

# OpenTheo

## Deuteronomy: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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## **Transcript**

In Deuteronomy Chapter 1, Israel is about to enter into the Promised Land. The book is a

reiteration and renewal of the covenant of Sinai with Israel on the plains of Moab, just as it is about to enter into the promise. The focus is upon preparatory teaching, with a series of lengthy addresses from Moses unpacking the meaning of the covenant.

It is also the conclusion of Moses' own life and his leadership of Israel. He is going to have to die before entering the land, and the book concludes with his final blessing of Israel. There's a transition here in Moses' role.

Moses has formerly been the deliverer, the intercessor, the lawgiver, the leader and the ruler, the prophet, but now he is primarily the teacher. He's instructing Israel in the way of the Lord. There appears to be some sort of ceremony involved in the book, as the background for all these things that he's teaching.

The nation is assembled to hear Moses' words, and it seems to be a formal renewal of the covenant. This is suggested in places like Deuteronomy Chapter 26, verses 16-19. We see the same thing in chapter 27, verse 9. They are presented with blessings and curses and consequences for obedience or disobedience.

Instructions are given for a covenant ceremony to be performed upon their entry into the land, in chapter 27. Joshua is established as the successor for Moses. Instructions are given for the placing of the covenant document of the book of the law in the Ark of the Covenant as a witness.

Further instructions are given for later covenant renewal ceremonies at specified intervals. Moses speaks a song of witness to Israel and teaches it to them. Deuteronomy solidifies what was first established at Sinai and ensures that it will be an enduring reality in Israel's life, repeatedly brought to their attention and Israel reconstituting itself on the basis of what God did at Sinai at key intervals in its life.

Many have maintained that the book exhibits the structure of what has been called a suzerain vassal treaty. These would be established in the ancient Near East between a greater king and a lesser power that would come under him. That structure is seen in the literary form of this document.

So we have a beginning in the preamble in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 1. Then there's a historical prologue telling the events that led to that point in chapter 1 verse 6 to 4 verse 49. Then there's general stipulations in chapters 5 to 11. Specific stipulations in chapters 12 to 26.

Blessings and curses in chapters 27 to 28. Witnesses being called in places like 30 verse 19, 31 verse 19 and 32 verses 1 to 43. And then there's a concern for succession.

How is this going to be continued in the future? What ways is this going to be reiterated and re-established at certain key intervals? There are a great many common features that we can observe then. However, we should beware of a complete association or

identification. Israel is not just a vassal.

Israel is the son of Yahweh. Israel is the bride of the Lord. The covenant is not a contract.

It's a loving bond unilaterally established by a gracious act of deliverance as God delivers his people from Egypt. So while we can recognize certain similarities that give us a sense of the provenance and also the genre of the book, we must also be alert to the many differences. The first five verses of the book are a preamble.

They give context for all that follows. Israel is about to enter into the land and Moses is addressing them. They have already won some key victories but have yet to cross the Jordan.

We are told that Moses is undertaking to explain the law. He's expounding and unpacking the meaning of the covenant so that the people will understand what it means and entails. We could in many respects see this as an act of preaching.

He's unpacking the word of God and addressing it to the conscience of the people for the sake of action. He wants to call them to do something at the end, to make a particular decision, to choose life and the way of the Lord as opposed to their own way and the way of death. And in order to achieve this, he's unpacking scripture.

The law of Deuteronomy is the law that we find at Sinai much more unpacked and illuminated. The rest of Deuteronomy chapter 1 recounts the experience of Israel to that point, beginning at Horeb or Sinai, when the Lord charged them to move on from the mountain and take possession of the land. At this point, Moses describes the choice of elders to place over the people, something that, among other things, establishes the agency of the people distinct from Moses himself.

In what follows, the movement between I and you is one that's established in part upon the fact that there are elders representing the people towards Moses, and it's not just Moses over the people. The placing of this choice also suggests that it occurred at the end of the time at Sinai, and that Exodus chapter 18 is placed out of chronological sequence for theological reasons. One reason why we might have this mentioned here is that much of the law will be addressed, most particularly to the elders and leaders of Israel.

They will bear a special responsibility to teach, to administer, to uphold, and to judge according to the law. The book of the law is addressed to the people as a political body, not just as private individuals, so keeping the law depends a very great deal upon the men who are their rulers and representatives. The elders were given the responsibility of judges, and the exposition of the law that Moses is about to give is an articulation, among other things, of jurisprudence.

In Moses addressing all Israel, we should not presume that Moses is speaking to every

individual. That wouldn't be possible, there are over 600,000 people here. But rather he's addressing their elders and rulers, and the priests and Levites in particular, who would then instruct the rest of the people accordingly.

Nevertheless, the law is by no means exclusively or even overwhelmingly addressed to rulers. It is addressed to everyone as members of the covenant body. It is a civil, moral, and religious code for all to abide by.

Moses recounts the refusal of Israel to enter the land and their rebellion against God at Kadesh. The Lord condemned that generation to wander in the wilderness until they all perished, save for Caleb and Joshua, who would then lead the people into the land. The Lord was even angry with Moses on their account.

Moses' association with them and his failure to resist the contagion of rebellion in chapter 20 of Numbers caught him up in their consequences, even though he was able to intercede with them on many previous occasions. The retelling of the history to this point foregrounds many of the issues of the book as a whole. Moses is reminding Israel where it has come from.

He is reminding Israel of the incredibly costly errors that they have made in rebellion. A journey that should have taken no more than a couple of weeks ended up taking 40 years. Israel is reminded of how they went off course so that now they can take the right route.

Deuteronomy is a book about the decision between life and death, and in the choice not to enter the land, Israel's fathers chose death, except for Caleb and Joshua, who are held out as the examples for Israel at this point. The fact that, after being told that they could not enter the land, they tried to enter in under their own power and failed so abysmally serves as evidence of their need to depend upon the Lord for this. So they find themselves at this juncture in history, about to enter the land, they're looking back on what has happened in the past, and they're being instructed as they go forward.

A question to consider, what might Deuteronomy chapter 1 highlight for us about the importance of reflecting upon the past within the task of obedience? Deuteronomy chapter 2 begins as the 38 years of wandering after the failure to enter into the land are about to come to an end. The warriors of the first generation of the Exodus have been wiped out, not all the women and children of that generation presumably, but the adult males, and great numbers of these have been wiped out by special judgments of God, not just by old age. We recall the path of Israel from Numbers chapter 20 onwards in this chapter, the first time they were going to go straight into the land from Kadesh Barnea, but now they have to go the longer way around, they pass round a series of nations, Edom, Moab, Ammon, and then they fight the transjordan Amorite kingdoms of Sihon and Og.

They will now enter the land from the east. These are related peoples in many cases, the children of Lot, Moab and Ammon, and the children of Esau in Edom. Israel has to recognize its brotherhood with Edom, indeed Edom was the twin of Israel, Jacob and Esau, and the relationship between Israel and Edom is here presented in a far more positive light than it is in Numbers chapter 20.

That pairing of the two nations is seen most clearly in the book of Genesis, but it develops further, you can see it also in places like 1st Samuel. Israel's brother and distant cousins, Ammon and Moab, have already taken possession of the land, and they provide examples for Israel. What the Lord has provided for Israel is good, however, and they must not be jealous of the other peoples around them.

We're further told that the Lord has given these other peoples their lands. While Israel is set apart from the peoples, there are parallels with these other peoples. The Lord has also given territories to other peoples, and Israel must honour that gift.

The Lord is the Lord of all peoples, the God of the whole earth, and Israel needs to be careful not to think of themselves as unique in all respects. Observing this, we should probably beware of placing too much weight upon the concept of holy war for understanding their entering into the land. It is an important concept, but it won't bear all the weight that some people want it to bear.

First of all, Israel is not spreading the worship of the Lord through military conquest and subjugation of other nations. That is not the purpose of the conquest of Canaan. Second, the conquest is bounded.

