

Deuteronomy 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 16 May 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 17 And you hear of it.

Then you shall inquire diligently. And if it is true and certain that such an abomination has been done in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has done this evil thing, and you shall stone that man or woman to death with stones.

On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses, the one who is to die shall be put to death. A person shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness. The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people.

So you shall purge the evil from your midst. If any case arises requiring decision between one kind of homicide and another, one kind of legal right and another, or one kind of assault and another, any case within your towns that is too difficult for you, then you shall arise and go up to the place that the Lord your God will choose.

And you shall come to the Levitical priests and to the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall consult them, and they shall declare to you the decision. Then you shall do according to what they declare to you from that place that the Lord will choose.

[1 : 3 3] And you shall be careful to do according to all that they direct you, according to the instructions that they give you, and according to the decision which they pronounce to you, you shall do. You shall not turn aside from the verdict that they declare to you, either to the right hand or to the left.

The man who acts presumptuously by not obeying the priest who stands to minister there before the Lord your God, or the judge, that man shall die. So you shall purge the evil from Israel, and all the people shall hear and fear and not act presumptuously again.

When you come to the land that the Lord your God is giving you, and you possess it and dwell in it, and then say, I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me, you may indeed set a king over you, whom the Lord your God will choose.

One from among your brothers you shall set as king over you. You may not put a foreigner over you who is not your brother, only he must not acquire many horses for himself, or cause the people to return to Egypt in order to acquire many horses.

Since the Lord has said to you, you shall never return that way again. And he shall not acquire many wives for himself, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he acquire for himself excessive silver and gold.

[2 : 4 5] And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law, and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children in Israel.

Going through the book of Deuteronomy, we have noticed that it follows the order of the Ten Commandments in chapters 6 to 26. The material of chapter 17 falls under the category of the Fifth Commandment, to honour father and mother, and here it's about authority structures within the life of Israel.

What does a free society look like? Israel has been delivered from Egypt in the Exodus, and in Egypt they were under the tyranny of Pharaoh, a king who functioned more like a god.

It would be very easy for Israel to fall back into that pattern of society. Moses could disappear from the scene, and then they would establish a king with absolute divine-like authority, and fall under a new form of tyranny.

Political structures are of course complicated things. On the one hand there's the disorder of anarchy, every man doing what's right in his own eyes, a society without coordination, without security, and without a strong common life.

[4 : 13] On the other hand there's the danger of tyranny, of oppressive, arbitrary government, of being subject to the capricious whims of a willful monarch. Israel had hopefully learned some lessons on this front from the hard-heartedness of Pharaoh and its consequences.

There are great benefits in having a strong and effective government if you want to have a common life, if you want to forge an identity that extends over territory, and across different periods of time.

Deuteronomy exhibits a centralising impulse when it comes to the worship of Israel, moving everything to a common central sanctuary, so that everyone doesn't do what's right in their own eyes, but there is a common form of worship.

The establishment of a more centralised government, not an absolutely centralised government by any means, has similar benefits. Yet in the task of establishing a polity, any benefits come with great risks, or associated costs.

There's no way to opt out of this. In the book of 1 Samuel, for instance, we see a number of different forms of government and operation. We have Eli the high priest, functioning as a sort of judge.

[5 : 17] Then we have the prophetic judge in Samuel. And then, of course, we have the first king in Saul, followed by David. None of these systems of government is perfect. All of them are affected deeply by sin.

Yet there are differing advantages and disadvantages associated with each one. And the fact that a more centralised, monarchical system comes out on top doesn't seem to be merely an accident of history.

In chapters 17 and 18 of Deuteronomy, we're dealing with priests, with kings, and with prophets. One of the first things we should notice is that there is a division between these different offices.

Absolute power is not concentrated in any one of these particular offices. Rather, they are all subject to each other in different ways. In verses 21 and 22 of the preceding chapter, we notice some odd commandments concerning Asherah trees and pillars that seemed out of place.

And these commandments are followed by another commandment that seems to belong with them, concerning blemished sacrifices. The importance of unadulterated worship is highlighted at this point. They must not worship the Lord on their own terms.

[6 : 20] Verses 2 to 7 deal with cases of idolatry and rejection of the covenant. This is connected with the preceding verses concerning false worship. You can notice, for instance, the use of the term abomination in both.

