues the section of the book of Deuteronomy devoted to the fifth commandment.

[3 : 0 0] It speaks about the Levites and about the prophets. The Levites have no territorial portion within Israel. This goes back to Genesis chapter 49 verses 5 to 7, and the blessings and judgments of Jacob upon his sons.

Simeon and Levi are brothers. Weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their counsel. O my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen.

Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel. I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel. Instead of a territorial portion in the land, the Levites have the portion of the Lord's sacrifices.

Apart from ascension or whole burnt offerings, the priests enjoy a portion from the offerings made to the Lord. They are stewards of the Lord's house, and they eat from his table. In Numbers chapter 18, the offerings seem to belong to the priests alone.

But here, and in Joshua chapter 13 verse 14, we seem to get a different picture, one suggesting that all of the Levites enjoyed the sacrifices. In Joshua chapter 13 verse 14, The Levites also, rather than being granted territory with the other tribes, were scattered throughout the nation.

[4 : 24] As Jacob declared, Numbers chapter 35 verses 1 to 8, The Lord spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab, by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, Command the people of Israel to give to the Levites some of the inheritance of their possession as cities for them to dwell in.

And you shall give to the Levites pasture lands around the cities. The cities shall be theirs to dwell in, and the pasture lands shall be for their cattle, and for their livestock, and for all their beasts.

The pasture lands of the cities, which you shall give to the Levites, shall reach from the wall of the city outward, a thousand cubits all around. And you shall measure outside the city, on the east side, two thousand cubits, and on the south side, two thousand cubits, and on the west side, two thousand cubits, and on the north side, two thousand cubits, the city being in the middle.

This shall belong to them as pasture lands for their cities. The cities that you give to the Levites shall be the six cities of refuge, where you shall permit the manslayer to flee, and in addition to them you shall give forty-two cities.

All the cities that you give to the Levites shall be forty-eight with their pasture lands. And as for the cities that you shall give from the possession of the people of Israel, from the larger tribes you shall take many, and from the smaller tribes you shall take few, each in proportion to the inheritance that it inherits shall give of its cities to the Levites.

[5 : 44] As we look at the tribes of Israel, we see that they were not interchangeable. Different tribes had different places within the land, different callings as well. The Levites, among other things, would help to unite the nation.

Scattered throughout the nation, they would express something of the united character of the people of Israel, that they were not just separate tribes, each doing their own thing, occupying their own territory, but they were a single people, bound together by a common form of worship, a common destiny.

The parts of the animal devoted to the priest here differ from those mentioned in Leviticus chapter 7, verses 28 to 36, and numbers 18. I'm not sure what to make of this.

Perhaps it's something related to a change in practice as they go into the land. I'm not sure. The priests are also given the first fruits of grain, wine, oil, and the first fruits of the fleece of sheep.

This would give them the basic requirements of food, clothing, and other such necessities. The priests have been chosen out of all the people to serve in this manner. God has set them apart for his own purpose in this way.

[6 : 48] Verses 6 to 8 seemingly refer to non-serving Levites who could voluntarily determine to join the service of the tabernacle. It secures the rights of the Levite in such a situation.

They are strictly instructed not to learn the ways of the pagan nations round about. They are being given the land, and the previous occupants lost the land on account of such practices.

These were pagan ways of discerning God's will, of trying to perceive the future and fate. Balaam is an example of such a false prophet who would seek these sorts of signs and omens and other things.

Necromancy and consulting the dead are also things that are banned for Israel. Israel is a people of life. They communicate with the living God, not with the dead. Likewise, you don't need to engage in the shadowy arts of divination if you have the living God who has spoken to you.

Israel is going to be addressed with clarity by the Lord in his prophets. The Lord speaks to his people directly. They don't have to resort to these strange and shadowy signs.

[7 : 50] What is a prophet? Well, we can think about a priest as a steward of God's house. A king is a vice-guerrant of the Lord, someone who rules under God. And a prophet is a member of the heavenly council.

A prophet is someone who speaks to the Lord on account of the people and speaks to the people on account of the Lord. Many people have this idea that prophecy is primarily about foretelling the future.

While the prophet does foretell the future, we should not restrict the task of the prophet to this particular activity. Rather, the prophet is primarily the one who relays the words of the Lord to the people.

Understanding the different offices of priest, king and prophet can also help us to understand how they relate together. The priest is someone who is a steward of God's house.

He represents his master to the guests that are invited into the house. The king rules the people of the Lord in the name of the Lord. And the prophet can address the word of the Lord to these figures.

[8 : 48] However, the prophet is not a king, nor is the prophet a priest. Although the prophet could be a priest or a king in certain instances. We might think about David, for instance, who is both a king and a prophet.

Moses is the prototypical prophet. He's the one who establishes the covenant. Israel, seeing the theophany at Sinai and the glory of God and the terror of the Lord, asked Moses to go instead of them.

And the Lord approved this. In the story of Isaiah, Isaiah goes into the presence of the Lord as the Lord fills the temple and he is aware of his sinfulness. He is a man of unclean lips, dwelling among a people of unclean lips.

And he has seen the Lord of hosts. Few people would be equipped for such an encounter. And so the prophet is the one who goes between God and his people. Moses, as we see in the story of the golden calf, is the intercessor for the people.

He represents the people to God, speaking on their behalf, standing in the breach when they have sinned. And he also represents God to the people. He expresses God's anger to the people.

[9 : 54] That task of the prophet then is one that's seen most clearly in the ministry of Moses. The prophet is raised up from the brothers of Israel. The king is chosen, the priesthood is chosen, and the prophet is raised up.

There seems to be a different manner in which the prophet comes to his particular office. The prophet does not have a hereditary office as the priesthood does. Likewise, the king would generally be a member of a dynasty.

The Lord places his words in the mouth of the prophet. This is a stronger relationship to the word of God than the priest has, or the king has. The priest is someone who obeys the word of the Lord.

He's someone who declares the word of the Lord as he teaches the law. The king is someone who meditates upon the law, who's internalized the law, and has gained wisdom through it. The king is someone who sings from the law.

But the prophet is one who has internalized the law even further. The word of God has been taken into him, and he becomes a covenant mouthpiece. In the story of Ezekiel, he eats the scroll.

[10 : 53] The scroll becomes part of him, and then he declares it from his midst. The movement in redemptive history, from the law external to us, to the law taken into us in meditation, in memory, in song, and in wisdom, develops further, as the word of God is taken into the life, and the mouth, and the heart of the prophet.

God has written his law upon the heart of the covenant-bearing prophet, and then that is declared to his people. This is a sign, among other things, of the deeper relationship that God desires his people to have with his word in the course of redemptive history.

If the king is an example to the people of meditation, of reflection, of delighting in the law, and learning wisdom through it, the prophet is an example of someone who's been transformed by the law.

The law has been written upon his heart, and now he can act and speak in a new and remarkable way. The prophet, in that sense, is in anticipation of what will happen to the people more generally.

Would that all of the Lord's people will prophesy that the Lord would put his spirit in them. A question to consider. This passage promises that the Lord will establish a prophet like Moses.

[12 : 04] In the New Testament, we have a number of different occasions when Jesus is spoken of as the prophet that is expected. What are some of the ways that we can see Christ fulfilling this prophecy?