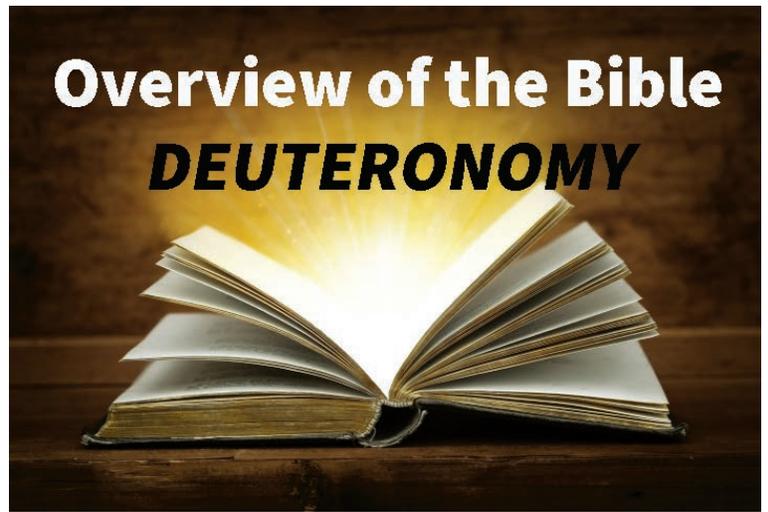


DEUTERONOMY:  
CIVIL ORDINANCES  
*Deuteronomy 17 - 20*  
Lesson 39  
Wednesday, April 7, 2021



CHAPTER 17  
THE PUNISHMENT OF IDOLATRY. CONTROVERSIES TO BE SETTLED BY PRIESTS AND JUDGES.  
ELECTION AND DUTIES OF A KING.

2. **Wickedness]** idolatry, as in 4:25. 5. **Unto thy gates]**.

7. **The hands of the witnesses]** This regulation, by throwing the responsibility of the execution upon the witnesses, would act as a safeguard against false evidence: see on Lv 24:14.

8–13. Difficult cases are to be referred to a supreme court of judicature, consisting of the priests and the chief magistrate, whose decision is final. This court is to sit at the central sanctuary: see Ch 19:8–11. 10. **Inform thee]** rather, 'direct thee.' The common Heb. word for 'law' is derived from this verb and means really 'direction.'

14–20. The Law of the Kingdom. It is to be observed that the people are not commanded to appoint a king, as in the case of the judges (16:18). But the desire for a king is anticipated and is not disapproved. The kingdom is theocratic, i.e., the king is the representative of God and is chosen by Him. The law of the kingdom is the law of God (vv. 18–20). The Church and the State are identical. 14. **Like as all the nations]** the actual words of the people in 1 S 8:20. 15. **Not a stranger]** i.e., a foreigner, a non-Israelite: because Israel is the peculiar people of God. The Jews were always intolerant of foreign authority: cp. Mt 22:17. Messiah, when He came was to rid them of the foreign yoke: see Ac 1:6.

16. **Not multiply horses]** The horse is here forbidden, not as an article of luxury, but as an instrument of warfare, in which the kings of Israel are not to trust: cp. Ps 20:7; 33:16, 17; 147:10. Canaan was not suitable for cavalry, and the conquest of the country was effected by infantry, whose superiority was due to the hilly nature of the country. Solomon imported horses from Egypt (1 K 10:26, 28), and similar reliance upon Egypt was a frequent snare to the Israelites against which the prophets raised a warning voice: see Isa 31:1; Ezk 17:15. Horses were also dedicated to the sun-god by the idolatrous kings of Israel: see 2 Kg 23:11, and on Ex 9:3. 17. Solomon transgressed this commandment with precisely the result here foretold: 1 Kg 11:1–4, and cp. Neh 13:26.

18. **A copy of this law]** i.e., not merely the law of the kingdom contained in vv. 14–20, but the entire Deuteronomic Law which is in the custody of the priests: see on 31:9, 24–26. At the coronation of Josiah, the 'testimony' was put into his hands (2 Ch 23:11); and to this day, when a Christian monarch is crowned, the Bible is delivered to him with the words: 'We present you with this book, the most valuable thing that the world affords. Here is wisdom; this is the royal law: these are the lively (i.e. living) oracles of God,' signifying that the law of God is to be the rule of his kingdom. In LXX the words, **a copy of this law** is represented by the single word 'deuteronomion,' from which the title of the whole book is derived.

