

Deuteronomy 14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 14 You are the sons of the Lord your God. You shall not cut yourselves or make any baldness on your foreheads for the dead. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.
- You shall not eat any abomination. These are the animals you may eat, the ox, the sheep, the goat, the deer, the gazelle, the roebuck, the wild goat, the ibex, the antelope, and the mountain sheep.
- Every animal that parts the hoof and has the hoof cloven in two and chews the cud among the animals you may eat. Yet of those that chew the cud or have the hoof cloven, you shall not eat these, the camel, the hare, and the rock badger, because they chew the cud but do not part the hoof, are unclean for you.
- And the pig, because it parts the hoof but does not chew the cud, is unclean for you. Their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch. Of all that are in the waters you may eat these.
- Whatever has fins and scales you may eat, and whatever does not have fins and scales you shall not eat. It is unclean for you. You may eat all clean birds, but these are the ones that you shall not eat.
- [1 : 2 0] The eagle, the bearded vulture, the black vulture, the kite, the falcon of any kind, every raven of any kind, the ostrich, the nighthawk, the seagull, the hawk of any kind, the little owl and the short-eared owl, the barn owl and the tawny owl, the carrion vulture and the cormorant, the stork, the heron of any kind, the hoopoe and the bat.
- And all winged insects are unclean for you. They shall not be eaten. All cleaned winged things you may eat. You shall not eat anything that has died naturally. You may give it to the sojourner who is within your towns, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner.
- For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk. You shall tithe all the yield of your seed that comes from the field year by year.
- And before the Lord your God, in the place that he will choose to make his name dwell there, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, of your wine, and of your oil, and the firstborn of your herd and flock, that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.
- And if the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, when the Lord your God blesses you, because the place is too far from you, which the Lord your God chooses to set his name there, then you shall turn it into money, and bind up the money in your hand, and go to the place that the Lord your God chooses, and spend the money for whatever you desire, oxen or sheep or wine, or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves.
- [2 : 5 0] And you shall eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household. And you shall not neglect the Levite who is within your towns, for he has no portion or inheritance with you.

At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year, and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

As we've been going through the book of Deuteronomy, I've noted the way in which the laws of this book loosely follow the order of the Ten Commandments. Chapters 6 to 11 are an exposition of the first commandment, of having no other gods beside the Lord.

Chapters 12 to 13 relate more to the second commandment, not to make a graven image. And chapter 14 contains material relating to the third and fourth commandments.

As we go through this passage, I will discuss more why I think this is the case. Israel is a people consecrated to the Lord their God, and for this reason they must avoid certain mourning practices.

[4 : 01] The practices in question, cutting themselves for the dead, or pulling out their hair in mourning, are contrary to their holy status. The people of the Lord must not mark themselves out by death.

Leviticus chapter 21 verses 1 to 6 and 10 to 11 describe similar requirements for the high priest and the other priests. And the Lord said to Moses, Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, No one shall make himself unclean for the dead among his people, except for his closest relatives, his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother, or his virgin sister, who is near to him because she has no husband.

For her he may make himself unclean. He shall not make himself unclean as a husband among his people, and so profane himself. They shall not make bald patches on their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuts on their body.

They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God. For they offer the Lord's food offerings, the bread of their God. Therefore they shall be holy. The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor tear his clothes.

He shall not go in to any dead bodies, nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother. The people of Israel more generally, like the priests, are holy to the Lord, and they must not be a people marked out by the marks of death.

[5 : 29] God is the Lord and the giver of life, and he does not want his people to become people associated with death. The food laws we have here are far more condensed than those of Leviticus chapter 11, but here they are fundamentally the same.

However, certain parts of the law associated with much less commonly eaten animals are not filled out. We aren't sure about the identity of all of the animals mentioned in this chapter, although we have a pretty good sense of most of them.

The big question, however, is how are we to make sense of the dietary laws? We should start off by trying to feel around the subject a bit. First of all, the dietary laws seem to be connected with Israel's holiness.

This section immediately follows after other material associated with Israel's holy status, and it's bracketed on the other side with a statement about Israel's holiness. For you are a people holy to the Lord.

The association between the dietary laws and holiness is not just found here, it's also found in Leviticus chapter 20 verses 24 to 26. But I have said to you, you shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.

[6 : 37] I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from the peoples. You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird, or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean.

You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine. So it's holiness to the Lord, but also separateness from the peoples.

Israel is distinguished, and part of the means by which God distinguished his people is through the dietary requirements. The dietary requirements would seem to be in the category of a symbolic law, similar to the law of circumcision.

There is reason to it, a sort of symbolic rationale and fittingness, but it wouldn't be classed as a dimension of natural law, in the same way as the prohibition on murder would be. A second thing to observe is that sacrificial creatures, oxen, goats, sheep, doves and pigeons, are a subset of clean animals.

