

DEUTERONOMY

Lesson 23 - Chapters 17 and 18

We were discussing the section of Deuteronomy 17 that dealt with God's boundaries and limitations on Israel's civil and religious authorities. And one of the chief principles is that in God's economy there is NO separation of church and state (so to speak). I'll not debate the US decision to go that route except to say that this is at the bottom of what ails us as a nation. Basically our government has decided that God's ways are fine for what goes on within the walls of a Synagogue or a Church, but they are to have no bearing at all anywhere else in our lives, communities, schools, or government. I wonder: have we actually reached a point whereby we are comfortable with that philosophy and passively accept it? Do we effectively live our lives as though God makes a distinction between what we think and do while we're in religious service versus what we think and do in every other facet of our existence, even though if confronted with it we deny it? Here in Deuteronomy the Lord makes it clear that Israel's leaders (of every kind, no exceptions) are to first and foremost obey Him. The leaders should (above all else) adhere to the Lord's Laws and Commands so that things will go well with them, the people they govern, and Israeli society in general.

Let's re-read a part of Deuteronomy 17.

RE-READ DEUTERONOMY 17: 8 - end

The first group of governmental leaders we discussed is called **Shofetim**, Judges. They were usually tribal elders and the purpose for their selection was to behave as a lower court handling matters within in their own tribe about things that happened within their own tribal territory. An upper court was also established, and it was to consist primarily of Levites. Therefore the place where these upper courts met were in the 48 Levitical cities scattered throughout the Land.

These upper courts were NOT appeals courts; they were courts designed to handle matters that were too difficult or too complex or beyond the scope of the lower courts. Since the Levites (and that part of the Levites who were Priests) were Israel's experts on the Laws of Moses, it is logical that if laymen (the Elders) couldn't reach agreement on a case it would be referred to those who are the recognized legal experts. The ordinance of God that establishes this legal structure also states that since this upper court (consisting primarily of Levites) is a federal

court (so to speak) then it handles matters from or between members of various tribes; thus their rulings were NOT to be questioned. And that anyone who refused to carry out they're rulings was to be executed.

Here is a key in understanding the role of the Judges: the typical ones (those who formed the lower courts) ONLY dealt with matters concerning their own tribe. And while we get this mental picture of a judge sitting behind a bench, ruling on legal issues, in fact many of Israel's Judges came to assume entirely different roles than those ascribed (or possibly even envisioned) here. Samson for instance, he of the superhuman strength, acted as a protector of his people and an instrument of God's wrath upon the Philistines. He certainly did not sit as an arbitrator of legal matters among his tribe of Dan.

The next class of governmental leaders Moses discussed was Kings. It would be nearly 300 years AFTER the time of Moses before Israel actually had its first King, Saul. So the instructions regarding the boundaries and limitations around what an Israelite King should be and what he could and could not do, looked well into the future. And we must grasp that what this is, is both knowledge of the future and a concession on God's part. That is He foreknew that Israel would eventually want to be more like their neighbors than to be seen as set apart and unique, so He makes provision for Israel to have an earthly king because the Hebrews were (in time) going to demand it. It's not at all unlike circumstances that Paul was dealing with in his thoughts concerning divorce; it is not that God ordains divorce it's that in His foreknowledge and grace He knows that fallen man will go this route so He sets up procedures and boundaries to deal with it. God is in no way setting up the parameters of kingship because He accepts the governing philosophy of a man ruling His people as a king; He is doing it because in time Israel WILL, by their own folly, insist that a king be appointed over them (and indeed that is exactly what eventually happened).

Deuteronomy 17 verses 16 and 17 speak of the limitations God puts upon Israel's future kings in 3 different contexts. That is, 3 different spheres of influence that every king has sway over are covered: military, political, and economic. And the first injunction is that the King is not to amass too many horses. And since the finest and most well-trained horses came from Egypt, Israel would be tempted to rebuild ties with their former slave master in order to attain these animals.

There is also a deeper sense of instruction contained in this admonition; it is that for Israel's leadership to create a relationship of convenience or personal benefit with an enemy of God is not something that ought to be pursued by God's redeemed. Today this admonition of God is not only ignored by Israel and the Church, it is considered wrong not to seek after such relationships. There are many logical reasons why this practice of worshippers of Yehoveh comingling and even striking up an alliance with God's enemies is dangerous, but the only reason that really ought to drive us to obey is that God has prohibited it. When the Church

buddies up to Islam in so-called love and peace that is a direct violation of this command. When Israel trades with its sworn enemies and even gives them political concessions that is a direct violation of this command.