20. **And his children]** an indication that a hereditary dynasty is not inconsistent with divine choice.

CHAPTER 18  
THE PRIESTLY DUES. CHARACTER AND WORK OF THE TRUE PROPHET.

1–8. The Priestly dues: see on Nu 18.

4. This is the only place where the priests are said to receive the **first of the fleece**: cp. Nu 18:12.

9–14. Condemnation of superstitious and magical practices.

10. **Pass through the fire**] The context here seems to imply that this was a method of divining or obtaining an oracle from a god: see Lv 18:21. **Uses divination**] a general term, but applied specially to the casting of lots: see e.g. Ezk 21:21. **Observer of times**] RV 'One that practices augury': the meaning of the word is uncertain. **An enchanter**] one who observes omens, watches for signs in the sky or in the flight of birds. **Witch**] RV 'sorcerer,' one who practices magic by means of drugs and spells: cp. on Ex 22:18. 11. **Charmer**] one who **ties knots**, weaves magic spells and curses. **Medium with familiar spirits, or a wizard**] lit. 'one who consults a ghost or familiar spirit,' probably a ventriloquist who professes to hold communication with subterranean spirits. **Necromancer**] one who inquires of the dead: cp. Lv 19:31; 20:27.

Before discussing the law of the prophet, Deuteronomy first lists various techniques employed by paganism for obtaining divine oracles (vv. 9–14). These are not the ways by which Israel will detect the voice of the Lord. What these banned items have in common is that they fall into the category of human wisdom and ingenuity.<sup>1</sup>

15. This is closely connected with what precedes. Israel has no need to employ such arts of divination as other nations use. God Himself will communicate His will to them through the prophets whom He raises up and instructs. See Isa 8:19. The singular number here, **a Prophet**, does not refer to a particular individual, but to a succession of prophets. Israel will never want a prophet to communicate to them God's will. This prophecy found its ultimate fulfilment in Christ, the perfect revealer of God's grace and truth and the new lawgiver is applied to Him by Peter and Stephen: see Ac 3:22; 7:37.

18. This verse contains the definition of a prophet. He is one who speaks the word of God and interprets to men the divine will: see on Nu 11:25, the words of our Lord in Jn 14:10. 20. **That prophet shall die**] For an instance see Jer 28:15–17.

21, 22. At no time is it easy to distinguish the true from the false prophet. Different prophets in Israel not unfrequently contradicted each other. One test of the true prophet, but not the only one, is proposed here, viz. the fulfilment of prediction. Manifestly this test could only be applied to predictions of the immediate future. But the prophet sometimes prophesied of things that were afar off (Ezk 12:22–27) so that his words could not be verified by those to whom they were addressed. The ultimate criterion of the true prophet is the moral character of his utterance. Conscience is the true judge. Our Lord reproached His generation because they insisted on seeing signs and wonders before they would believe.

Works Cited

<sup>1</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 419.

**CHAPTER 19**  
**THE CITIES OF REFUGE. PUNISHMENT OF DECEIT AND FALSE WITNESS.**

1–13. On the Cities of Refuge see Nu 35:9–34 and notes there. **2. In the midst of thy land]** Those on the E. side of the Jordan have already been assigned: see on 4:41–43. **3. Prepare thee a way]** It was the duty of the Sanhedrim, or chief council of the Jews, to maintain the roads to these cities in good repair, and to have fingerposts where necessary with the words 'Refuge, Refuge' inscribed upon them, so as to afford every facility to the fugitive.

**8. Enlarge your territories]** i.e., thy border, to the limits mentioned in 1:7; 11:24. The condition of such enlargement is stated in the next verse.

**9. Three cities more]** i.e., besides the three mentioned in vv. 2 & 7 and those in 4:41–43. The additional three would be in the newly added territory beyond the usual limits of the kingdom. There is no evidence to show that they were actually appointed.

