

Robert Vannoy, Deuteronomy Lecture 15

© 2011 Dr. Robert Vannoy, Dr. Perry Phillips, Ted Hildebrandt

Altars, Summary [Final Lecture]

1. Uncut Stone Altars: Exodus 20:24-26

Why only earth and uncut stones for construction of altars? Was that meant only for the wilderness? Hobart points out that it is not reasonable to conclude that this is a reference only to the wilderness; it was meant for the time after entrance into Canaan. This was the kind of altar that was to be used. In fact, instructions for the altar were given in Exodus 20 right at Mt. Sinai; there is no thought at that point of 40 years in the wilderness. The golden calf apostasy had not occurred; the law had just been given at Sinai. The anticipation is that soon Israel will come into the Promise Land. In the Exodus 20 passage there were strong regulations on how the altar was to be built, the place it was to be located, which was removed from arbitrary choice of the people. Notice it says “that in all the places where I record my name I will come unto you.” So the regulations were on how it was to be built and the place it was to be located, but it gives no indication that only one place was to be used. Certainly it is clear that the practice during the time of Samuel corresponded to that law, and there was more than one altar. So Halwarda asks the question: How then do we harmonize Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 12? Do we adopt laws and conclusions, or is it a long period of development--originally with a multiplicity of altars developing into centralization of a single altar. Does Deuteronomy 12 demand centralization?

2. Deuteronomy 12:14

So the discussion of chapter 12, verse 14, becomes really a critical verse. You read in verse 14, prefaced it with verse 13: “Be careful not to sacrifice your burnt offerings anywhere you please. Offer them only at the place the LORD will choose in one of your tribes, and there observe everything I command you.” “Not in every place, but in the place in one of your tribes.” Halwarda says that you cannot stop with the first impression you may get in the phrase, “in one of your tribes.” (Deuteronomy 12:14) According to Hebrew usage, that does not necessarily indicate only one because frequently this kind of expression can have the same idea as the English word “any,”—“in any of your tribes.” So that it could mean “in any one of your tribes” or “in any number of your tribes.” It’s not explicitly clear.

3. Deuteronomy 18:6 Levites Coming

Now, what Halwarda points out is the analogy with Deuteronomy 18:6. In Deuteronomy 18:6, you have the regulation, “If a Levite comes,” and notice the King James translates this part: “And if a Levite comes from any of thy gates out of all Israel, where he sojourned, and comes with all the desire of his mind unto the place which the LORD shall choose, then he shall minister in the name of the LORD his God, as all his brethren the Levites do, which stand there before the LORD.” Now, the expression in the Hebrew is really identical, but the difference is in the debate of the Hebrew word *'ehad*: “from *one* of your gates” or “from *any* of your gates.” But the point is that this is not a rule for a Levite coming from *one* particular gate, but for *every* Levite coming from *any* gate. “If a Levite comes, any Levite comes, from any of thy gates.” So the expression can be translated explicitly either way “from one of” or “from any of.” It depends on a large

degree on the context in which it is placed.

4. Deuteronomy 12:14: Numbers 16:7 [Korah Rebellion], Singularity?

But then you notice, getting back to Deuteronomy 12:14, it says, “in the place.” Isn’t that in the singular? If more than one place was meant would it not require a plural, “in the places which the Lord shall choose”? But again, not necessarily; it may, but not necessarily so. In Numbers 16:7, you read in connection with the uprising of the rebellion with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram in the wilderness: “Take censers from all and put fire therein put incense in them before the Lord tomorrow, and it shall be that the man whom the LORD thus chooses, he shall be holy. You take too much upon you, ye sons of Levi” and so forth. Now the point is: “The man whom the Lord thus chooses.” The phrase is identical there: “the man” is singular, but the question is if the office of the priest and leaders comprised of Moses and Aaron can be extended to the 250. There are 250 people that are involved. So the choice is between two plurals, but the text says “the man,” singular. The meaning is clear in the context of Numbers: “the man” is used whether there were two men or 250 men. It’s saying, “the man whom the Lord will choose,” but not necessarily, or exclusively, only *one* man. It’s either Moses and Aaron or these 250 people that were taking the same office as Moses and Aaron. It’s going to be “the man which the Lord shall choose,” but in the sense of more than one; it’s those who are to be the leaders.

Now, I think exegetically you have to conclude on the basis of the expression in the chapter itself that Deuteronomy 12 can mean one place and one tribe, or more than one place, but the Lord will indicate this in any of the tribes. It can mean either on the basis of language use. So that really Deuteronomy 12 says the same thing as Exodus

20:24: “In all the places where I record my name I will come unto you and I will bless you.” The question is not one or more, but whether the places are selected by human, arbitrary means or by divine choice. It’s not in “every place” chosen by humans, but “in the place” chosen by God. Is that multiplicity versus centralization – no. The question is not one or more, but how are the places selected: by human arbitrary means or by divine choice? That’s the point. And at that point there is consistency between Exodus and Deuteronomy.

5. Deuteronomy 12:18 Whole Family Journey

He also says that the motifs behind the specifications of Exodus 20 have been shown to have been a prohibition against precisely the kind of altar that existed in Canaan. Israel was to have a distinctively different kind of altar than the heathen Canaanites did. Their worship was not to be confused with the Canaanite worship. But the point of the regulation in Exodus is to make very clear that the Israelite altar is to be distinctively different from the Canaanites altars.