Israel is not allowed to take possession of lands beyond the territory that the Lord has allotted to them, and we see that very clearly within this chapter. Third, Israel is set apart from the nations as the people of the Lord's own possession, but Israel is not the only people who have had territory allotted to them. In Deuteronomy chapter 32 verses 8 to 9, when the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God.

But the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage. In Amos chapter 9 verse 7, Are you not like the Cushites to me, O people of Israel, declares the Lord? Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Kathdor, and the Syrians from Ker? The granting of these lands to these peoples also recalls details of the story of Genesis before Israel went down into Egypt. There we saw that the narrator's attention is never merely narrowly restricted to Israel itself, but peoples arising from Ishmael, from Lot, from the sons of Keturah, and from Esau all come into view at various points.

Fourth, Israel is not the only people who have dispossessed aboriginal peoples according to the Lord's will. Such dispossession is not necessarily illegitimate. Elsewhere in places

like Judges chapter 11, with the conversation between the Ammonites and Jephthah, the impression is given that on occasions people can lose their rights to territory when dispossessed by other nations.

The holy war card that some people resort to in order to justify the dispossession of the Canaanites as a unique case does not necessarily work in such instances. This chapter contains a number of examples of people who are dispossessed giants, descendants of the Rephaim, and driven out other peoples and settled in the lands that had formerly been theirs. The Horites were driven out by Esau and his descendants.

We see a lot of this in chapter 36 of Genesis in the background of the story, the displacing of the Horites. The Moabites displaced the Emim, the Zamzanim were displaced by the Ammonites, and the Avim by the Kapturim or the Philistines. If these peoples successfully occupied their lands and displaced giants in many cases, then Israel should be able to follow in their footsteps.

While they do not attack Moab, Ammon, or Edom, they attack King Sihon of Heshbon, an Amorite king. His heart is hardened like Pharaoh. Initially the Israelites request passage through his land, but Sihon responded with force because the Lord willed to give his land into the hands of the Israelites.

As in the case of Egypt, this seems to be one of the ways that the Lord judges or dispossesses nations. Sometimes nations are dispossessed by cruel and evil powers, powers overseen by, but not approved by God. On other occasions, however, the Lord moves the hearts of kings to folly so that they are destroyed.

Those nations given into the hands of Israel are to be totally defeated, their entire territory occupied, every town and city captured, every person killed or driven out, all spoil taken. In addition to the conquest of the other surrounding nations, the victories that they have already achieved on the eastern side of the Jordan provide Israel with lessons and models to follow for when they cross the Jordan and enter into the principal part of the land. If chapter 1 of Deuteronomy told the story of Israel's wanderings in a way that foregrounded the bad choices that were made in their failure to enter into the land and the consequence of death that followed from that, and the positive example of Joshua and Caleb against that background, here in chapter 2 we have positive examples of entering into the land, of faithfully seizing hold of what the Lord has laid out for them.

A question to consider. In the book of Genesis, there are several examples of people related to Israel achieving landmarks before Israel did. In this respect, they provided patterns for Israel to follow, examples for them to learn from both positive and negative lessons, and also encouragements that what was possible for these other people might also be possible for them, and certainly with the Lord's help.

Looking back to the book of Genesis, can you identify some of these examples?

Deuteronomy chapter 3 continues the opening account of the victories of Israel over the transjordanian kings, Sihon king of Heshbon and Og king of Bashan. The end of Deuteronomy chapter 2 spoke of the defeat of Sihon of Heshbon, and this chapter describes the defeat of Og of Bashan in a similar manner. Once again there was a total routing of the Amorite king and a complete conquest of his territory, 60 towns.

Og was one of the remaining giants and the size of his bedstead is described as evidence of his great stature. The land of the Amorite king stretched from the salt or dead sea above the Moabite kingdom up to Mount Hermon, some way north of Kinnareth, the sea of Galilee adjoining Aram. All of this land was parceled out to the half tribe of Manasseh, the Reubenites and the Gadites.

The land was conquered from south to north, but the parceling out of the land here is described from north to south in the verses that follow. Jair, the son of Manasseh, was Manasseh's great-great-grandson. In 1st chronicles chapter 2 verses 21 to 22 he's described as follows.

We shouldn't presume that Jair is an individual here, it most likely refers to a clan. Mekhir was the son of Manasseh in Genesis chapter 50 verse 23. Mekhir and Jair are two subgroups of the half tribe of Manasseh and these two clans received the northern parts of the conquered territory.

Jair was one of the names of the judges in Judges chapter 10. He was a Gileadite from the region occupied by that Manassite clan. This stage of the conquest is also described in Numbers chapter 32 verses 29 to 42.

And what the Lord has said to your servants we will do. We will pass over armed before the Lord into the land of Canaan and the possession of our inheritance shall remain with us beyond the Jordan. And Moses gave to them, to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuben and to the half tribe of Manasseh, the son of Joseph, the kingdom of Sihon, king of the Amorites, and the kingdom of Og, king of Bashan.

The land and its cities were their territories, the cities of the land throughout the country. And the people of Gad built Dibon, Atorath, Aroah, Atrosh Shofan, Jezer, Jogbeha, Beth Nimra and Beth Haran, fortified cities and foals for sheep. And the people of Reuben built Heshbon, Elialeh, Kiriathim, Nebo and Baal-meon, their names were changed, and Sibma.

And they gave other names to the cities that they built. And the sons of Mekiah, the son of Manasseh, went to Gilead and captured it, and dispossessed the Amorites who were in it. And Moses gave Gilead to Mekiah, the son of Manasseh, and he settled in it.

And Jair, the son of Manasseh, went and captured their villages and called them Havath-Jair. And Noba went and captured Kenath and its villages and called it Noba after his own



name. This is also described in Joshua chapter 13, verses 8-13.

And Gilead and the region of the Gesherites and the Maakathites and all Mount Hermon and all Bashan to Selechah, all the kingdom of Og in Bashan, who reigned in Ashteroth and in Edrei, he alone was left of the remnant of the Rephaim. These Moses had struck and driven out. Yet the people of Israel did not drive out the Gesherites or the Maakathites, but Gesher and Maakath dwell in the midst of Israel to this day.

Gesher and Maakath appear to be micro kingdoms. In Numbers chapter 32, verses 6-27, Moses had required Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh to join the rest of the tribes in their conquest of the land on the west side of the Jordan. But Moses said to the people of Gad and to the people of Reuben, Shall your brothers go to the war while you sit here? Why will you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over into the land that the Lord has given them? Your fathers did this when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to see the land.

For when they went up to the valley of Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the heart of the people of Israel from going into the land that the Lord had given them. And the Lord's anger was kindled on that day. And he swore, saying, Surely none of the men who came up out of Egypt from twenty years old and upward shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, because they have not wholly followed me.

None except Caleb the son of Jephunneh, the Kenizzite, and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have wholly followed the Lord. And the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of the Lord was gone. And behold, you have risen in your father's place, a brood of sinful men, to increase still more the fierce anger of the Lord against Israel.

For if you turn away from following him, he will again abandon them in the wilderness. And you will destroy all this people. Then they came near to him and said, We will build sheepfolds here for our livestock and cities for our little ones.

But we will take up arms, ready to go before the people of Israel, until we have brought them to their place. And our little one shall live in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until each of the people of Israel has gained his inheritance.

For we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has come to us on this side of the Jordan, the east. So Moses said to them, If you will do this, if you will take up arms to go before the Lord for the war, and every armed man of you will pass over the Jordan before the Lord, until he has driven out his enemies from before him, and the land is subdued before the Lord. Then after that you

shall return and be free of obligation to the Lord and to Israel, and this land shall be your possession before the Lord.

But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the Lord, and be sure your sin will find you out. Build cities for your little ones and flocks for your sheep, and do what you have promised. And the people of Gad and the people of Reuben said to Moses, Your servants will do as my Lord commands.

Our little ones, our wives, our livestock, and all our cattle shall remain there in the cities of Gilead, but your servants will pass over, every man who is armed for war, before the Lord to do battle as my Lord orders. In the willingness of the tribes of Gad and Reuben and the half-tribe of Manasseh to fight with their brothers for the rest of the land, there is an expression of the commonality of the people of Israel. They are not just detached tribes, but they are coming together for a common purpose and a common destiny.