It's not that the Church ought to go around killing Muslims or even necessarily shunning them; it's that whatever relationship is established should be all about evangelizing people who worship a false god and never about tolerance or appeasement or personal gain or legitimizing that which is abhorrent to Yehoveh. It's not that Israel ought to find reasons to aggravate or fight with their neighbors; it's that whatever relations Israel has with their neighbors it is not to be for Israel to try to be more like them, or to give up any portion of their unique relationship with God and God's land for the sake of geopolitical peace, or to essentially give up their set-apart status to join the world's league of nations and partake of their wealth.

Further, there is an interesting side comment that Israel is not to turn to Egypt for more horses because, "you must not go back that way again". What's the name of that old song, You Can Never Go That Way Again? Lots of interesting exegesis has come from this passage, and its intent is not thoroughly agreed upon. But keep in mind that this is a warning to any future Israelite King; and at the least it is that Israel is not to turn to their former masters for help or sustenance. Israel is not necessarily to be at war with Egypt, but neither are they to ally themselves to Egypt, or become dependent on Egypt for items the King deems important to him. I think the wisdom of this, and its point, is probably best expressed as an unequal yoking or an illicit mixture. What have the people of God got to do with Egypt? God's answer: nothing.

It is ironic that in the 21st century the very same people (Islam) that the Western World is at war with are the same ones we have made ourselves dependent upon for a key element of our economy and our military. We have made a pact with the devil so to speak, and although it's taken a while the debt has come due. What began as a Western debate on oil as it relates to warring against Islam, has now turned to a debate on whether or not it is better to appease them than to continue to hold on to our traditional Judeo-Christian values. Recently the new approach to this seemingly intractable problem is essentially removing religion as an issue altogether by reforming the world as a universal secular humanist society that demands tolerance of all gods and upholds none. I'm afraid that everything that I see, and that the Bible prophesies, is that appeasement and surrender is well under way. And it is this that leads to Armageddon; although the world is doing everything it humanly can to prevent it.

This is what that verse of "not going back that way" is primarily about. Because if Israel's Kings ever start looking to the same people who view them as no more than escaped slaves for friendship and as a source of strategic military hardware or economic benefits, the price will be to compromise or even abandon God's principles to achieve it. And, of course, that is exactly what the West and even a great portion of Church is in the process of doing as we speak.

In Moses' day horses were for one primary purpose: to pull chariots. And chariots were used for two things: as limos for the king and his court but more importantly they were key armaments for ancient warfare. The more chariots a king had in his arsenal the more formidable he was in battle. The kings of Israel were instructed to place their trust in Yehoveh, not in military armaments. Their power was to be their faith in the God of Israel, not in advanced weaponry. Even so God does NOT speak against Israel being well armed and having a substantial military. Rather it is that their hopes of victory are the Lord and thus obedience to Him is the key to their survival. And the source of their power and their ability to survive certainly shouldn't come from a people (Egypt) who could pull the plug on that power source at any time. Further, as has always been, kings who taste great power are jealous to keep it and so they often turn their military against their own people in order to maintain that power. Yehoveh does not want Israel's kings to be so strong and arrogant as to be impervious to the will of the civilian population.

The command that Israel's kings must not have many wives centers around a uniquely Middle Eastern societal unit called a harem. Westerners tend to think of a harem as simply a pleasure palace full of beautiful women for use by the king and his court. That is far from reality. Political power in the Bible era came as much from forming strong alliances as it did from exercising military might. And those alliances almost always entailed intermarriage between the families of the kings that were involved. We miss the point in the infamous story of Solomon and the enormous number of wives and concubines in his harem because the idea that seems to be prevalent among the church is that Solomon was on some level a self-indulgent sex maniac; rather the Biblical story was meant to brag about the immense number of alliances he had created throughout the region.....and how wrong minded it was.