It is, however, more directly connected with the surrounding theme of judgment and justice. Justice here is seen as something that is a communal responsibility. The entire people need to be actively committed to upholding the will of the Lord in their life as a people.

The case of the person rejecting the covenant is the most fundamental case. This is an act of treachery against the sovereign of the people, the Lord himself. We think of the law often as the responsibility of the government.

And individuals within the nation, provided they're law-abiding, don't really have to think much about the law. However, the vision of the law in Deuteronomy is one in which the people play a much larger and more active role in upholding the law.

The entire people are responsible to uphold the righteous standard of God's law and to establish just processes. Injustice and authorities and wickedness and neighbours makes everyone culpable.

[7 : 27] None of these things should be tolerated and they must be dealt with as a matter of the greatest severity. Israel was to have higher courts to which lower judges could send cases that they weren't competent to adjudicate.

This is similar to the role of Moses in Exodus chapter 18. The judges and the chiefs of the people would rule in the lesser matters. If they were not competent to judge in a particular matter, they could put it up to Moses.

Specific types of cases seem to be in view here and these would be ones that would be sent up to the Levitical priests and the chief judge. When a decision had to be made in a potentially capital crime concerning what type of homicide had occurred, it was supposed to be sent to the higher court.

Now this is not a court of appeal as we might have for defendants. It's a court to which the judges were expected to direct the cases. The prominent role of the Levitical priests in these courts probably depends in part upon their expert knowledge and familiarity with the law.

They were the ones who most meditated upon and studied and taught the law and so they were in the best position to adjudicate according to it. The authority of the priests and the chief judges had to be honoured and it would be through this that the authority of the law itself would be rendered effective in practice.

[8 : 42] Moses now moves on to teach concerning the king. Having a king is not here presented as illegitimate in principle, I don't believe. However, in wanting a king, we're told that they wanted to be like the nations surrounding them.

In 1 Samuel chapter 8 verses 10 to 18, we have Samuel's long warning given from the Lord himself about the potential actions of the king and the dangers in taking a king.

So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you. He will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen and to run before his chariots.

And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots.

He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants.

[9 : 47] He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys and put them to his work. He will take the tenth of your flocks and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves.

But the Lord will not answer you in that day. Although the monarchy is presented as in many respects a positive development in scripture, there remains a very strong note of ambivalence.

Like entering into the land, the monarchy is a levelling up in maturity, responsibility and capacity, but it is one that comes with considerable dangers and temptations. Temptations that must be mitigated by adherence to the law.

This isn't an institution immediately established by God, it's interesting to note. It's presented as something established in response to the people's request. Is the monarchy merely a concession to human sin?

Or is Moses just speaking about a prediction of some future sin on the part of the people? I'm not sure that's the case. It is presented as a concession in 1 Samuel chapter 8.

[10 : 50] The Lord says that the people are rejecting him in their desire for a king. However, a righteous king who ruled under the Lord is a good and a desirable thing. Unfortunately, Israel failed in this respect.

The monarchy proved to be a gift that they were not mature enough to handle. Nor is it just presented as a permission. Christ, of course, would ultimately fulfil the purpose of the Davidic king.

What would the king do? The king would defend the nation from its enemies. He would assemble and lead its army. He would establish and maintain civil order. He would maintain peace. And he would also, as the guardian and the establisher of civil order, be the one who established the worship of God within the land and maintain that.

Perhaps the most arresting feature of this teaching concerning the king is the fact that the king is so clearly subject to the law of God. The king is not a god.

The king is not himself the law. The king is not even the lawgiver, the one who makes up the laws and teaches the laws as his own wisdom. No, the law is the Lord's and the king must come under that law.

[11 : 56] He's a servant of that law, someone who's responsible to study the law, to understand it deeply and then to rule in terms of it. Not only then is there a challenge to unchecked sovereignty in the separation of powers between king, priest and prophet, there is also a challenge to unchecked sovereignty in the way that the king comes under the law of God.

This is a society with a constitution. It's not something established by the king himself. It's something to which the king himself is subject. The king isn't the priest.

However, he does function as the representative of the people and as such as something akin to the chief worshipper. He's also the one who's responsible as the representative and leader of the people and the guardian of civil order to establish the worship of God within the land.