They are divided in the land into different territories, but they have a common possession in the land, as they all belong to the one nation. Fighting for each other's territories is one of the ways in which this is expressed. Moses also charges Joshua as the new leader of the people at this point.

The defeat of the two Amorite kings, Sihon and Og, is held forth as an example of how the Lord would bring them victory on the other side of the Jordan. The Lord fights for Israel. Having been told that he could not enter the land, Moses pleaded with the Lord that he might be permitted to go over and see it.

However, the Lord was angry with Moses on account of Israel, and he could not. His association with an unfaithful people, and his own unfaithfulness with the striking of the rock at Meribah Kadesh, meant that he had to die on the far side of the Jordan. However, he does get to view the land from Pisgah.

A question to consider. In Genesis chapter 13 verses 14-15, we find a very similar description to that of Moses on Pisgah concerning Abram. In Deuteronomy chapter 4, we move into the next phase of Moses' teaching.

This is still Moses' first address, but it's the conclusion of it. Moses has described their journey to the land, and now he moves to discuss their future life in it. If Deuteronomy chapters 1-3 focus particularly upon obeying the Lord's specific directives, about going into the land, fighting against their enemies, and these sorts of things, now we're focusing upon obeying the Lord's commandments.

And in particular, they're supposed to learn from things like their failure at Baal Peor, where they were promiscuous and idolatrous, the events described in chapter 25 of Numbers. All of this is providing exhortation for their future obedience within the land. They are on the brink of entering into the land, and they need to be prepared for the

faithfulness that the Lord requires of them.

This all provides them with reasons for obedience. In encouraging them to keep the law of God, Moses provides them with a number of motivations, or reasons for obedience. First of all, they're supposed to learn the lessons of places such as Baal Peor, the lessons of disobedience to the law of God, and the things that happen to those people that reject the Lord and rebel against him.

A further motivation is found in the reputation that they'll gain for wisdom, as they obey the law of God in the sight of the nations. They're supposed to learn, again, from the theophanic encounter at Horeb or Sinai, the way that they witnessed the glorious presence of God and his voice speaking to them. They're supposed to think about the threat of exile and scattering, and use that as a spur to faithfulness.

They're supposed to consider the uniqueness of the Lord and his relationship with Israel, a relationship such as no other nation enjoys. And they're supposed to recognise that as they obey the law of God, they will flourish in the land. It's a possibility opened up for them in their future.

The third address of Moses, in chapters 29-30, returns to these themes. And these two addresses frame the central section of the book. It is the first two commandments that Moses especially emphasises in this book.

They must have no other gods besides the Lord, and they must not worship idols. They should have learned the lesson of Baal Peor, where they yoked themselves with Baal. They also need to learn the lessons of Horeb and the Exodus.

They are both proof of the Lord's uniqueness, and also the fact that God should not be represented in any physical form. The passage moves backward from their current situation in Beth Peor, back through the experience of Horeb, and back to the earlier part of the events of the Exodus and God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Looking back upon their itinerary, they're supposed to see the developing revelation of God and what it means to be faithful or unfaithful and the consequences of those things.

It's an exhortation to obedience again, with the warning of banishment if they reject the law. There's a repeated emphasis upon consideration, upon mindfulness, remembering, pervading the text. They are to remember what they have witnessed, and to learn the lessons of what they have seen.

They are given commandments and rules. Is there a difference between these things? Some have suggested that commandments are those things that are more transparent to our understanding. We know why God tells us, you shall not murder.

But rules are a bit less apparent. A rule is something like the law concerning the red heifer. There are ways in which we can understand that, but it requires deep meditation

and reflection.

It's not immediately apparent. They are charged not to add or to subtract anything. Now clearly there's going to be added case law.

They're going to reflect upon the laws that God gives them and develop them into further case law, speaking to specific situations. They're going to have positive law that addresses situations that are not envisaged within the law as it's given Sinai. There are many ways in which they will add to this body of law, but they're not supposed to add anything that's replacing it.

They're not supposed to add in a way that would subvert the fundamental uniqueness of the Lord at the heart of Israel's life. And I think the import of this particular instruction is more apparent when we see it in the context of the chapter in which it's placed, where the focus is upon not serving gods other than the Lord, not bowing down to idols, not making idols. That is what it would mean to add or subtract, to do the sort of thing that they were doing with Baal Peor, the way that they would be adding to the worship of God, the worship of some other god.

From the events of Baal Peor, they're supposed to learn not just the consequences of rebellion, but also the preservation of the righteous. Those who stood firm were preserved. As they live by the law, it will prove to be a blessing for them.

The law is connected here with wisdom, and it's a wisdom that will be seen in the sight of the whole nations. They live in the sight of the nations. What happened to Israel at the Exodus, what happened to Israel at Horeb, what happened to Israel in bringing them into the land is something that has significance for the whole of the world.

They are a light to the Gentiles. What God is doing with Israel is a lesson for all peoples to learn from. It's a revelation of who the Creator God is.

It's a revelation of the way His world works, the principles by which we're supposed to approach it. There is something different about Israel. They are a people who dwell alone.

A people who are set apart from the nations, as an example to the nations. The other nations are supposed to look at this people and say, what a wise and understanding people. What a people that they have their God so close to them.

The law here is connected with wisdom. The law itself is a manifestation of wisdom. The commandments that are given are commandments that stand out from the nations.

The nations all have laws, but when you look at the laws of the nations and compare those and contrast them with the law of God, you'll see the difference. There is something about the nation of Israel that sets them apart. And it's not that they're

particularly numerous.

It's not that they're particularly powerful. What sets them apart is the wisdom of the words that God has given to them. It's the near presence of the Lord to them.

And in these things, they will find their glory if they persevere in them. The connection of wisdom with law also highlights the importance of meditation upon the law. The law is not just a series of rules to be enforced by Israel's leaders with criminals and transgressors to be punished.

That's not the purpose of the law primarily. The purpose of the law is to train people in righteousness. This is a means by which people will gain wisdom, insight into the world.

It's a means by which the society will become one of justice. And this law is given not just for the civil authorities of Israel. It's given for all the people and for all the people to meditate upon, to reflect upon, to chew over this law constantly.

And as they chew over it, to recognize the deeper logic of it. It's a training in truth and ethics. It's a training in what it means to please the Lord.

It's a training in what it means to live well. And as we go through the book of Deuteronomy, it should become apparent that it is precisely in the interplay between the condensed principles and the expanded principles that literacy and understanding in the law and in the world will be achieved. And Israel's kings in particular were supposed to have the law of God written out by themselves that they could reflect upon it on a regular basis.

This is something that's celebrated in the Psalms. The person who is righteous meditates on the law of God day and night and becomes like a fruitful tree planted by streams of water. This is something that we see in Psalm 119 in particular.

As David goes through all the different ways in which the law is his delight, brings him understanding and wisdom and truth. And the Israelites are charged to teach this law to their children. They're supposed to pass it on to generations after them.

And in that process of passing it on, to come to a deeper understanding of it themselves. You can look back to Genesis chapter 18 verse 19 to see some of the importance of what it means to teach children the law of God. Israel must learn the lessons of Horeb, the lessons of Sinai and the great theophanic appearance of God's glory.

They're supposed to act as a historical witness to this event. Now many of the people who are hearing Moses here were not actually present 39 years previously at the events of Sinai and theophany there. But Israel itself is a historical witness to these things.

And these things pass down generation after generation. So each generation shares in

that fundamental event. In the same way, the church is called to be a continuing historical witness to what God has done in Christ.

They heard a voice but they saw no shape. The Lord is a God who speaks. And you relate to the Lord primarily through his word, through reflecting upon his law, not through making or bowing down to images in the way of the nations.

