

## Session 9: Deuteronomy 16-18

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This is Dr. Cynthia Parker and her teaching on the book of Deuteronomy. This is session 9, Deuteronomy 16 - 18, on leadership.

### **Review and Introduction**

We already talked about the feasting that is given to us in Deuteronomy 16. The final verses of 16, I think, actually go really well with chapters 17 and 18 because they're part of the conversation of how do the Israelites set up a leadership structure once they go into the land. I always find it really interesting that the idea of leadership and establishing a system of leadership doesn't show up until now. So, already we've seen this persuasive speech from chapters 5 to 11 and getting the people to adhere to the statutes and commandments that God is giving to his people. We've already seen in chapter 12 that God is the one who is choosing the place to put his name, and it acts as a centralizing kind of source of identity for people regardless of where it is that they live in the land.

And we've already seen how the people have to be meticulous about all that is in their midst, the detestable things or abominations in their midst, to eradicate them, even if that means killing a false prophet or even killing a close friend or a son. The priority needs to be that God is the only God who is worshipped. We looked at kosher laws, and we looked at the beginning ideas of social ethics.

And only after all of those things did we stop and pause and say when you go into the land as a community, as you're trying to build a nation in a place, you're going to need a system of leaders to help the land function well.

So, we're going to take a look at those. They start at the end of chapter 16, but we're going to try to keep in mind a few different things before I start reading.

### The Reign of God & Leaders in the City Gate & His Chosen Place

So, one, this whole system of leadership is subservient to or falls under the reign of God. So, this is God's choice. There's a huge emphasis on who God is choosing and why he is choosing them. We're also going to notice since we've already talked about city gates and the chosen place, we're going to pay attention to where all these different leaders are located. And there is a combination of leaders located in the city gates, and leaders are located at the chosen place. And there is a connection here, an ebb and flow that goes between these two places. And this is just building on the structure of place that we already saw initiated and started in chapter 12.

And again, we're going to focus on how in the latter part of chapter 17, from 17 to 18, the focus of the leaders who are mentioned in these chapters is all God's choice. So, again, we have this system of leadership that is being built. It is God's choice, but in a way, to kind of bridge and make sure that we are still dwelling together well in the land.

### **Mutual Responsibility**

So, we're going to start looking at chapter 16, and again before I start reading, we're going to notice the shift between the center and all of the different city gates or distributed places, how there's an emphasis on mutual responsibility. So, even though judges and priests are being mentioned as those who are fulfilling leadership positions, there is a mutual responsibility there. The regular people, the other people in the city gates, still participate.

## **Justice and Righteousness**

I also want us to think about, or at least mention, these sister concepts justice (mishpat) and righteousness (sedeqah). So, justice and righteousness, they go hand-in-hand. Righteousness could be described as this is God's character. It is upright. It is the plum line. It is straight up and down. God is always talked about as being righteous. So, the laws that God is giving to his people are righteous. Justice is something that happens. If this is righteousness, if this is God's character, if the people swing out of line and are not in line with righteousness, justice is the act of bringing things back together back into righteousness. So, justice is saying this person is out of line, or this organization's out of line, and pulling it back so that the people can represent God's righteousness.

### **Deuteronomy 16:20: Justice or Righteousness?**

This is interesting for me because I find at the very beginning of chapter 16, we look at verse 20, and you should read this in your translation. My translation of the Bible says, "Justice and only justice, you shall pursue that you may live and possess the land which the Lord your God has given to you."

I wonder what your translation says. Almost every time when I have a class, and I have a student sitting in front of me, almost every translation says "justice." And that sounds good. It sounds like the right word because we want to be pursuing justice, the act of helping people and bringing things back in line with what God says is righteous. Except when we look at the Hebrew and verse 20, this is the Hebrew, "Sadeq Sadeq," "righteousness, righteousness." So, it's curious to me that it is always translated into English, almost always translated into English, as "justice." Justice seems like something you should be pursuing, and it says pursue "justice, justice" you should pursue. Except the emphasis is

actually on righteousness, God's character. So, the emphasis is not necessarily the action, by bringing everyone in line, but pursuing God's righteousness. That is what you should pursue so that you can live long in the land.