He also says that Deuteronomy 12 says that all the offerings are to be brought to the chosen place, or places, and then it is added the whole family will appear with servants and Levites. Verse 18 of Deuteronomy 12: “Now must ye stand before the Lord thy God in the place the Lord thy God should choose: thou, thy son, thy daughter, thy manservant, thy maidservant, and the Levite who was within thy gate.”

Now what he points out is this is the whole family with the servants and the Levites. Think of what that meant practically for a city such as Dan north of Galilee 150 km from Jerusalem. Minimally, three times a year at the peak of harvest, offering the free will offering and other required offerings. The whole family was to make a trip to

Jerusalem. Now Halwarda, in his article discusses what the meaning would be in a European context. It would be roughly an absence of a week, minimally. It would be like us today going to Florida, or something, or perhaps farther, to make these required offerings. What about the Levites? Consider if there were many families in the village. A Levite would be on the road the whole year.

6. Single Sanctuary But Multiplicity of Altars

Then Halwarda says, “Why if you were a Levite from a northern town not just stay in Jerusalem and meet them when they come?” He says that it is impractical to have only one place of sacrifice; it couldn’t be carried out. His conclusion is that Israel never had a law that bound the cult to one place. Rather, they always lived under a law that provided for local places as well as a central sanctuary--originally at Shiloh, later in Jerusalem. That doesn’t mean that there wasn’t a central sanctuary and there wasn’t primacy of sanctuary connected with the ark and the temple but that was not to the point of exclusiveness or illegality of any offering at any other altar except the sanctuary.

7. Location of Altars

So he said what was regulated was the place where altars were to be built: not just arbitrarily anywhere, but the places that the Lord somewhat made clear. How? By theophany or whatever is not explicitly described, but it is restricted to places the Lord indicated. The materials out of which altars were to be built were to be regulated, and the offerings that were to be brought were to be regulated. So God provided for altars scattered in various localities, but that doesn’t mean there is an altar in every village or every few miles--just arbitrarily everywhere--because in Deuteronomy 12:21 it says: “If

the place which the Lord thy God has chosen to put his name there is far from thee, then thou shall kill of thy herd and thy flock which the Lord has given thee and commanded thee and thou shall eat in thy gate whatsoever thy soul desires.” In other words, animals can be killed or eaten in places other than going into the sanctuary to slaughter animals. Distance might make that impractical. So it sounds like altars weren’t just anywhere throughout the land there was some restriction in connection with the Lord’s designation of certain places but not restricted to a central sanctuary with all the other altars being illegal. So God provided many altars to keep all his people from the temptation of Canaanite worship all around them and to keep them in fellowship according to the provision in the sacrificial system that the Lord had made without making that system almost impossible to follow because of the extreme distances.

8. Manley’s Conclusino: Not Number of Altars but Their Character

Basically, that is Halwarda’s view. I’d say you find roughly the same position in Thompson when we read his commentary and his introduction. If you want also to see a very similar viewpoint, there’s Manley, *The Book of the Law* that I have asked the graduate students to read. Manley has a whole chapter on this and basically he comes to the same conclusion. He says, “The centralization language use is capable of having this interpretation read out of or into it. The real focus in the context of Deuteronomy 12 is not between many YAHWEH altars and one, but between those of the Canaanites and to other gods whose name is to be destroyed and the place and name of the place of where YAHWEH shall abide.” It is not their number, but their character, which is in question. “Whether the words be read according to one center or more than one, they do not exclude the possibility of other altars dully authorized. Deuteronomy 16:21, 22

contemplates their existence, and in Deuteronomy 27 the building of one is commanded. So it's not multiplicity of altars that is argued against in Deuteronomy.

Another book is H. M. Segal, *The Pentateuch: Its Composition and Authorship*. It has a chapter on the centralization of worship, page 87 and following. I could read that, but I think our time is just about up, and again it's basically the same conclusion. Manley, Thompson, Segal generally have the view that the multiplicity the altars was not excluded in Jerusalem by Deuteronomic legislation.

9. Course Summary -- 3 Areas: Structure and Integrity (treaties), Centralization of Worship, and Sequence of the Law Codes

Now it seems to me just as we draw this whole introductory section to a conclusion that there are three issues in Deuteronomic studies that are significant on which presently there is a very solid orthodox counterpart to critical theory. The first is this whole structure of the book, and Kline's work and others with the treaty/covenant analogy have given a good argument supporting the integrity and the unity of the book of Deuteronomy over against critical theory.

The second issue is this matter of centralization worship, critical to Wellhausen's view. I think the position of Halwarda, Thompson, Manley and others face that issue and give an alternative position putting the issue on quite a different perspective than Wellhausen does.

The third matter, and I can't get into it because it's complex and detailed, is the matter of this so-called progression of altars through the J code, E code, Deuteronomy code, holiness, and priestly codes. In other words, a sequence of parallel development and change in some kind of historical progression. Manley deals with that beautifully in

this book *The Book of the Law: Studies in the Date of Deuteronomy*. He points out numerous problems with the scheme of JEDP's progressive development and successive codes. This requires a detailed consideration of specific laws that contrast with the covenant code in Deuteronomy and the conclusions that can be drawn from that. Manley's discussion of that is an excellent response countering Wellhausen.

So in those three areas, structure and integrity, centralization of worship, and sequence of codes, in the past few years there has been an enormous amount of work done from an evangelical perspective that I think is of great value to counter the positions that have just dominated the field in the study of the book of Deuteronomy. Next class we will get into student presentations on Deuteronomy chapters 4 through 30.

Transcribed by Connillia Williams and Ted Hildebrandt

Rough edited by Ted Hildebrandt

Final edit by Dr. Perry Phillips

Re-narrated by Dr. Perry Phillips