Harems were not large palaces full only of women; it was where the children of these women also resided. For a king to disgrace or show disrespect to one of the wives among his harem was tantamount to an international incident and could even bring about war with the family that wife represented. So the warning that comes that a King's "heart might go astray" should he have a large harem means that this king would be tempted to be more focused on keeping his wives, and the alliances they represent, satisfied than paying attention to God's people and God's commands. Let me also remind you that the use of the word "heart" was referring to the king's mind.....his intellect, what interested him and what he felt was important.....not his emotions or that his love and affection towards his harem would override his common sense.

And finally is a warning for the king not to go around amassing a personal fortune on the backs of his subjects. And how would a king go about doing that? By heavily taxing his people and by confiscating wealth from those smaller nations and city-states he has conquered and under his control. While all of that was standard operating procedure for Canaan's kings, the Israelite king was only to gather wealth for the good of his nation in order to fund a proper military, to care for the neediest of the society, and for national building projects like roads that truly benefited the people on a corporate level. The Biblical reality is that the story of David's son,

King Solomon, is told in a fashion meant to highlight that he violated all of these provisions of the law: to abstain from an overly large military, to avoid having many wives and the alliances they represented, and to not store up for himself wealth. Even with Israel having a king, the law we are reading in Deuteronomy was designed to retain God as the ultimate king of Israel, and the human king simply God's representative on earth accomplishing the Father's will (even though much more imperfectly than if Israel had not insisted on having a human king).

It is difficult in a short period of time to explain why God's definition of an earthly king as ordained in Deuteronomy is so opposite of mankind's definition of a king. But suffice it to say that earthly kings typically created the laws for their people and just as typically exempted themselves from their own laws. Since Israel's Laws came from God Almighty, then Israel's kings were to be as much under Yehoveh's laws as was any other Hebrew citizen.

From verse 18 to the end is one of the most interesting instructions that brings a lump to my throat whenever I read it. Upon his selection the FIRST duty of new king is to borrow the original Torah scrolls from the priests of Israel and then to write a copy of that document for Himself. The King is NOT to have a scribe make a copy for him, he is to take whatever time is needed to write it word-for-word and then keep it close by his side as that instrument that governs his life and is the law of the land for governing the people who look to him for leadership.

There is only one detailed narrative of the coronation of an Israelite King in the Bible, and it is of the very young boy, Yoash, in 2 Kings 11. Yoash was only 7 years old when he became the king of the southern kingdom of Judah.

This is well worth taking a few minutes to read for a number of reasons. Turn your Bibles to 2 Kings 11 and we'll read from verse 1 through verse 16.

READ 2 KINGS 11:1 - 16

First we see that the Hebrews had become just like their pagan neighbors when it came to the attributes of King and how he came into power. We see secrecy, we see a power struggle, we see a personal agenda and we see the death of rivals.

Second we see that as always happened when a king came to power, instead of the king serving the people the king quickly turned to making the people his servants. What possible wisdom and strength and leadership could a 7 year-old child offer? None. It was his parents and those who wanted to manipulate this boy for their own personal power and gain who were

actually in control.

Third, notice that the army was under the control of the ruling family and it was the army's job #1 to keep the king and his family safe from the people!

Fourth, also notice the rather fleeting mention in verse 12 of giving the king a copy of the testimony (meaning the Law, the Torah). This was supposed to happen not as mere symbolism as part of a coronation ceremony but rather as something the king was to do in earnest after he was put into power. What was a 7 year-old going to do with the Torah Scrolls? He had no ability to copy them let alone carry out the justice they contained. This was just crass pomp and ceremony and a hollow gesture that had no real meaning; by this time it was something they did as a tradition and probably didn't even remember why.

Yet later we'll read that as this king grew older he DID apparently take the Torah seriously and turned to it for wisdom. On the other hand he still ruled much like a typical Middle Eastern King; he even gave away some of the Temple's sacred treasures to make peace with an Assyrian King and later was murdered by his own servants.

I can tell you as one who manuscripts every lesson I have ever taught, that the act of fully writing something out has a mysterious component to it that allows one to remember it better and to contemplate it deeper. Back in the day before the new progressive teaching methods that have made reading, writing, and math secondary to learning secular human social agendas such as tolerance, diversity, and anything-goes sexuality, repetitive writing was used to facilitate memory and retention. It works; and here in Deuteronomy the Lord orders the King of Israel to employ muscle memory, if you would, for the purpose of drinking in deeply and never forgetting the Lord's commands upon the King and the laws that he is to enforce upon those he serves. Few of Israel's kings paid these laws any heed.