### **Leaders: Deuteronomy 16 – Judges in the Gates**

Okay, so let's back up, and let's actually go through the different types of people that are taught by the different types of leaders and leadership roles.

So in chapter 16, the first kind of cluster of people that we talk about that are mentioned are judges. But then, we have regular citizens who are mentioned, and we have priests. And we're going to see that these activities, leadership activities, take place in both the city gates and the chosen place.

So, read with me. We're going to start with chapter 16, verse 18. "You shall appoint for yourselves judges and officers in all of your towns, you may have in all of your cities." The Hebrew says, "in all of your gates," and that is reflecting actually how society actually worked. When you have larger cities, they're protected by gate complexes. These gate complexes were quite large, and there were lots of activities that happened in the gate. The gate becomes the heart of every state. This is where all the gossip happens. It is where people would beg for food. It's where if you have extra food, you could sell. So, there's buying, selling, and begging in the city gates. We're also going to have judges who sit in the city gates administering justice.

So, you have judges and officers in all of your towns or gates, "which the Lord your God is giving you according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment. You shall not distort justice. You shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe. For a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous."

This, for me, is interesting. We've already talked about eyes and eyes being your perception of the world. There are a lot of repetitive warnings for people not to take a bribe because it blinds the eyes of people.

We also have as a very interesting kind of aside, a little, if you want to track this down and just follow how it goes throughout biblical narratives, we find that with some of the leaders, when the Bible talks about leaders and towards the end of their rule, it will talk about them being clear-sighted, still having sharp eyesight or not. It might be in reference to this, maybe not. It could just be old age. But I find it interesting when the biblical writers are so intent on letting us know his eyesight has dimmed. And therefore, you know, like Moses, when we get to chapter 34, Moses, his eyesight was clear all the way to the end. Okay, so do not take a bribe because a bribe will blind the eyes.

### **Deuteronomy 16:20 Warnings Against Idolatry – All Citizens Responsible**

Now we have verse 20, and I'm going to read it the way that it is written in Hebrew with "righteousness, righteousness." "You shall pursue that you may live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not plant for yourself an Asherah of any kind of tree beside the altar of the Lord your God, which you shall make for yourself. You shall not set up for yourself a sacred pillar which the Lord your God hates. You shall not sacrifice to the Lord your God an ox or sheep, which has a blemish or any defect, for that is a detestable thing to the Lord your God. If there is found in your midst," so, again, like chapter 13, you, as citizens, are responsible for all that is in your midst. So, "if you find in your midst, in any of your towns, which the Lord your God is giving you, a man or a woman who does what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God by transgressing his covenant and has gone and served other gods and worshipped them or the sun or the moon or any of the heavenly host, which I

have commanded. And if it is told to you and you have heard of it, then you shall inquire thoroughly."

So, who's the you? It's not necessarily the leaders. It's not necessarily the judges. It's you, the citizenry. So, we have judges, who are handling these cases in the city gates, but you, the citizen, every one of you, are also responsible. So, if you've heard of this, you need to go seek it out to see if it is true.

In verse 5, "Then you bring out the man or the woman who has done this evil deed to your gate, that is the man or the woman, and you shall stone them to death. On the evidence of two witnesses or three, he who is to die shall be put to death. He shall not be put to death on the evidence of one." So, there's no manipulation or personal grievances that can be brought against someone, and it is two or three or more citizens who have gone out who can state, yes, this person has gone against God's covenant. You take them to the city gate. The understanding is the judge is going to be at the city gate. So, you have the leadership of the city and the citizens of the city who are making this decision.

In verse 7, "The hand of the witness shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward, the hand of the people. So, you shall purge the evil from your midst. If any case is too difficult for you to decide between one kind of homicide or between one kind of lawsuit or another, between one kind of assault or another, being cases of dispute in your courts or in your gates, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the Lord your God chooses. So, you shall come to the Levitical priests or the judge who is in office in those days. And you shall inquire of them, and they will declare to you the verdict of the case."

## City Gates and the Chosen Place

So, we're noticing that here the city gates and the chosen place are not in opposition to each other. It's not a matter of the chosen place being a supreme court. So, you lost your case in the city gates, and so you appeal to the chosen place. It's not that at all. It's more along the matter of if something is too complicated if you need a more specific knowledge of the law, if there is something that is too hard to figure out in your own context, take that difficult case to the chosen place. And at the chosen place, we have Levites because that is their inheritance to work at the place God chooses. But we also have judges. And we saw judges at the city gates as well.

