

# OpenTheo

## May 17th: Deuteronomy 18 & Luke 9:51-62

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Levites and prophets. Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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### Transcript

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Deuteronomy chapter 18. Deuteronomy chapter 18. Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel.

I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel. Instead of a territorial portion in the land, the Levites have the portion of the Lord's sacrifices. Apart from ascension or whole burnt offerings, the priests enjoy a portion from the offerings made to the Lord.

They are stewards of the Lord's house, and they eat from his table. In Numbers chapter 18, the offerings seem to belong to the priests alone, but here and in Joshua chapter 13 verse 14, we seem to get a different picture, one suggesting that all of the Levites enjoyed the sacrifices. In Joshua chapter 13 verse 14, To the tribe of Levi alone Moses gave no inheritance.

The offerings by fire to the Lord God of Israel are their inheritance, as he said to him. The Levites also, rather than being granted territory with the other tribes, were scattered throughout the nation. As Jacob declared, Numbers chapter 35 verses 1 to 8, The Lord spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, Command the people of Israel to give to the Levites some of the inheritance of their possession as cities for them to dwell in.

And you shall give to the Levites pasture lands around the cities. The cities shall be theirs to dwell in, and the pasture lands shall be for their cattle and for their livestock and for all their beasts. The pasture lands of the cities which you shall give to the Levites shall reach from the wall of the city outward a thousand cubits all around.

And you shall measure outside the city, on the east side, two thousand cubits, and on the south side two thousand cubits, and on the west side two thousand cubits, and on the north side two thousand cubits, the city being in the middle. This shall belong to them as pasture lands for their cities. The cities that you give to the Levites shall be the six cities of refuge, where you shall permit the manslayer to flee.

And in addition to them you shall give forty-two cities. All the cities that you give to the Levites shall be forty-eight with their pasture lands. And as for the cities that you shall give from the possession of the people of Israel, from the larger tribes you shall take many, and from the smaller tribes you shall take few, each in proportion to the inheritance that it inherits shall give of its cities to the Levites.

As we look at the tribes of Israel we see that they were not interchangeable. Different tribes had different places within the land, different callings as well. The Levites, among other things, would help to unite the nation.

Scattered throughout the nation they would express something of the united character of the people of Israel, that they were not just separate tribes, each doing their own thing, occupying their own territory, but they were a single people bound together by a

common form of worship, a common destiny. The parts of the animal devoted to the priest here differ from those mentioned in Leviticus 7, verses 28-36 and Numbers 18. I'm not sure what to make of this, perhaps it's something related to a change in practice as they go into the land.

I'm not sure. The priests are also given the first fruits of grain, wine, oil, and the first fruits of the fleece of sheep. This would give them the basic requirements of food, clothing, and other such necessities.

The priests have been chosen out of all the people to serve in this manner. God has set them apart for his own purpose in this way. Verses 6-8 seemingly refer to non-serving Levites who could voluntarily determine to join the service of the tabernacle.

It secures the rights of the Levite in such a situation. They are strictly instructed not to learn the ways of the pagan nations round about. They are being given the land, and the previous occupants lost the land on account of such practices.

These were pagan ways of discerning God's will, of trying to perceive the future and fate. Balaam is an example of such a false prophet who would seek these sorts of signs and omens and other things. Necromancy and consulting the dead are also things that are banned for Israel.

Israel is a people of life. They communicate with the living God, not with the dead. Likewise, you don't need to engage in the shadowy arts of divination if you have the living God who has spoken to you.

Israel is going to be addressed with clarity by the Lord in his prophets. The Lord speaks to his people directly. They don't have to resort to these strange and shadowy signs.

What is a prophet? Well, we can think about a priest as a steward of God's house. A king is a vice-guarantor of the Lord, someone who rules under God. And a prophet is a member of the heavenly council.

A prophet is someone who speaks to the Lord on account of the people and speaks to the people on account of the Lord. Many people have this idea that prophecy is primarily about foretelling the future. While the prophet does foretell the future, we should not restrict the task of the prophet to this particular activity.

Rather, the prophet is primarily the one who relays the words of the Lord to the people. Understanding the different offices of priest, king and prophet can also help us to understand how they relate together. The priest is someone who is a steward of God's house.

He represents his master to the guests that are invited into the house. The king rules the people of the Lord in the name of the Lord. And the prophet can address the word of the

Lord to these figures.