He builds the temple, among other things. We can see this in the story of David as he establishes the worship of the tabernacle, singing within the tabernacle, these sorts of things, and then in the story of Solomon, of course, who builds the temple.

The king must be an Israelite, one of the brothers. He must be someone that the Lord himself chooses. The king is not elected by the people. He's a servant of the Lord.

[13 : 08] He represents the Lord's authority in his law to the people. He's supposed to be a minister of the law of God to the people of God, but he is supposed to remain one of his brother Israelites, and that will happen as he is humbled by submission to the law.

He is not over the law. He is not the source of the law. He is not someone who rules apart from law by his own capricious whim. He is under the law, just as the rest of the Israelites, and he rules by the law.

There are three key limits here placed upon the king's quest for glory. The first one, he shall not accumulate horses. There should not be this great military build-up. He shouldn't return to Egypt to get them.

The Lord brought them out of Egypt, out of that particular sort of kingdom, and they are not supposed to go back to try and recreate that kingdom in themselves. Second, he should not multiply wives, lest his heart be led astray.

Multiplying wives held a number of dangers. First, in the king's natural love for his wives, it would be very easy for him to be led astray into idolatry and other things. We see great examples of this in the story of Solomon, of course, and then in the story of characters like Ahab.

[14 : 16] A woman has great power over the heart of the man who loves her, and a king who has not mastered his love for women will find that his heart is easily led astray. He will give his strength to women when he should be giving it to upholding the law of God among the people.

And third, the king must not acquire excessive silver and gold. It is certainly not inappropriate for a kingdom to be glorious, but a king that accumulates wealth beyond limits is a king who is tyrannical to his subjects.

We see in the story of Solomon that he falls into each one of these sins. In 1 Kings 10, verse 14, to chapter 11, verse 10, every single one of these sins is mentioned.

And as we read on in the story, we see that Solomon starts to take on the character of Pharaoh himself. Israel, having been delivered from Pharaoh in Egypt, ends up recreating Egypt in their own land.

There is a real danger that the king is idolised, that the king becomes a god-like figure. The king could easily serve as another god besides the Lord. This is why it is so important that the king is subject to the Lord and to the law of the Lord.

[15 : 23] And both as a symbol and as a practical means of this submission to the law of God, the king is required to write his own copy of the book of the law for the purpose of his own meditation throughout his life.

He must do this under the supervision of the Levitical priests, who are the stewards of the house of the Lord. And in the fact that they supervise this, it's a sign that he comes under the authority of another.

The king is not the absolute authority within the land of Israel, but the priests can represent the authority of God relative to the king and the prophet too. The prophet can rebuke the king, challenge the king in the name of the Lord as we see Nathan challenging David after his sin with Bathsheba.

The king is expected to be literate. He's expected not merely to know the contents of the law, but to meditate upon them for wisdom. His relationship with the law is even more intimate because he's supposed to write it out all for himself.

These are all ways in which the king is supposed to take the law into himself, to internalise in himself the law that he will rule in terms of. The king's self-mastery, according to the law, is the basis by which he will rule the nation.

[16 : 31] In places like the Psalms and the book of Proverbs, we see the result of this. The faithful king is the archetypal Israelite, who has become wise through meditation upon the law day and night, who can think about the world and speak about the world with wisdom because he has internalised the principles of wisdom in the law.

Earlier in the book of Deuteronomy, we were told that the peoples around would see the wisdom of Israel in the law and come to hear that wisdom. We see that happening in the story of Solomon, someone who had meditated upon the law and as a result could speak with wisdom into the world so that people would come to hear Israel's king.

Now ideally, what was true of Israel's king would become true of the people as a whole. The king then is a model for the rest of the people. We see the same thing in the Psalms. The Psalms are the songs of the king, the king who has meditated upon the law of God day and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water giving forth its fruit in season. He is someone who is wiser than all of his teachers because he meditates upon God's law and as the law has been taken into him, he can be someone who rules wisely within the world in the name of the Lord.

If the priest is a steward and a servant, the king is more of a son. A question to consider. Many people when they're thinking about our political systems focus upon the ancestry of the ideas that ground our systems to ancient Greece and Rome.

[17 : 54] But yet, when we look at the history of political thought, we see a great deal of influence from scripture, particularly the Old Testament and places like this. What might be some of the distinctive ways in which the teaching of chapters like this has influenced politics within the modern world?