So again, we're seeing this connection between the two places. And just as it was really important in your city gates to check and make sure no abomination is happening in your midst, at the chosen place, this place that represents the place where God has chosen to put his name, that place too must maintain an element of holiness.

And so, in verse 9, it says, "So you shall come to the Levitical priest, or the judge was in office in those days. You shall inquire of them. They will declare to you the verdict in the case. You shall do according to the terms of the verdict which they declare to you from that place which the Lord chooses. You shall be careful to observe according to all that they teach you, according to the terms of the law which they teach you, and according to the verdict which they tell you, you shall do. You shall not turn aside from the word which they declared to you to the right or to the left. The man who acts presumptuously by not listening to the priest who stands there to serve the Lord your God, nor to the judge that man shall die. Thus, you shall purge evil from Israel."

## **Judges at the Gates & Levitical Priests at the Chosen Place**

So we have very similar ideas of what's happening in the city gates and at the chosen place. There are leaders from within the people who rise up and become the judges in the city gates. There are the Levitical priests who God has already chosen to be priests. They are at the chosen place administering the law for any kind of extra complicated idea. But righteousness needs to be upheld at both places.

## **The King**

Now let's think about the king. So, this is a really interesting part in Deuteronomy because Deuteronomy's version of a king is quite different than other ancient Near Eastern kings. So other ancient Near Eastern kings, the king was a symbol of the human power of acceptable social behavior. He was the creator of laws. Some kings set themselves up as semi-divine. They often did set themselves up as the ones who, as they came to power, everything is in disarray and chaos, and they were the ones that can bring order to society, so executor of the law, the builder of the law, the one who is not necessarily subservient to the law. So, the king kind of stands above and beyond the law. And this is really quite a different picture than what we get in the book of Deuteronomy.

## **King as God's Choice**

So when Deuteronomy talks about the king again, we focus on the fact that the king is supposed to be God's choice of king. And we're focusing again on the fact that the king is from among their brothers. So there aren't any laws established so that the king is of a hierarchy, where there is a king that goes from father to son, to son, to grandson, and great-grandson. It's not that. It's God's choice from among the brothers.

## **Laws for the King, Contra Ancient Near Easter Kings**

So, I'm reading in chapter 17 in verse 14. "When you enter the land, which the Lord your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me like all the other nations who are around me.' You shall surely set a king over you whom the Lord your God chooses, one from among your brothers; you shall set as king over yourself. You may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not of your country. Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause people to return to Egypt to multiply horses since the Lord has said to you, you shall never again return that way. He shall not multiply wives for himself; else his heart will turn away. Nor shall he greatly increase silver or gold for himself."

So, if we pause again, all of this is counterintuitive to how the ancient Near East set up Kings and kingdoms. Because the country was there to support the king, and the king was at the epic, the epitome of leadership. He also could make business deals. Collecting horses is a way of saying that your country is powerful enough to collect war horses. Horses were used for war, not for peace, and not for agriculture. So, collecting horses is a way of stocking up and being ready to go to war.

Same as collecting taxes, hoarding wealth, and making several marriage agreements, and that goes way beyond just being very lustful. It's much more of a political agreement between kingdoms. So, when one kingdom and another made a political agreement, there were women that would go from one household to the other household. That marriage contract was a political contract of peace between kingdoms.

So, God says, when it is that you look around, you see all these other nations, and you end up wanting to be like them. You can, but you will choose

my person, the person I choose to be king over you, and that person cannot go and do all of these things like all the other kings around you.

And it goes even further. So, it says in verse 18, "Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom. He shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by carefully observing all the words of this law and the statutes that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen. And that he may not turn aside from the commandments to the right or to the left. So that he and his sons may continue to live long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel."

So, once more, we have this purity that must exist in the midst of Israel. But what is interesting is, again, in contrast to other ancient Near Eastern kings, this king is not above the law. This king is to write a copy of the law, the physical act engagement of writing of letting the law soak in it to himself, his mode of behavior, the way that he is going to rule his kingdom with wisdom, comes from the laws God has given his people, not the king given his people. So, God is the one who takes a state of chaos and disarray and brings order to it, not the king.