Idolatry is seductive and appealing and the people must be vigilant against it. Idolatry presents people with a way of controlling God, of limiting God, of having some sort of handle upon God. It's a theological technology perhaps, a way of manipulating God and putting God into our service, of making God safe.

But God is a consuming fire. God is a jealous God. He will not be replaced by our fetishes, by those things that we put in place of him.

The many ways in which we seek to efface him and relate to something that's far more domesticated and safe. But God is not a safeguard. Heaven and earth are called as witnesses.

If they reject the covenant, they will perish from the land and be scattered among the other peoples, in sharp contrast to the blessings of faithfulness. However, even in the death of exile, hope is held out for them. And as I mentioned earlier, these themes are returned to in Deuteronomy chapter 29 and 30, in chapter 30 verses 1 to 6. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you.

And he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it.

And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. Israel's experience of God is unique, as is what God has done for them.

They witnessed the theophanic glory of God at Sinai, and they heard the voice of the Lord. They saw no shape, so they should not make an idol. But what they have seen is unique, as is what God has done for them.

God took Israel from Egypt, a nation from another nation, so much greater and more powerful. He proved in the process his power over all of the Egyptian gods. The Lord

alone is God in heaven above and on earth below.

This is a strong statement of monotheism. And this statement of monotheism is a key note for understanding the book of Deuteronomy. God is unique.

And Israel, in their relationship to God, is not just relating to a god of that particular nation. Israel is relating to the God of the whole earth. Israel is relating to the God who created all things, the God who rules supreme and unrivaled over all others.

All other powers are beneath him. All other powers are created, but he is uncreated. And Israel then is a witness to this one true God.

They're supposed to be a light to the nations. The other nations should see them and see that there is something different about this people, that this people stands out from all of their neighbors, that the law that this people has, the law that has been given to them by the Lord, that as they obey it, they grow in wisdom, and that that wisdom is something that sets them apart, that makes them different, that shows grace, that shows truth, that shows insight into reality. And as they see that, they should be drawn to the light of Israel.

Moses then lists three cities of refuge. And we have the description of the cities of refuge in Numbers chapter 35, verses 9 to 34. The manslayer could flee to the city of refuge and find safety there, and he would remain there until the death of the high priest.

The chapter ends by introducing the discourse that follows. A discourse in which Moses declares and unpacks the law. A question to consider.

How would you summarize Deuteronomy chapter 4's critique of idolatry? Deuteronomy chapter 5 returns us to Exodus 20, reiterating the Ten Commandments or the Decalogue. This was given over 40 years ago at Sinai or Horeb, and now it is revisited as they are about to enter into possession of the land. Moses speaks of the events of Sinai as occurring in the memory of most of his audience.

This might seem strange to people who think that the whole generation of those who came out of Egypt died in the wilderness, and this is a new generation. In some senses it is. But a significant number of the people that Moses is talking to were present as children or as teenagers.

They witnessed the events of Sinai. And so this isn't something that their parents told them about. They saw it with their own eyes.

Beyond those who were children at the time, there would also be a great number of women who did not die out with the men who were destroyed from the first generation. Beyond all of this, Moses also speaks about the experience of Israel in the Exodus and the wilderness as if a living body of memory that is constantly being returned to and

renewed. The Ten Commandments were at the core of the covenant document.

These were the central principles that were expounded and unpacked in all of the rest of the material. In the present context, these Ten Commandments are the basis for all the laws that follow. It's the introduction to the main body of the book.

The claim that there were ten commandments is something that we get from the text itself in Deuteronomy 4, verse 13. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the Ten Commandments. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone.

The structuring of the commandments in terms of the number ten divided into two tables is something that is common to most accounts of the law. The tablets of stone are the great symbol of the covenant document. God takes Israel to himself as he delivers them out of Egypt and brings them to Sinai where a covenant is made with them.

They are taken as his bride, or according to a different metaphor, as his firstborn son. And this document is not just a dry series of laws that will be enforced by judges in the life of Israel. It is the document that expresses God's relationship with his people and his people must meditate upon it and delight in it and live it out in all areas of their lives.

The laws, as Moses recounts them here, differ from those in Exodus chapter 20 in some slight ways. For instance, the rationale for the Sabbath in the fourth commandment has changed from that given in Exodus chapter 20. In Exodus chapter 20, it focuses upon creation that God created in six days and rested on the seventh.

Whereas here, the emphasis lies elsewhere. It's upon the Exodus. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

There are further details of this commandment that differ from those that we have in Exodus chapter 20. For instance, the purpose of the law is given in part that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. That was not found in Exodus chapter 20.

Again, therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. That is another statement that is not found in the earlier body of law. It is also a statement found in the fifth commandment for honoring father and mother.

A commandment that also includes an additional element in the statement and that it may go well with you. Beyond some other minor changes, we see that the order of items in the last commandment have changed. In Exodus chapter 20 verse 17, we read, You shall not covet your neighbor's house, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.



Whereas here, it says, And you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, and you shall not desire your neighbor's house, his field, or his male servant, or his female servant, his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's. The change in order might seem minor, but there is something significant about it in so much as the wife is removed from the house as it were. The wife stands apart from the household in a way that she doesn't in Exodus 20 and then the rest of the items of the household are listed.

Looking through the commandments there are a number of things that we can observe. First of all they seem to move from the most serious offences down. So it begins with offences against God, having another God beside the Lord, then various other offences of worship, moving down through the Sabbath, to honouring father and mother, and then into various commandments concerning one's neighbour.

The first five commandments can be contrasted with the later five commandments in that they have explanations or warnings or rationales or some other thing attached to them, such as a promise. The final five commandments, by contrast, tend to be just straightforward imperatives. In Deuteronomy's list of the Ten Commandments we also recognise that the Lord's name is found in each of the first five commandments, but not in the ones after that.

The first five commandments seem to deal with vertical offences, offences against those who are over us, God particularly, but then also father and mother. And the next five commandments are commandments dealing with offences against our neighbour. There is a logic as we follow through them as well.

First of all we notice that there are two positive commandments at the centre. There's the laws concerning the Sabbath day, to remember it and to keep it holy, and then there's the commandment concerning honouring father and mother, which is not a negative commandment in the form of you shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, or you shall not bear the name of the Lord your God in vain. It's a positive commandment.

And at the very heart of these things we see a positive vision emerging. Like the marble that must be removed by the sculptor to reveal the great image beneath, the commandments list a number of things that must not be done, surrounding some positive things that must be done. And when you remove those negative things, what you see emerging is the positive vision at the heart.

A vision of people giving rest and enjoying rest. A vision of people remembering and celebrating the great works of deliverance and creation of the Lord. A vision of father and mother joined together, male and female, in peaceful union, and then peace between the generations and honour between the generations.

This is the positive vision at the heart of the law, and all the rest of the law surrounds

this. The law can also be summarised in two great principles. The first great commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and then the second is to love your neighbour as yourself.

That first greatest commandment is found in the chapter that follows this, and the other is found in Leviticus chapter 19. In the Ten Commandments there is also a movement through from one commandment to the next, which can elaborate and develop certain principles. So the first great commandment begins with the statement of the Lord's deliverance, which both introduces the first commandment and the commandments as a whole.

At the very outset it lays out the principle of exclusivity and faithfulness to the Lord, and then it moves on into an elaboration of what that means in the second commandment, that a carved image or likeness of anything in heaven and earth that is worshipped is again usurping the place of God, is standing in the place of God and is a form of spiritual adultery. And then from there into a further commandment, a commandment concerning bearing the name of the Lord in vain. That bearing is not just a matter of cursing, it's not just a matter of taking a vow and not keeping it in the name of the Lord.

It can also include the fact that Israel has the name of the Lord placed upon them. The notion of bearing the name of someone can be found in Exodus chapter 28, where the high priest would bear the name of Israel into the presence of the Lord. Israel bears the name of the Lord before the nations, and they must not bear the name of the Lord in vain.

Faithlessness to the Lord is not just seen in serving other gods, it's not just seen in idolatry and setting up images. It can also be seen in unfaithfulness that causes others to blaspheme his name. Much as we bear our family name and we must live in a way that honours our family name, Israel bears the name of the Lord their God, and they must bear it with honour before the nations.