God consumes sacrifices, and the altar is a sort of table. But fish are never offered on the altar. In the sacrificial system, animals seem to represent Israelite persons.

[7 : 48] So the bull represents the high priest, the goat represents the leader of the people, the sheep represents the average person, the turtle dove or pigeon can represent the poor of the people.

These animals are all domesticated animals. However, Israel's diet could exceed this. They could eat certain game meats, they could eat fish from the sea, they could eat certain types of insects, and certain birds other than the dove and the pigeon.

However, if the animals of the sacrificial system represent Israelites, and are symbolically consumed by the Lord, then perhaps the dietary requirements are related to symbolic inclusion and exclusion of other persons.

This particular line of reasoning would seem to be given some weight from the New Testament, where Peter's vision in chapter 10 of Acts, concerning the sheet and the various unclean foods in it, is connected with the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God.

A third thing to note, contrary to much popular thought on the subject, these things do not seem to have to do with health, hygiene or dirtiness. The more closely you look at the requirements, the more they don't really fit that paradigm at all.

[8 : 56] Fourth, the commandments seem to be exclusive to Israel. They're signs of Israel's holy status. It marks Israel out, and teaches Israel to be a people who make distinctions concerning what they assimilate into their life.

But God-fearers, other nations round about, and the foreigner were all able to eat many of these foods, without being seen to have done something wrong in the process. Like circumcision then, it seems to be a sign of inclusion in the people of God, and of the nature of the people of God relative to God, and also to the nations.

It is not an absolute moral commandment. Fifth, we should observe that there are various detailed criteria according to which we determine whether a creature is to be eaten or not. They seem to be there for a reason.

They're not just arbitrary. A lot of this material in Leviticus chapter 11, and in this chapter, is explaining what you can and cannot eat according to specific principles, and those principles invite explanation and exploration.

Sixth, the forbidden creatures are typically carnivores, predators, and carrion creatures. Animals that chew the cud and have split hooves are creatures that are herbivores.

[10 : 07] Jewish oral law argued that you could also tell forbidden animals by their teeth. If they had incisors suited for eating meat, then they were not kosher. This suggests that what we have here are rules of thumb by which you can tell whether something is a herbivore or not, by whether they are ruminants, and whether they have cloven hooves.

But there might be something more to this. So while this is part of the picture, in all likelihood, I think we are justified in looking further. A seventh thing, the limitations on eating in Eden and after the flood should be noted.

In Eden, the food that was explicitly given to Adam and Eve was all plant-based. After the flood, however, we are told that Noah was given to eat meat. And as that permission is given, he is instructed not to eat the flesh with the blood.

The blood must be poured out. The blood of the animal is the life of the animal, and it is important that he does not eat the life with the flesh. Such restrictions upon food were important.

It involved, among other things, a recognition that all comes from God and is subject to him. A mindfulness about food and where it comes from alerts us to the fact that God is the Lord and the giver of life.

[11 : 21] We can't treat the animal creation as if it were ours to dispose of however we will. There is some commonality between human life and animal life. And even though we are permitted to eat animals, we must do so in a way that dignifies the creatures that we eat and does not treat them as ours to dispose of however we will.

An eighth point is that it seems that these animals are the ones that are most different from the serpent. The serpent swallows its food. It has a very strong degree of contact with the ground.

Serpents are associated with death and prey. Clean quadrupeds, by contrast, do not touch the ground with their skin. They do not have the contact with death of predators and carrion birds.

They are herbivores. And Israel's distancing from death is also seen in the fact that they do not eat things that have died naturally. Israel is a people of life, so their exposure to death is limited.

The water animals, they're animals without fins and scales. And in that respect, they're closer to the serpent in certain respects. They are not to eat carrion birds or birds of prey.

[12 : 33] Again, these are animals that are associated with death. When we're trying to understand the meaning of these things, we should pay attention not just to the content of passages, but also to the form and the structure and the literary situation of passages.

It's like doing a jigsaw puzzle. You pay attention both to the details of the picture and to the shape of the pieces. And Leviticus chapter 11 gives us real insight here, I believe. The literary structure of the book of Leviticus betrays some of the deeper meaning of what's taking place.

There is the establishment of this new garden scene, this new tabernacle, and the worship is being set up. The man is being placed in the garden, the high priest, and then everything's set up for this great celebration.

And then there's a fall event with Nadab and Abihu and their sin, the forbidden fire that they bring in. And from there, chapter 10, there is a series of chapters, and those chapters play out four themes.

So chapter 11 concerns the judgment upon the animals. The judgment upon the serpent followed immediately after the fall. After that, it was the judgment upon the woman. And sure enough, in chapter 12, we have a chapter devoted to the question of childbirth and how that's to be treated.

[13 : 45] Chapter 13 and 14 concern skin diseases, the judgment upon the sweat of the brow, as it were, and the body. And in chapter 15, it's emissions from the body, and the body is a site of death, the body as a spring of uncleanness.