So, again, the king is subservient, and the king is not supposed to elevate himself above his brothers, for he is one of his brothers.

Now, just out of curiosity, and for me because I like to pay attention to place and the organization of place, when we looked at the previous leadership rules, we said the judges are in the city gates. The citizens are active in the city gates. The priests, the Levitical priests, live in the cities, but their job is at the chosen place, and we find judges at the chosen place. Where's the king? In these verses in chapter 17, the king isn't given a specific place.

So, as the Israelites go into the land, and they're organizing themselves, and they're learning ethical behaviors again, the king is almost an afterthought because God is actually the king over his people. God is the one who rules the land. He's the one who invites everyone to his table to provide for his people. The king should not elevate himself over his countrymen. The king is not given a place of elevation or a central place in the organization of Israelite society.

Now, you may say, he does need to write the law and do it in the presence of the Levitical priests. So, maybe it suggests that he is close to the chosen place. Maybe but the Levitical priests can live anywhere. So, it doesn't dictate that the king is at the center. I find that to be really interesting because it again it's showing us the priorities of Deuteronomy. The priority is God is the one in charge, and everyone is trying to pursue his righteousness. And a king is taken out of the assumed role of being the one person at the pinnacle, at the top, and is removing the king and putting the king even among all of the brothers.

### **Deuteronomy 18**

So now, as we move into chapter 18, we're going to be looking at the Levites. And once more, with the Levites, we're going to have a movement back and forth between the chosen place and the city gates.

So, in chapter 18 and verse 1, it says, "The Levitical priests, the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel." In other words, they don't get the land inheritance that the other people get. "They shall eat the Lord's offerings by fire and his portion. They should have no inheritance among their countrymen. The Lord is their inheritance, as he promised them. Now this shall be the priests' due from the people, from those who offer a sacrifice, either an ox or sheep of those which they should give to the priest, the shoulder, and the two cheeks and the stomach. You shall give him the first fruits of your grain,

your new wine, and your oil, and the first shearing of your sheep. For the Lord, your God has chosen him and his sons from all of your tribes to stand and serve in the name of the Lord forever. Now, if a Levite comes from any of your towns throughout Israel, where he resides, and comes whenever he desires to the place which the Lord chooses, then he shall serve in the name of the Lord his God, like all of his fellow Levites you stand there before the Lord. They shall eat equal portions except what they received from the sale of their father's estate."

So, we're going to pause there. Again, quite interesting we're introduced to a little bit more of the particularities of the Levites. They live among their brothers, but they don't own property. And why not? Well, God has given the land to all of Israel. The land is Israel's inheritance. But the Levites are given the inheritance of the pleasure, the privilege, of ministering before the Lord at the chosen place. So, the Levites are actually set up as examples for the rest of Israel for how they should behave. They are a nation of priests, in a way. They're all supposed to be reflecting God's righteousness, the Levites; their inheritance is being able to minister at the chosen place.

So, what shows us, when do the Levites prosper? When all of the rest of Israel prospers, because how did the Levites eat? The generosity of the Israelites brought things before the Lord. So, portions of the sacrifice go to the Levites. So, the Levites who were they're ministering before the Lord, they prosper when all of Israel prospers. All is well when everyone is fulfilling their role when the rest of the Israelites are bringing the gifts they should be bringing to the chosen place. At the chosen place, all of the Levites eat together as equals and share equal portions.

So again, we have this move back and forth between the city gates and the chosen place.

## **How the Israelites & Prophets Should Not Act**

So, in the rest of 18, we have a few verses that talk about how the Israelites should not act. So, they do not act according to the ways other kingdoms work. So, the other kingdoms also have prophets, but they have prophets that behave in a particular way—so evoking magic as a way to try to communicate and engage the gods and then give those messages to the people.

So, in chapter 18 in verse 10, it begins, "There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer" and it goes on. "One who casts a spell."

In other words, this role of the prophet should not look like the prophets of other nations. It's a little bit like we just had this rule of the king should not look like the rule of the kings of other nations. There will indeed be a prophet, but it depends on God's choice, not the people.