The fourth commandment concerns the Sabbath day, and as we've looked through the covenant in Exodus particularly, we've seen the Sabbath day as the core commandment of the covenant. This is the sign of the covenant, particularly expressed in Exodus chapter 31, but also seen elsewhere. It is the Sabbath principle that sums up their deliverance from Egypt, and this is why in this particular context it is the rationale for the celebration of the Sabbath, because they have been released from Egypt, they have to celebrate this day of release, and give rest to their servants too.

It's an expression both of the principle of creation that God rested on the seventh day, but also the principle of redemption, the principle of deliverance from slavery, that they experienced as they were taken out of Egypt. The importance of the Sabbath is seen particularly in places like Leviticus chapter 23 and 25, as it's expanded into an entire festal calendar, and then into things like the Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee. One

thing that the law of the Sabbath highlights is that God is a God of time.

God is a God of time in creation, but God is also the God of time in redemption in history. God has acted in history, and he acts according to particular rhythms. These must be remembered, and they must be observed.

And Israel, as it celebrates this day, will participate in the meaning of what God accomplished in the Exodus. They will give liberation to their servants, as God gave liberation to them as servants of Pharaoh. Israel's deliverance from Egypt is never intended to be an event in the past that's left behind, that's a foundation of the nation that's then forgotten.

No, it's supposed to be instituted in their ongoing life. And every time they celebrate the Sabbath day, they are looking back to that original event of deliverance, and instituting it in their ongoing life as a principle to observe. The Christian celebration of Sunday has a similar principle.

We are looking back to the principle of new creation and of new covenant. The Sabbath day looked back to the original creation and the event of the deliverance from Egypt. We look back to the new Exodus that Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection, and the new creation that he brought in as he rose from the grave.

In many respects, the Fifth Commandment is a transitional commandment. It has many of the features of the first five. It has the name of the Lord mentioned within it, it has the lengthy explanation or rationale for the commandment, and it also deals with vertical relationships.

However, at this point we're moving from our relationship with God primarily, to our relationship with other human beings. The commandment to honour father and mother as it gets impact elsewhere, includes the way that we must honour other figures that God has set up in society. Our submission to father and mother is also a submission to leaders that have been placed over us in different roles.

Honouring father and mother should not, however, just be thought of in terms of obedience. Honouring is a far broader principle than that. We can honour father and mother, for instance, in honouring the sacrifices that they have made, the seeds that they have sown in their lives, tending, watering, protecting, and then bringing those seeds to harvest, so that the work of a people can continue over multiple generations, that each generation is not in rebellion against the one that has preceded it.

And the rationale for this is that people's days may be long in the land, that it might go well with them. When the generations are at peace with each other, this will be the natural result. We can see the same principle in relationship to the second commandment.

I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on their children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. Thousands being generations. Faithfulness continuing over generations has a cumulative effect and it builds up a great legacy that can be passed on and continued.

But it's a fragile thing. In a generation that abandons the faithfulness of their fathers and mothers, all can be lost. Beyond the broader generational principle, we should also observe that it refers to father and mother.

This is not just about honoring your father. It is about honoring both of your parents, in their distinct stations in life and in their respective labors. The two fundamental bonds that lie at the heart of any society are the bonds between men and women and the bonds between the generations.

In father and mother, male and female being brought together, and the honoring of both of them in the generation that arises from them, we're seeing all these bonds being held intact and the integrity of society being secured at its very heart. If the Lord is the true and the living God, the unique creator of all things, it might seem that the most fundamental form of rebellion against him would be to take life. Creatures cannot create life, but we can destroy life.

Murder is a fundamental assault upon those created in the image of God. It is for this reason an assault upon God himself. It should not surprise us that Satan is described as a murderer from the beginning.

God created mankind in his image. He also created mankind male and female, and the image of God is expressed in the bringing together of male and female. If murder is a fundamental assault upon the image of God, then adultery, or anything else that attacks the bond of marriage, is an assault upon that expanded sense of the image.

Beneath the heading of this commandment is included a great host of sexual sins. If the most fundamental attack upon the image of God is murder, and the more extended attack upon the image of God is seen in adultery, there is an expansion of the notion of attack upon persons in the eighth commandment concerning not stealing. To steal from someone is to take something that is an extension of their person.

When someone steals from us, there is a violation of our integrity. It is a seizing of our property, of something that is proper to us. But I am not just my life, nor my life and my union with a person of the other sex, in the bond of marriage, nor even in those things plus my property.

I also have standing in society. I have a name. I have a reputation.

I have a status. And all of these things can be assaulted in different ways. And the ninth

commandment particularly relates to those things.

It relates to the various ways in which we can use systems and laws to attack other people, words to slander them, or otherwise to offend against their dignity. And the tenth commandment takes these principles even further. Envy is something that is fundamentally opposed to the dignity of my neighbour.

Envy has found the great seed of antagonism towards my neighbour. In envy, I want to be my neighbour. I want to occupy his place in the world.

I want to occupy his possessions. I want his house to be my house. I want his wife to be my wife.

His existence and his well-being is experienced as a slight against my person. The ten commandments bring this sin to light, and they challenge it. This sin that lies at the heart of so much dysfunctional social relation.

We should also observe the way that the tenth commandment turns the attention in. We are no longer thinking about an external action here. We're thinking about a posture of heart.

And as that is appreciated, it will influence the way that we read the entire body of the ten commandments. The ten commandments are ultimately fulfilled not in a set of prescriptions and proscriptions, but in a posture of heart, in loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbour as yourself. It's a posture of heart, and the tenth commandment draws our attention to where the root problem lies.

And once that root problem has been observed, the nature of the health that it undermines will also be perceived. All of these commandments were received in the context of the Theophany of Sinai, a Theophany that was glorious and dreadful, that terrified those who saw it, and struck awe into their hearts. Through publicly speaking to Moses in such a manner, God confirmed that he had been speaking to Moses all along.

As Israel witnessed the terrifying voice of the Lord, the divine source of the covenant, and also the authorization of Moses, was made very clear. Furthermore, once they witnessed these things, they called for Moses to go in before the Lord for them, because they could not approach the Lord themselves. So Moses' intermediation for Israel occurred at their own request.

In the later part of this chapter then, Moses is justifying and providing the rationale for his place relative to Israel. This is something that was established by, and testified to by God, but also something that the Israelites called for themselves. A question to consider.

When we think about law, we might think about dry and dusty tomes of legal statutes,

on the record that lawyers and others might pour over. We do not think of something that is a living part of the life of a people, that they return to and meditate and reflect upon, and chew over and delight in. But that is exactly what the law is within the book of Deuteronomy.

Simply looking at this chapter, what are some of the ways in which the law as it is recounted here, differs from what we would usually think of as law, and what lessons might we learn from that? Deuteronomy chapter 5 recounts the Ten Commandments, but from chapter 6 to 26 the Ten Commandments are expounded. Part of the purpose of this is to develop literacy in the law. Literacy can be thought of as condensing and expounding.

To condense is to put things in a nutshell, to express the deeper principle of something, in a single statement for instance. And to expound is to be able to unpack that single statement, or the basic principles, and to show how they play out in practice, to refract the white light of the law into all these different applications. Chapters 6 to 11 unpack the First Commandment, what it means to have no other gods besides the Lord.

The focus is upon the importance of a loyalty to the Lord, and the First Commandment sums up the meaning of the Covenant. Israel's exclusive loyalty to the Lord is the fundamental principle of the Covenant, that which lies beneath everything else. Their observance of the commandments and statutes that the Lord has given them, is their way in which they will express the loyalty that they have to the Lord their God.

If we want to understand why the First Commandment is given so much attention within the book of Deuteronomy, it is because of this. Unless the First Commandment is grasped and observed, everything else is in vain. Everything builds upon the foundation of this First Commandment.