The previous chapter distinguished between the true prophet and the false prophet, who is to be put to death. This idea of distinction is then carried into ch. 19, the distinction being between the unintentional murderer and the intentional murderer, for whom, as with the presumptuous prophet, the penalty is death. Once again, the laws of Deuteronomy presuppose a future Israel, components of which will be sinful Israel. Even among the elect and holy nation there will be, regrettably, crimes of passion and violence displaying utter contempt for the sanctity of the life of others.<sup>2</sup>

**14.** The landmark was usually a stone, or heap of stones, which in the absence of hedges or walls defined the boundary of a man's field. Its removal was equivalent to theft.

**15–21.** The law of false witness. Cases of suspected false witness are to be investigated and punished by the supreme court: see on 17:8–13. **21.** See on Ex 21:23 and cp. Lv 24:20.

From its discussion of the law about asylum, Deuteronomy proceeds to a one-sentence law about not removing a neighbor's landmark (v. 14) and a law about the evidence of witnesses, especially malicious witnesses (vv. 15–21). The thrust of the (at least) two-witnesses requirement is to prevent the possibility of anyone being falsely charged and condemned merely on the basis of hearsay or spurious testimony by a felonious witness. The first part of this chapter (vv. 1–13) is designed to restrain immediate and illegal blood vengeance against a person who has accidentally taken the life of another. The second half of the chapter (vv. 15–21) is designed to restrain wrongful conviction resulting from lack of sufficient verifiable and incriminating testimony.<sup>3</sup>

Works Cited

<sup>2</sup>Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 420.

<sup>3</sup>Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 420.

## CHAPTER 20 LAWS OF WARFARE.

Chapter 19 discussed the taking of life when one kills a neighbor unintentionally or in hate, and a civil procedure against a malicious witness. The theme now continues into ch. 20, in which the general theme is war.

The first half of the chapter (vv. 1–9) is composed primarily of an exhortation by the priest—here in a unique role outside the sanctuary—to the soldiers to be courageous (vv. 2–4), and an offer by the officers to allow some to disqualify themselves for military service (vv. 5–9).

The list of those exempted from serving in the army is interesting: a man who has recently built a new house that has not yet been dedicated, or in which he has not yet started to dwell; a man who has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its harvest yet; a man who is engaged to be married; and those who are fearful and fainthearted (see Gideon's words to the fearful in Judg. 7:3). The first three categories of exemption are quite normal. It is somewhat unexpected to find an able-bodied man reclassified as unfit for service simply on the basis of being afraid. But who would want to serve in the trenches with a man given to panic under duress? He is best exempted from duty or assigned to a noncombat position.<sup>4</sup>

**1. Horses and chariots]** The army of the Israelites was chiefly composed of infantry: see on 17:16. **2.** The priest] It is implied that the priests accompany the hosts of Israel into battle: see Nu 10:9. Hence the Heb. phrase 'to consecrate a war, or warriors,' usually rendered to 'prepare': see Joel 3:9 mg.; Isa 13:3.

**5–9.** From Nu 1:3 it would appear that all able-bodied men from twenty years of age were liable to military service. But the evils of compulsory service were obviated by the rule laid down in this passage exempting certain classes. There was (1) the man who had built a new house or planted a vineyard and had as yet got no return for his labor. The law exempting him for a time was an encouragement to those who by personal labor increased the material resources of the country. (2) A man who was betrothed or newly married was exempted for a year (cp. 24:5). (3) The fearful and fainthearted were discharged. Fear is infectious, and the presence of such persons in the host would be a source of weakness and danger. For an instance of the observance of this rule see Jg 7:3. It is implied that a sense of honor will protect this law from being abused.

**10.** War is to be regarded as the last resort, and only to be employed when negotiations for peace have been tried and failed. In the event of victory, only the fighting men are to be put to death; women and children are to be spared, except in the case of neighboring idolatrous tribes. **16.** Cp. 7:1–5.

**19,20.** Fruit-trees are not to be used for bulwarks and battering rams. The words at the end of v. 19 should probably be read as in RV, 'for is the tree of the field man, that it should be besieged of thee?' i.e., The tree does no harm and is not to be treated as an enemy. Wanton destruction is not permissible even in war.

All these rules were designed to mitigate as far as possible the evils of war. There is to be no destruction of human life and property beyond what is actually necessary. The conduct of war is to be guided with reason and mercy.<sup>5</sup>

### Works Cited

<sup>4</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 421-422.

<sup>5</sup> J. R. Dummelow, ed., *A Commentary on the Holy Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), 129-131.