Chapter 16 is the day of coverings, when God covers his people. It deals with themes of expulsion as well, as the goat is sent out into the wilderness. Once that pattern has been recognised, we have a lot more perches upon chapter 11.

It is connected with the judgment on the serpent. And so the restrictive foods are foods that are associated with the serpent. Clean animals are animals that are distinguished from death.

They are animals that are herbivores. They are animals that do not have the same direct exposure to the polluting dust. Animals with cloven hooves wear, as it were, shoes, in sharp contrast to the serpent who crawls on his belly and eats dust.

Unlike the serpent who swallows things whole, ruminants take a long time digesting things. Not only are they not connected with death, they consume their food in a way that makes a far greater distinction between inside and out.

[14 : 57] A final point we could make. Maybe there are some eschatological themes that can tie into this. We have statements about creatures in places like Isaiah chapter 11, verses 6 to 8.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together, and the little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. Isaiah chapter 65, verse 25. The wolf and the lamb shall graze together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food.

They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord. The distinctions between animals here seem to be related to their tameness and their engagement in predation.

The Lord only consumes domesticated herbivores in the sacrifices on the altar. Israel would mostly eat those animals as well, but they could also eat some other herbivores, creatures that weren't domesticated.

[16 : 04] The Lord is forming a people that are the polar opposite of the serpent, and Israel's eating of food is a sign of what it should and should not assimilate into its life. By this it is marked out as a holy people, special to the Lord.

However, the time would come when animals, formerly unclean, would be rendered clean. The inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God is marked by an extension of the sorts of food that people like Peter could eat.

Straight after this, we have one of the strangest commandments in the whole body of the law. Israel is instructed not to boil a kid in its mother's milk. And this, of all things, is a command repeated three times.

It's also found in Exodus chapter 23 verse 19, and in chapter 34 verse 26. On the other occasions where we find this, it's a climactic statement.

In chapter 23 verse 19 of Exodus, it concludes the body of legal material in the book of the covenant. In chapter 34 verse 26, it concludes the words of the renewed covenant.

[17 : 06] This suggests that this law is of great importance and is almost certainly symbolic of something important. There have been a number of suggestions. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz makes an interesting case that there is an allusion to mother-son incest here, or some other form of inappropriate closeness between a mother and a son.

I'm not persuaded that this accounts for the prominence that this particular commandment is given on these various occasions. There are almost certainly important symbolic meanings to be discovered in this law.

It's repeated three times at pivotal moments in the law, in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, as I've mentioned, and it's likely I'm missing several of these entirely. But a meaning nearer to the surface concerns the importance of keeping life and death very strictly separate.

That makes sense in the context of what we've just been reading in terms of the dietary requirements. This distinction between the animals is designed to keep death at a distance.

It's designed also to distinguish oneself from the serpent. Before that, we have the laws concerning mourning that Israel should not mark itself out by death. Once again, life and death being kept separate, even in a context like preparing a meal, where you might not be immediately alert to their proximity, the milk of the mother and the flesh of her child.

[18 : 28] The law charges us to separate them. This fits in with surrounding themes of this chapter then. Israel is a people that has been delivered from death to life, and they must live as a living people, as a people that sharply separate their life from the reality of death.

This really doesn't seem to relate very naturally to the third commandment. You shall not bear the name of the Lord your God in vain. How might we explain the connection? The answer is found in what it means to bear the name.

Israel is holy to the Lord. God has placed his name upon his people. They are his firstborn son. Leviticus 21 verse 6 reads, They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God.

Not bearing the name of the Lord in vain is not profaning the name of the Lord, and that is profaned by living in a way that is not holy to the Lord when he has set us apart. The purpose of the laws concerning mourning and the dietary requirements are all about Israel maintaining its distinctiveness.

Its distinctiveness from death, its distinctiveness from the other peoples, and its separateness to the Lord. At this point, there's a shift to material associated with the Sabbath law.

[19 : 39] This is material concerning tithe feasts. We should harmonise the teaching here with various other parts of the law. It would seem that there were different tithes. The first tithe was given to the Levites.

The second tithe was for the owner to celebrate feasts. And every third year, the second tithe was devoted to the use of the sojourner, the widow and the fatherless and the Levite.

In the seventh year, there would be no tithe, as it was the sabbatical year. The tithe served the purpose of connecting Israelites with the sanctuary and making the sanctuary a site of feasting and celebration.

Shared rejoicing in God's presence was a central feature of Israel's life then. The Lord wanted his people to delight and to know joy before him. The amount of food involved would suggest a really great feast.

This is over a month's worth of food. And yet they would only go to the sanctuary nine days a year by the requirements. So it suggests that they would be encouraged to go more often.

[20 : 36] And when they did go, to celebrate a really bumper feast. Finally, their concern for the marginal persons and the Levite within their community would be a cause for God to bless their work.

He who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. A question to consider. How could we incorporate feasting more into our worship?