However, the prophet is not a king, nor is the prophet a priest. Although the prophet could be a priest or a king in certain instances. We might think about David, for instance, who is both a king and a prophet.

Moses is the prototypical prophet. He is the one who establishes the covenant. Israel, seeing the theophany at Sinai and the glory of God and the terror of the Lord, asked Moses to go instead of them.

And the Lord approved this. In the story of Isaiah, Isaiah goes into the presence of the Lord as the Lord fills the temple and he is aware of his sinfulness. He is a man of unclean lips, dwelling among a people of unclean lips, and he has seen the Lord of hosts.

Few people would be equipped for such an encounter. And so the prophet is the one who goes between God and his people. Moses, as we see in the story of the golden calf, is the intercessor for the people.

He represents the people to God, speaking on their behalf, standing in the breach when they have sinned. And he also represents God to the people. He expresses God's anger to the people.

That task of the prophet then is one that is seen most clearly in the ministry of Moses. The prophet is raised up from the brothers of Israel. The king is chosen, the priesthood is chosen, and the prophet is raised up.

There seems to be a different manner in which the prophet comes to his particular office. The prophet does not have a hereditary office as the priesthood does. Likewise, the king would generally be a member of a dynasty.

The Lord places his words in the mouth of the prophet. This is a stronger relationship to the word of God than the priest has or the king has. The priest is someone who obeys the word of the Lord.

He is someone who declares the word of the Lord as he teaches the law. The king is someone who meditates upon the law, who has internalised the law and has gained wisdom through it. The king is someone who sings from the law.

But the prophet is one who has internalised the law even further. The word of God has been taken into him and he becomes a covenant mouthpiece. In the story of Ezekiel, he eats the scroll.

The scroll becomes part of him and then he declares it from his midst. The movement in redemptive history from the law external to us to the law taken into us in meditation, in memory, in song and in wisdom, develops further as the word of God is taken into the

life and the mouth and the heart of the prophet. God has written his law upon the heart of the covenant bearing prophet and then that is declared to his people.

This is a sign, among other things, of the deeper relationship that God desires his people to have with his word in the course of redemptive history. If the king is an example to the people of meditation, of reflection, of delighting in the law and learning wisdom through it, the prophet is an example of someone who has been transformed by the law. The law has been written upon his heart and now he can act and speak in a new and remarkable way.

The prophet in that sense is an anticipation of what will happen to the people more generally. Would that all of the Lord's people would prophesy that the Lord would put his spirit in them. A question to consider.

This passage promises that the Lord will establish a prophet like Moses. In the New Testament we have a number of different occasions when Jesus is spoken of as the prophet that is expected. What are some of the ways that we can see Christ fulfilling this prophecy? Luke chapter 9 verses 51 to 62 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them? But he turned and rebuked them, and they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, I will follow you wherever you go. And Jesus said to him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. To another he said, Follow me.

But he said, Lord, let me first go and bury my father. And Jesus said to him, Leave the dead to bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Yet another said, I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.

Jesus said to him, No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. At the end of Luke chapter 9 we enter a new phase of the Gospel. The Gospel of Luke can be divided into three sections.

There is the section up to Luke chapter 9 verse 50, which concerns the ministry in Galilee, which sets the scene for the beginning of Christ's vocation. In chapters 9 verse 51 to 19 verse 28, there is the travel and the journey towards Jerusalem. And then from chapter 19 verse 28 onwards, there is the final week in Jerusalem and the events of the crucifixion and the resurrection.

The journey narrative in Luke is greatly drawn out. At many points we might forget that

we are on a journey, but the journey is very important for understanding what's taking place. Jesus is on the way.

He's on the way towards his destiny. He has set his face towards Jerusalem and he is about to arrive there. And all these things that are taking place are taking place in the shadow of that destination.

Travel is a theme within the work of Luke and Acts more generally. There are larger journey narratives and smaller journey narratives. Some of the smaller journey narratives include the Emmaus Road, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch Saul on the road to Damascus.

And these journey narratives serve a purpose narratively. In each of those stories, a physical journey is accompanied by a movement in understanding that ultimately leads to eyes being opened. It leads to the celebration of baptism or the Lord's Supper.

These are movements in understanding that Luke is using a travel narrative to frame. There are also larger journey narratives, Paul's missionary journeys, the journey to Jerusalem of Christ, but then also of Paul in the book of Acts. Paul also journeys towards Rome and the shipwreck narrative is a very important part of the structure of the book of Acts.

Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, to a far greater extent than the other Gospels, is presented as a travelling prophet. Luke is one of the synoptic Gospels, so there are lots of commonalities with Matthew and Mark, but there are some very arresting differences in this section. Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in this section takes 35% of Luke's Gospel narrative, in contrast to Matthew where it only has 6% and Mark where it only has 8%.

If Matthew accents Jesus as the teacher, the one who's teaching the law, the new Moses perhaps, and Mark represents Jesus as the new David, the king, the one who does everything straightway, who's the man of action, the man who defeats the demons, Luke presents Jesus as the prophet, the man of prayer, the man who wanders from place to place like the prophets did. The days drew near for him to be taken up. Jesus is looking beyond the cross to the ascension.

The cross is facing him, but there's something beyond the cross. He's going to accomplish his exodus in Jerusalem, as he spoke about on the Mount of Transfiguration with Elijah and Moses. The description of looking forward to that time when he's going to be taken up also draws our mind back to 2 Kings 2 perhaps, and the description of Elijah on the way to be taken up in the chariots of fire into heaven.

Jesus makes a determined move towards Jerusalem. There is a decisive shift here. He sets his face and he is not going to be turned aside.

He also sends disciples ahead of him, messengers ahead of him. In Malachi 3, verse 1,

Earlier on in the Gospel, these words are applied to John the Baptist. And here we see the disciples playing a similar role to John the Baptist as Jesus moves towards Jerusalem.

James and John ask whether they should call for fire to come down from heaven, as Christ is rejected on the way. In this, they imagine themselves to be like the prophet Elijah. Elijah called down fire from heaven to judge people in 2 Kings 1. Elsewhere in the Gospels, James and John are described as the sons of thunder.

And it seems this is a fitting request for the sons of thunder to make, for fire to come down from heaven. Peter's failure is that of being a stumbling stone. Peter is the rock, but he can turn into a stumbling stone if he is not careful.

In the same way, James and John's calling, the way in which they have been set apart by the Lord and renamed by him, is one that comes with dangers. Their very strength holds possibilities of weakness. Like John the Baptist, they seem to be wondering where the promised fire is going to come from.

He is going to baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. When is the judgment coming? What we should be beginning to recognise here though, is that Jesus, though he has similarities to Elijah, is not Elijah. The travel material of this Gospel is interspersed with discipleship material, which is quite fitting.

Others must join Jesus on the way. The movement towards Jerusalem is connected with taking up the cross and following Christ. Christ makes a number of statements here to different people who want to join along the way.

Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Foxes have holes may be a reference perhaps to people like Herod, the birds of the air, to the Gentiles within the land. Herod is referred to as a fox in Luke chapter 13 verse 32.

And he said to them, Go and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my course. Jesus uses the term Son of Man of himself. This terminology is used from time to time for people outside of the immediate discipleship group.

It would draw people's mind back to Daniel. It would reference suffering. It would also suggest heavenly authority.

It's an enigmatic term and maybe it's a challenge not to slot Jesus into an existing category. Jesus' statement to the man who wants to bury his father first is a surprising and arresting one. Let the dead bury their own dead is a very radical statement.

We need not presume that the man's father has just died. However, he might want to do his filial duty first and then follow Jesus to a later point, waiting around for a few years

perhaps. However, Jesus speaks of that situation as one that is like serving an ongoing cycle of death.

Let the dead bury their own dead. If you're just going to bury your father and then your son's going to bury you, nothing's going to change. He's going to bring resurrection, a change, a bringing of life into a cycle of death.

And those who will follow him will be part of breaking that cycle of the dead burying their dead. The final statement is from someone who wants to go back and say farewell to the people at his home. Once again, Jesus' response is radical.

That the man who has put his hand to the plough should not look back. The story of Elijah is once more in the background in 1 Kings 19-21. So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat who was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him.

And he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, Let me kiss my father and my mother and then I will follow you.

And he said to him, Go back again, for what have I done to you? And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of oxen and gave it to the people and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him. Once again, there is a distinction being drawn between Jesus and Elijah.

Jesus' ministry has a much greater urgency than the ministry of Elijah. A question to consider, how does the sending on of people ahead and the calling of people to follow behind help us to better understand the character of Jesus' movement to Jerusalem here?