Let's move on to chapter 18.

READ DEUTERONOMY CHAPTER 18 all

The previous chapter outlined the general boundaries and limitations for 2 of the 4 classes of government leaders of Israel: Judges and Kings. This chapter now does the same for the remaining 2 classes, priests and prophets.

Verse 1 begins with the matter of the priests and reiterates that the official group of priests of

Israel comes ONLY from the tribe of Levi. It is noteworthy that since Exodus and the establishment of the Priesthood, the phrase “the Levitical priests” is often included when matters concerning the clergy of Israel are raised. The reason is as simple on the one hand as it is complex on the other. It is simple because while God has declared that only ONE tribe (Levi) is to provide God’s authorized servants, and only ONE clan within that tribe (Aaron’s) is to provide the Priests, this was not something that the other tribes of Israel found easy to accept. It was the norm for most other Middle Eastern cultures of that era for the King to choose the highest priest and then the highest priest would usually choose the lesser priests. A new King usually meant a new batch of priests. What families these priests came from DID play some role in their selection, but it was far more a matter of political (and therefore economic) influence rather than some long established heredity right to their position.

Remember; until the Law was given on Mt. Sinai there WAS no official priesthood for the Hebrews and certainly no priestly tribe had been appointed. Rather the firstborns from each family, from every tribe, tended to behave as a sort of family priest. This was a special status relished by the firstborn of each family who held it. So when Moses told the 12 tribes that God has ordered that this “firstborn” system was to come to an end, to be replaced by members of the tribe of Levi, it was naturally met with stiff resistance. As we’ve talked about mankind’s propensity to be in a never-ending search for loopholes no matter what his faith or religion he adheres to, the tribes of Israel did their best to punch holes in the laws concerning who could be priests. Therefore we’ll find the phrase “Levitical priests” used repeatedly to make it abundantly clear that ONLY Levites formed the clergy for Israel.

Another reminder is contained within the first verse: it is that while the Levites were blessed with the higher-than-everyone-else holiness status (needed to be God’s servants and priests) they also paid a heavy price for that election. They were not given hereditary tribal land holdings in Israel as were the other 12 tribes. Looking on a map from the days of Joshua and for several hundred years after, we’ll find fairly well defined districts that were assigned as “forever” land holdings to each tribe; but nowhere is there a territory of Levi. Instead the Levites were assigned 48 cities scattered among the 12 tribal districts along with a few acres of pastureland just outside the walls of those cities.

It is this understanding of both the Levites’ status and they’re lack of land that Israel is to respond by means of their corporate duty to economically support the tribe of Levi in exchange for the Levite’s duties to the central sanctuary, the local courts, and as teachers of the Law.

The focus of verses 3-5 is to address the livelihood of the priests and Levites and we’re told that this livelihood is to come primarily from the sacrifices of firstlings as offered by members of the other 12 tribes (meaning the firstborn animal sacrifices and the firstfruits from the field and the tree crops). As we covered a long time ago in Leviticus there were many specific classifications of sacrifices, each with a different protocol and purpose. Therefore back in verse 1 we’re told that a group of sacrifices (typically rendered in English as “fire offerings” or

something similar) is to be the source of sacrificial offerings from which the priests and Levites are to keep a portion for themselves. The Hebrew term for “fire offering” is *ishsheh*; and it is NOT the same thing as that common term “the burnt offering”, which in Hebrew is *olah*. *Ishsheh* represents a series of sacrifices that are designated as those that while a portion is burned up on the Altar another and larger portion can be used for food for the clergy; while *Olah* indicates a class of sacrifice in which the ENTIRE animal is burned up and NONE of the meat can be used for food by anyone. Let me be clear about something because someone asked me about it last week and it was a good question; was all the meat from the sacrificed animal placed on the Altar fire and then some of it removed for food when it was cooked? The answer is no; that which was to be held back for the clergy and the worshipper was not put onto the Altar fire. This wasn’t like a backyard bar-b-que where the meat was cooked on a communal grill and then everyone grabbed a rib or a burger. That Altar was not a place where meat was cooked; rather the meat was to be destroyed, burned up completely until it was only ashes.