And as they observe this commandment, they will find that things go well for them. They'll be brought into the land that flows with milk and honey, these symbols of fruitfulness, and they'll experience God's blessing upon them. At the heart of this chapter is the Shema, which is that great statement beginning, Hear O Israel.

This statement is at the very heart of Israel's life, having a sort of creedal significance. There are various ways in which this statement has been interpreted and translated. Some see it as, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

That's a statement of the exclusivity of God as the Lord of His people. There are no other gods that they will have besides Him. While this is arguably not the most natural way to translate it, it's in this way that Zechariah 14, verse 9 expresses the principle.

Another way to take it is that the Lord our God, the Lord is one. That being a statement about God's nature, that God is unique, there is no other being like the Lord, or that God

is simple, that there is no division in God, there's no separation, there's no distinction between action and potential in God, or between genus and species. It could also be interpreted as, The Lord our God is one Lord.

The claim there would be that the Lord is not many, a Lord of this location and a Lord of that location, but the Lord of all the earth, the Lord of all things. My inclination is to go with the first interpretation, that it's a statement of the Lord's exclusive claim upon the loyalties of His people. Yet to see in this statement of loyalty also an implicit statement of theology, and the being of God, does not seem inappropriate to me, although that move needs to be made carefully.

Moses charges people to love the Lord their God with all their heart, and soul, and might. Love is the fulfilment of the law. The law is not a matter of observing a set of commandments just in external action.

It's not just a matter of legalistic, dotting I's and crossing T's. It's about something that arises from the heart. It's not just about feeling as we would understand it though.

When we hear the word love we tend to think in terms of emotions, but this is more than emotions. It's a total commitment expressed in actions. One's heart is one's seat of thought, of will, and of feeling.

One's soul is one's emotions, passions, and desires. And Moses stresses that it's to be all of these things. It's not to be half-hearted or divided.

There's no wavering to and fro. There's no compartmentalization of loyalties. This is something that requires the entirety of your being.

And to do so with all your might is to throw your entire weight into it. You're doing this without reserve. This statement, as Jesus expresses it, is the greatest commandment of the law.

It's the statement in which the whole of the law is summed up. It's a summation of the first commandment, to have no other gods besides the Lord, but it unpacks what that actually means, and the sort of loyalty that is required of the people of God. Not just an external loyalty, but a complete devotion of themselves.

And this great commandment also expresses how important the heart is in all of this. The heart has to be ordered towards the Lord, not just the external practice. And from this fundamental statement of the first commandment, and the love and the loyalty that is required of God's people, Moses moves to the words that he's about to teach them, that those words must be in their heart.

This is the shape that loyalty and love towards the Lord takes. Taking his words into us, and making them part of us. The taking of words into the heart might imply, among

other things, memory.

That we memorise scripture, that we chew it over, that it is something that is within us. I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. The memorisation of scripture really does seem to be part of what's in view here.

Having the words of God in your heart is also having those words as matters of delight. Words in your heart are things that you rejoice in, that you take pleasure in, that you return to again and again and again. It's also a matter of meditation.

Meditation in that you chew over these words, you ruminate upon them. And the Psalms seem to be part of the fulfilment of this. Not just in the way that you memorise the Psalms, but also in the way that the Psalms conscript the emotions and the desires.

So that when you sing the Psalms, your desires are made part of your expression of the word of God. This is part of what is meant, I believe, in having the word of God in our heart. This also anticipates the new covenant.

In Jeremiah chapter 31, verses 31 to 34, God declares, Not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord.

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord. For they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.

For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. Writing the law in the heart is a matter of knowing the Lord within. It's not just an external word, it's a word that has become part of us.

It's also a sign of divine ownership. As God writes his word in the hearts of his people, his people are marked out as his people. We can see something of this movement in scripture itself, as law starts off being an external commandment, and then as we go through scripture it's increasingly taken within.

I've already mentioned the Psalms, which are an internalization of the word of God in the expression of delight and song, the stirring up and conscription of the emotions, and in memorization. It's also in the work of wisdom, as the law is taken in so that the person can perceive in terms of the law of God. And then it goes further in the work of the prophets.

The prophets are those who actually eat the word, as in the case of Ezekiel, for instance.



And as he eats the word, that word is taken into himself in an even deeper way. So he is an embodied expression of God's message to his people.

2 Corinthians 3 speaks of the Corinthians as epistles of Christ, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of heart. Moses goes on to emphasize that the law is to be taught to children as a pattern of life. This is something that you don't just keep for yourself, it's not just something that you meditate upon in your own heart, it's something you speak about to your offspring and to your family.

It should be constantly a matter of your conversation. You're always chewing this over, ruminating upon it, muttering it as you're walking around, as you're sitting down, as you're lying down, and then as you're getting up. The words of the law should be bound to your body.

From at least the 2nd century BC, Israel took this literally, binding leather containers containing passages from the Torah to their foreheads and also to their hands. Like the tassels on the Israelite garments, these phylacteries serve to memorialize the law of God, to provide a constant objective spur to memory and to reflection. Writing them on the forehead and on the hand is associated with action and with thought.

This is something that you're supposed to meditate upon, it's something that's supposed to guide the action of your hand. It is also to be written upon the doorposts of houses and on gates. Those places of entry, those liminal realms that mark out the difference between what's inside and what's outside.

What's inside is distinguished by the fact that it comes under this sign, under the sign of the law. The law is the banner, as it were, that is upon Israel's houses, upon their cities, marking out their loyalties and expressing their core commitments. We have a very narrow conception of words.

We can think of words merely as conveying information, but words written upon things express ownership. They express a connection between the thing and the words that are written upon them. Within this passage, there is a rich and deep emphasis upon a multifaceted relationship with the word of God.

The word of God is not just some information that God gives to us. It's something that is expressed in material form. We write it upon things so that our houses come under its sign, so that its ownership of our bodies is expressed.

We seek to write it upon our hearts through memorisation, through singing, and through these various other means by which it becomes part of us, and not just an external set of words upon pages. In Deuteronomy 17, verses 18-20, the king is instructed to write a book of the law for himself and to meditate upon it throughout his life. We might

consider doing the same sort of thing, to express the bond that exists between us and the law of God that he has given to us, and by which we are to be formed.

The importance of teaching children is foregrounded in both verses 4-9 and in verses 20-21. The sections in between focus upon not forgetting the Lord or the lessons of the Exodus in the wilderness. The Lord is a jealous God, and those who reject or forget him will suffer severe consequences.

There is a real danger of forgetting the Lord in the prosperity of the land that he will give to the people. They have the seductive pull of false gods as well to experience. They are told that they should not test the Lord, as they did at Massa.

This is a reference back to Exodus 17, verse 7. And he called the name of the place Massa and Meribah, because of the quarrelling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord, saying, Is the Lord among us or not? Later on in Psalm 95, verses 7-9, this event is recalled. There was an implicit threat of disobedience within the statement of the people at Massa. Is the Lord among us or not? Is he going to act on our behalf? If he doesn't, well, we might just reject him.

Even though they had seen all of the things that God had done for them in the wilderness, and then before that, in the events of the Exodus itself. They must teach all of these things to their children. They need to know the rationale for obedience.

They are not just being told, you must obey. They are being told why they must obey. And as they understand that, they will grow in wisdom and a deepening acquaintance with the law.

The law will not just be something that is laid upon them from outside. It will be something that they can take into themselves. Parents, to do this, are to retell the story of the Exodus.

Their former state in slavery. The deliverance that God accomplished for them. God's judgments upon Egypt.

His good purpose for them in bringing them into the land. His gift of the law at Sinai. And his requirement of obedience for their good.

Moses ends with the statement that such obedience will be righteousness for us. As people express their loyalty to God in observing the commandments, it will be to their credit. They will be in right standing with the Lord.

It is imperative that we see what is at the heart of the faith of Israel. At the heart of Israel's faith is not a set of legalistic requirements. It's the calling to love God.

To be loyal to Him. It's a calling to faith. This is ultimately what will be righteousness for

the people of God.