## **A Prophet Like Moses**

In verse 15, it says, "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me, from among you from your countrymen. You shall listen to him. This is in accordance with all that you asked of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, 'Let me not hear again, the voice of the Lord my God. Let me not see the great fire anymore, or I will die.' The Lord said to me, 'They have spoken well. I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you,'" speaking of Moses. "And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command. It shall come about that whoever will not listen to my words, which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in my name, which I've not

commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.' You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the Lord has spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about nor comes true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You shall not be afraid of him."

And so we have a prophet chosen by God, and again we have a person who is of the people, among the people, chosen by God and told to speak and represent God to the people. That prophet should be different than, and look different than, the prophet of other countries.

### **Prophet Like Moses and Jesus**

Now I'll just say as a quick little aside before we kind of tie up this leadership section, this idea of a prophet, and in verse 15 and verse 18. It says, "I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you," like Moses. This idea that Moses, Moses was remembered by the Israelites for being a great and righteous prophet, one of the best of the prophets. He's the one who went up to Horeb. He's the one who received the law. He's the one who explained the law to the people. And looking at these verses, people always thought there will be a prophet that God will choose to bring to speak to his people.

We have several prophets in the Old Testament, and as we move through the intertestamental period; so, this time between the Old and New Testaments, people as they're developing ideas of messiahship, of a Messiah who is coming, and the Jews are returning to the land, but they still fall under the rule of another kingdom. The Jews start talking about God still going to send a prophet like Moses, who can explain the law, and who will speak God's words on his behalf.

When you read through the Gospel stories, sometimes, when Jesus talks to the disciples, he asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am." And people were saying, 'Well, some people say you're Elijah, some say you're like Jeremiah or one of the prophets, some people say you are the prophet.' It's the idea of this prophet that Deuteronomy says there will be a prophet God will choose to raise up and put his words in that prophet's mouth.

Well, the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew writes to a very Jewish audience, and the Gospel of Matthew, in fact, is very tightly connected to the book of Deuteronomy. All the way down to the organization of the Gospel, it is very similar to the organization of Deuteronomy.

In Matthew 5, the gospel writer says, "Jesus goes up onto a mountain, sits down, and starts to explain to the people these words." It's a very light and gentle echo of what Moses does here in the book of Deuteronomy. So just as Moses goes up to Sinai and receives the law and then comes and explains it to the people. So, too, Jesus goes up to a mountain, brings the people with him, sits down, and explains the law. This is an interesting aside and something to be thinking about.

### **Summary/Conclusion on Leadership and the Israelite Community**

So just to tie up some loose ends, some general ideas about what we have learned about leadership here with the judges, the king, the Levites, and the prophets. Each leader is a member of the community. So instead of having a picture of leadership that looks like a triangle with the king at the top. Instead, we have a picture of a community with pillars from within the community who are raised up. None of them are elevated above all the others. There is no king who is the pinnacle at the top of a power triangle. It's not that at all. So, the leaders are examples for the people of what all of the people are supposed to be

doing. Even the king, he is from the brothers, he is subservient to the law, just like the rest of the Israelites are subservient to the law. So, the leaders are one of many who are representations to the rest of the people the way everyone is supposed to be acting. They are all supposed to be pursuing righteousness. They are all supposed to be judging righteously and all seeking God's voice.

And we noticed that the community is not passive. So, even in this section, where we were talking quite specifically about leadership, how we are maintaining order, and how we are handling disputes, the communities are actively involved. So, leadership and authority are not given to other people. Let those people handle it. It is they are one of us, those leaders are one of us, but I myself am still responsible for participating.

So, this is quite an alternative view to the classical hierarchy system. And it presents quite a rough critique against oppression and abuse of power. So, we see again, and although it hasn't been repeated in this chapter, but we see once more God is the one who has brought his people out of Egypt and is giving them the place in which they are to live. It's telling them to go in an established order in this way because this is the order that pleases me. This is not like the land of Egypt. Egypt was the house of a house of slavery, the fiery furnace of oppression. Egypt served the pharaoh. When you go in, don't establish those kinds of systems of justice of leadership. You go in, and you establish pillars of your community who can be examples to everyone about how everyone else is also supposed to be acting. And everyone is involved.

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