Three specific parts of the various sacrificial animals (when used as fire offerings) were to be set aside as food for the priests and Levites: the shoulder (meaning the upper part of the right foreleg than goes from shoulder to knee), and that part of the stomach that is often called the “fourth stomach”. Also the clergy is to receive the jowls and the tongue. Now for most moderns the last couple of items are considered as waste meat but that was NOT the case in this era. These were good and desired portions of meat and not just in the Hebrew culture.

In verse 4 we’re told that in addition to these meat portions certain agricultural produce was to go to the priests. We’ve talked on several occasions about firstfruits offerings; well, it was understood that ALL firstfruits were to go to the Levite clergy as their portion. And in addition to grain and fruit this included olive oil and wine, and even wool from the sheerings of the sheep among a rather lengthy list of other items.

Starting in verse 6 we get this cryptic statement that a Levite can go from any settlement within the land of Israel “to the place the Lord has chosen”, and if that Levite desires he can serve there. Here’s all this is getting at: most Levites lived in small towns and cities in remote areas of the various Israelite tribal territories. It was in one of these 48 Levite towns that they lived and served. Many Levites, however, desired to serve at the awesome central sanctuary, the seat of religious power, and not just at some local village and dealing with mundane everyday matters. Therefore the Lord makes it clear that all Levites are to be given an opportunity to participate at the Tabernacle if they so desire. And later we’ll see an interesting system of “courses” devised whereby the Levites are organized into groups from various areas and are given their turn (as a unit) to officiate and serve at the Temple in a set rotation. And as it says in verse 8, they shall share and share alike from the offerings and sacrifices; no one is to be excluded or to get more than another.

Next, chapter 18 discusses the all-important office of Prophet. And it is interesting that what

has been set down as limitations and warnings for Judges and Kings not to abuse their power, and then the instruction for Israel to make provisions for priests and Levites, now turns to the duty of the people to pay close heed to the Prophets. And in this case it is that ALL Israel is to listen to these Prophets: Judges, Kings, Priests and citizens at large. Prophets represented an official office within Israel. These people were not self-appointed per se. While priests were to observe and teach and in some cases adjudicate the written Word of God (the Law, the Torah), the Prophets were more Moses-like (or maybe more Samuel-like). The Prophets were those who had a legitimate line of communication directly with God.

Since Prophets are God's messengers to Israel and to Israel's leaders then Israel is of course to obey the words of the Prophets because they are God's words.

Beginning in verse 9 a couple of scenarios are laid out for Israel: 1st is what Israel's attitude is to be toward the "abhorrent practices of the nations"; that is, pagan practices as concerns communicating with the gods. What pagans were usually doing in attempting to communicate with the spirit world was to find out about the future. I'm not sure that there is a greater temptation among men than to find some way, any way, to find out about what the future holds that might directly affect them. Nostradamus, Edgar Casey, and so many other psychics and fortunetellers are held in high regard in every part of the world because it seems everyone has reason to want to know what lies ahead. God has authorized exactly one way for us to know about the future: and it is Him. If it isn't from Him, we're not to seek it. Further He says that the way He lets us know what part of the future He deems He wants us to know is by means of His prophets and/or His Word.

Verses 10 and 11 list a whole series of unauthorized means to attempt to get at the future and it ranges from offering a child sacrifice to a god in exchange for a favor of information, to divining, sorcery, and even attempting to talk with the spirits of the dead. Now while this is not intended to be an exhaustive list of every possible means of trying to apprehend the future, it does cover the most common and well-known methods. And what is listed includes things like reading the entrails of animals, talking with ghosts, looking at patterns of oil or blood dripped into bowls of water, magic, and so on.

And the Lord says that anyone who does these things is abhorrent to the Lord. Let's be clear: you know those cute little Psychic hotlines advertised on TV? Tarot cards we can buy at Barnes and Noble? Palm Readers next to the Tattoo Parlors? We might joke about them, but those folks are serious about what they do. And God is serious about it too. All I can tell you is that for God's people to even get close to dealing with folks who do such things (even as a lark) puts us into a direct confrontation with Yehoveh. Not a good idea. And the Lord says that THIS is the reason that He is kicking the Canaanites out of their land and giving it to Israel. Therefore Israel is not to do what the Canaanites have been doing in trying to divine the future.