This loyalty, this steadfast commitment to the Lord their God. Looking to God for provision, for care. Trusting Him and His character to look after them and to bless them.

And expressing that in obedience and faithfulness in the things that they do. Delighting in His word. Taking that word into them.

Meditating upon that word. Singing about that word. Making that word their constant reflection.

And teaching that word to their children after them. This is what it will look like to be the people of God. A question to consider.

Where can we find New Testament allusions to the Shema? Deuteronomy chapter 7 is a chapter that concerns in large measure Israel's relationship to the other nations of the land of Canaan. The Lord will clear out the nations before them. These seven nations that are greater and more powerful than they are.

And there's a serious warning against intermarriage. Now when we think about intermarriage we are often thinking about two individuals coming together and their individual ancestry. But that isn't the emphasis here.

Rather it's about joining families and intermingling peoples. For our understanding of marriage it's very much two detached persons. But within that culture it's a greater bringing together of peoples.

And so the intermarriage would be forging a bond between peoples not just between isolated individuals who have a romantic attachment. Israel seems to face a real temptation to intermarriage. Why is that the case? We could maybe suppose that it's about the romantic attraction between two individuals that fall in love.

One happens to be a Midianite, one happens to be an Israelite or something. And the star-crossed lovers are chafing at the restrictions that prevent them from coming together. Now that may be part of it but I think there's more going on here.

There is a temptation to intermarry because Israel is a small nation. And if you're a small nation one of the ways that you develop strength is by strategic alliances. By joining families and intermingling peoples.

And along with this would be the natural accompaniment of making covenants with them. And having religious syncretism as a part of that. They would serve their gods, they would make treaties with them and then they would intermarry with them.

And they would become one mingled people. There is an example of just this taking place of course in Numbers chapter 25 in the relationship with the Moabite women and

the Midianite women. There is also a warning against it in Exodus chapter 34 verses 12 to 16.

The warning here shows that alliances with people in the land, worshipping their gods and marrying their daughters and their sons all go together. If you engage in the covenant making these other things will tend to follow quite naturally. Daniel Lowenstein observes that there is a parallel with this of course in Genesis chapter 34.

This is the invitation of Hamel. This is an attractive offer. If you're someone who's wandering around from place to place who doesn't have great power or great numbers then you could get security by marrying into one of these established groups.

And it would enable both of them to be stronger for the alliance. The marriages then were the means of knitting peoples together, of intermingling peoples. And along with the alliance making and the intermarriage came the worshipping of the other's gods.

That syncretism that brought together two cultures, two peoples in the worship of the idols of each other. After the actions of Simeon and Levi in destroying Shechem, Jacob says to them You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and the Perizzites. My numbers are few and if they gather themselves against me and attack me I shall be destroyed, both I and my household.

The temptation for someone in that position is to intermarry. And appreciating the weakness of his position and how easily he could be preyed upon by others, Jacob was prepared to make some sort of treaty with the people of Shechem. And that treaty was one that involved them getting circumcised.

But that circumcision did not seem to be arising out of a deep commitment to the worship and serving of the Lord. It was a sort of religious syncretism. And the danger of course was that the syncretism went in two directions.

In the next chapter we read a very instructive passage. So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments. Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress, and has been with me wherever I have gone.

So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had and the rings that were in their ears. Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. And as they journeyed, a terror from God fell upon the cities that were around them, so that they did not pursue the sons of Jacob.

Jacob is aware of how small he is in numbers, and the need to make these sorts of strategic alliances with the people in the land. However, the result of this is a sort of syncretism. They have all these foreign gods, whether these idols were taken just in the

day-to-day interacting with the people of the land, or in the plundering of the city that we see at the end of chapter 34.

In both of these acts, Jacob's household was snared in idolatry. However, as they cut off those idols and completely removed themselves from the worship of the people of the land, and distinguished themselves as a people, not forming these sorts of entangling alliances, God puts a terror upon the cities round about them, so that they are not attacked. And a similar thing seems to be going on here.

They must completely dissociate themselves, completely reject the Canaanites and their ways. They must beware of appropriating their gods and their property. If they defeat a city, they must not take the spoil, because the spoil, as it was for Jacob's sons, seems to have been a snare, and they take the idols, and they start to worship the idols.

Rather, they are to be a people holy to the Lord, a people dwelling alone, not a people who are mixed in with the nations because they fear them defeating them. The story of Genesis chapter 34 is a despoiling of the Hivites, and at the end he talks about his fear of the Canaanites and the Perizzites. These are nations that are mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, and so the parallels between these stories would have been apparent to people who are reading this.

Where else do we find a story of the Israelites completely destroying a city of the people of the land? It's in Genesis 34. On the third day when they were sore, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males. They killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, and took Dinah out of Shechem's house and went away.

The sons of Jacob came upon the slain and plundered the city, because they had defiled their sister. They took their flocks and their herds, their donkeys, and whatever was in the city and in the field, all their wealth, all their little ones and their wives, all that was in their houses, they captured and plundered. And this plunder seems to have become a snare to them.

This was a pattern that the Israelites, as they went into the promised land, should not follow. They should learn from the failures of Jacob, but also from the failures of Simeon and Levi. Jacob failed by not keeping the people holy to the Lord, by making a covenant with the people of the land that would lead to intermingling.

And Simeon and Levi failed by again not keeping themselves holy, by taking things from the city that ended up trapping them and their people in the sin of idolatry. The snare of plunder must be avoided, and so they must bury the spoil if they are to escape. They ought to be a people holy to the Lord.

The Lord did not choose them because they were great in number. The Lord knows that

they are few, and the Lord will protect them as such. They must fear the Lord and be faithful to Him, rather than fearing the nations of the land.

The Lord will put His terror in them and protect them just as He did Jacob, their forefather. The Lord set His love upon them. They didn't do anything to deserve it.

He promised to their forefathers, and He delivered them from Egypt. Rather than engaging in strategic alliance-making, they need to be faithful to the Lord. That is the covenant that will pull them through, not the covenants that they will make in a shrewd way to gain favour with the people of the land.

It will be by cleaving to the Lord, and not departing from Him in any way. Why is God giving them the land? Verse 12 gives us an answer. Now this should remind us of something that we've heard elsewhere earlier on in the story.

It's the statement that God makes to Abraham after His sacrifice of Isaac, or His preparedness to sacrifice Isaac. It's a similar sort of statement. These two statements seem to make the blessing of God contingent upon the faithfulness of the person who's being blessed.

But there seems to be an apparent tension. The Lord here seems to suggest that they enter the land because they observe His rules. But just two chapters later we read, And that He may confirm the word that the Lord spore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

That's Deuteronomy 9, verses 4-5. And here it seems, in contrast to chapter 7, verse 12, they enter in because of the wickedness of the nations, and purely because of the Lord's promise and love to their ancestors. How do we reconcile these statements? How is it that they are given the land because they listen to and observe the commandments, but they don't in any way earn it? The answer is, although the Lord didn't choose Israel because of anything in them, He chose them for a purpose.

Their obedience is the means by which the purpose and the promise is fulfilled, not a means by which they earn the Lord's favour or love. And we see something of the logic of this in Genesis 18, verses 17-19. The Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what He has promised him.

The logic there is that God chose Abraham to bless all of the nations in the earth. He chose him for that purpose. He didn't choose him because of anything in Abraham that merited being chosen.

However, the blessing that God promised to Abraham that he would experience himself and the blessing that he would be to others will be achieved through Abraham's faithfulness. And God is going to form that faithfulness in Abraham so that God will bring to pass through Abraham what He always intended. Now what does this mean for Israel? It means that the land is not a reward that God is giving them.

No, it's part of their mission. God has chosen Israel so that there will be a light to the nations, a blessing to the people that have been cursed at Babel. He's going to drive out nations before them, but not because Israel is great, but because His purpose in Israel requires that they have the land.

The land is a tool for them to achieve the purpose for which He has called them. And so that blessing of the land is part of the way in which the promise is going to be fulfilled, part of the way in which God is going to bring His light to the nations round about and finally to the whole world. They are instructed to consume the peoples of the land.