Rather says the Lord in verse 15, He will raise up a Prophet for Israel for this purpose; that when it is God's will that Israel know things about the future God will anoint a Prophet to tell them. And in that quote it is made crystal clear that when a Prophet speaks, Israel is to obey.

But it also says in verse 20 that, if a prophet speaks something that God didn't tell him to say, or speaks in the name of false gods, then that Prophet must be executed. This is a HEBREW Prophet that is being spoken of here.

So the 1st issue concerns pagan prophets, but now the issue is Israelite Prophets. And the question becomes a sticky one that has bedeviled Judaism and Christianity forever: how can we tell a false prophet from a true Prophet of Yehoveh, when both are claiming to be loyal Believers of the God of Israel and both are claiming that their word is directly from God and therefore trustworthy? The simplistic answer lies in verse 22: when a prophet says he is speaking a word from the Lord and it does not happen, then that person is a false prophet and should not be listened to. Yet sometimes the prophecy that is spoken is to occur so far into the future, how will the people hearing it ever know which guy to believe?

This opens up quite a can of worms as well as a pet peeve of mine and it concerns those who make a habit of saying to others, "I have a word from the Lord for you". In other words, they have declared themselves to be Prophets. If you are tempted to put yourself in that position (or you are convinced that the Lord has indeed anointed you as a Prophet) then I ask you to think long and hard about what we're reading here in Deuteronomy 18. God leaves no wiggle room at all; if you truly have a message from Him it is infallible and it must happen precisely as given. If it doesn't happen then it wasn't from Him, it was from another source, and the Prophet who spoke it is false. A Prophet can speak the truth 10 times and be right, but if he should get carried away and say something 1 time that is NOT from God, the consequences for delivering a false message can be pretty severe, with the loss of credibility among his peers being the least of it.

Even God's greatest Prophets (the ones who have books of the Bible named for them) worried constantly about whether to tell the people what they believed God told them. They often had doubts about whether they were correct; they wondered whether or not what had actually entered their minds was indeed divine in origin. Or was it their imaginations working overtime, or even worse? God's greatest Prophets knew that being chosen as His Prophet didn't mean THEY were incapable of being wrong, it only meant that GOD was incapable of being wrong. Therefore all of God's Prophets were by definition "reluctant" Prophets in every sense, in that they weren't seeking to be a Prophet when God called them and they weren't even sure they wanted the job when the Lord gave them the message. They were usually full of doubts about whether to actually deliver the Lord's message to the people. Part of the reason for this insecurity was that Prophets were often beaten, jailed and martyred, and at the least had very difficult and often isolated lives. This is because the messages from God were usually not ones that the people particularly wanted to hear; you know the old saying about how people seem

always to want to kill the messenger of unwelcome news.

There was another facet to this predicament as well: Prophets understood God's sovereignty to a point that we generally don't. They knew full well that God might send them with a message that if the people didn't stop doing thus and so and repent, that God was going to destroy them. The Prophets also understood that it was God who would determine if the people complied; the Lord didn't consider the views of humans who merely stood back and observed. So like the story of Jonah at Ninevah, Jonah was concerned that the people of Ninevah might actually listen to God's ultimatum, repent in their hearts (invisibly to humans but exactly what God was looking for) and avoid the prophesy of destruction Jonah pronounced to them. The result would be that God would overturn His decision to annihilate the city and withhold His wrath. From Jonah's standpoint the prophecy of destruction that he preached then might not occur and that would have made Him a false prophet in the people's eyes; and at the least his own people would no longer hear him, and at worst he might be executed for being a false prophet. He was so concerned about this prospect that he fled and tried to hide from Yehoveh; God had to retrieve him and threaten him to deliver the message to the people of Ninevah. All of this anxiety and trouble that Jonah faced was completely standard operating procedure for God's Prophets in the Bible, and it's my contention that such a pattern never changes.

So let's understand: while being a Prophet is a great and honorable thing, it is fraught with danger and difficulty. It's not something to be sought after. Telling someone what you believe to be a word from the Lord is no trivial thing, and the Bible's Prophets are the greatest example of that.

Next week we'll begin Deuteronomy 19.