They must remember the lessons of the Exodus and not be afraid of any of them. The Lord fights for them. The Lord fought for them in the events of the plagues and the Lord will fight for them again in a similar manner.

He'll clear out the nations bit by bit so that they can take possession as they have the ability to do so. He won't do it in a sudden swoop. Rather, as they rise in faithfulness and their capacity for taking rule in the land, God will drive out the people as they grow.

And the work of defeating, destroying these nations will not primarily be done by them. It will be done by the Lord who fights for them. What this actually looked like in practice is not entirely clear.

We should not presume that it would just be a matter of them falling by the sword. When they do take over the land, they must beware at every step not to give in to the temptation of syncretism, not to take the plunder of the cities and fall into the snare of idolatry. They must be holy to the Lord.

And it's that bond with the Lord that drives all of this mission. The holiness that they must express, the wickedness that they must completely detest and reject, and the way in which God will bless them as they take that route over others. This will be the means by which God's purpose for his people will be accomplished.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which we can compromise our holiness as the people of God through dangerous entanglements that we enter into through fear? Deuteronomy chapter 8 continues Moses' teaching on the first commandment, the fact that Israel should have no other gods besides the Lord. And here the concern is that they remember the Lord their God in their prosperity.

The time in the wilderness was one of humbling and testing in preparation for the

challenge of entering the land. Like a father training his son, so the Lord trained Israel in preparation for their entry into the promised land. That training involved humbling and testing.

The humbling involved bringing them to a position of dependence upon God, utter dependence upon his provision and his protection. And the testing was to discern what was in their hearts. The gift of the land was for the sake of Israel's calling, but if they weren't careful it would become a snare to them.

Consequently, before they could enter into the land, they had to be prepared for it. In the wilderness they lacked provisions, they lacked power, and they lacked direction. And they had to depend upon the Lord for each of these things.

The Lord would guide them through, the Lord would give them the food that they needed, the Lord would protect them from their enemies and from the wild creatures of the wilderness. And during that time they would hopefully learn the lesson of what it meant to relate to the Lord their God properly. The wilderness was also a time of testing and judgment, where the heart of Israel was exposed through sin and rebellion, and when God judged them so that they would learn the lesson and be faithful.

If they had entered into the land as a haughty and disobedient people, the land would not bring blessing to them, it would not be a context of enjoying fellowship with God, it would actually be a snare to them, it would be a means of their own destruction. The land wasn't a reward for Israel's righteousness, rather it was something that they were supposed to mature into. It was a realm of increased responsibility and blessing.

However, before they could enter into the land, they had to learn the lessons of the wilderness and graduate from that class. And when they failed to do so, when they failed to heed the Word of God, to obey His voice, they had to take this remedial period of 40 years of testing and humbling, and they were judged for that period of time, because they were not prepared for that new level of responsibility. The manna in particular is singled out as something that was designed to teach them that man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

In times of plenty, we might be tempted to think that we live primarily by material resources. We live by our crops, by our wealth, by the strength of our hand and our military, and we live by the way in which we can foresee the future and plan for it. However, the wilderness was designed to teach Israel that societies ultimately live by the Word of God.

And the manna was a way in which God taught this. It taught dependence. You couldn't accumulate the manna.

You couldn't build it up and become wealthy through manna. You couldn't preserve it.



Each day you had to depend upon God for your daily bread.

You couldn't cultivate it. Ultimately, it came from God. It was not something that you could produce by your own might and ability and skill.

It taught obedience. You had to work according to God's schedule. You had to survive on His provisions.

And it was absolutely imperative that this lesson wasn't forgotten when they entered into the land. One aspect of the Feast of Firstfruits was to recall this fact, when they offered an omer of the barley grain of the land. This omer corresponded with the omer that they would gather each day of the manna.

It expressed the fact that the reality of God's provision in the manna continued in the grain. That the principle of the wilderness, while not so obvious, continued in the land. Israel is on the brink of its greatest test.

They have the choice between enjoying the good gifts of the land and forgetting the Lord, or enjoying the good gifts of the land and remembering the Lord. This is the real challenge. It is one thing to remember the Lord in the tough times, quite another to do so in times of prosperity.

Decadence easily develops when we lack any crisis. Life is easy when everything is handed to us on a plate. Israel was about to enter into a situation of plenty and prosperity.

Moses wants to be absolutely certain that they are ready for this. How do you prepare yourself for the difficult days when decadence crouches at the door of your prosperous society? This is what Israel is being prepared for in this chapter. When we look through the Pentateuch, it is startling how much of it is devoted to memory.

Israel is constantly having its mind directed back to the events of its history. It's recalling these in retelling the story, but also in the repeating of the rituals over time. The second half of Exodus, the book of Leviticus, much of the book of Numbers and the book of Deuteronomy all have the establishment of memory and continued practice and memorialization at their very heart.

The tabernacle and its sacrifices is an institutional continuation of the meaning of Sinai and that event of meeting with God there. The Sabbath and all the feasts of Israel's calendar are a continuation of the meaning of the Exodus event. In the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, they are entering once again into the experience of Israel leaving the land of Egypt.

And then again at the end of the festival year, when they celebrate the Feast of Booths, they are once again entering into that experience of leaving Egypt for the first time.

These events are not to be forgotten. These events are written into the calendar.

They're written into the book that Israel is supposed to take into itself. They are supposed to meditate upon these events and that will preserve their society from decadence and the destruction that comes to decadent societies. God never wanted Israel to remain all of its life in dependence in the wilderness.

He wanted them to grow in strength, to act in strength. And so he strengthened them to act and he gave them resources to cultivate and employ for their strength. However, when you have such strength, it's very easy to forget where that strength has come from.

Unless Israel constantly returns to the events of its history, it will forget. And in forgetting, they will forget not just their history, but forget the Lord who has equipped them with this strength. I have argued that this section belongs to an extended sermon concerning the First Commandment.

And here we see part of the purpose of that. We must have no other god beside the Lord. The point of this is not merely that we shouldn't replace God with idols and false gods, but also that we must not forget him.

The uniqueness of God is seen in his provision for all of our needs, our dependence upon him in every area of life. The fact that whatever we do, our strength, our resources, our provision, our protection, all of these things ultimately come from the Lord. And perhaps the greatest and most dangerous idolatry of all is assuming that we are God, that we are the ones whose providence rules the affairs of history.

That we are the ones who provide for all of our needs. That we are the ones who have the autonomous strength to serve all of our purposes. And this temptation to forsake and forget the Lord our God is felt most keenly in times of prosperity and growth.

This, of course, is perhaps the greatest temptation that we face in the modern world. And the consequence of such forsaking and forgetting is destruction. Such societies will decay and collapse.

The discipline of constant memory is the way in which we will be preserved from this. Remember our history. Remember the Lord our God, what he has done for us.

Remember the lessons that we learnt in times of humbling and testing. Constantly return to these. Learn the lessons that God has taught us at those times.

And then move forward in the light of those things. A question to consider. What are some of our practices of memory and memorialisation that ensure that we do not forget the lessons of the past? Deuteronomy chapter 9 begins with a statement that Israel is about to go into the land, displacing powerful peoples, because the Lord will go over

before them as a consuming fire.

The Lord has previously been described as a devouring fire in chapter 4 verses 23 to 24. Take care lest you forget the covenant of the Lord your God, which he made with you, and make a carved image, the form of anything that the Lord your God has forbidden you. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.

While on this occasion it relates to God's judgement upon the people in the land, on the earlier occasion it relates to God's judgement upon Israel, if they are unfaithful. Israel then cannot presume upon God's judgement, as if it were only directed against their enemies. When the nations of the land were driven out before them, the natural temptation for Israel would be to speculate that this happened because of their own righteousness.

The Lord is clearly rewarding them for being an upright people. And the point of this chapter more than anything else is to leave Israel under no illusion that this is the case. The majority of this chapter is devoted to cataloguing the various forms of rebellion that Israel committed in the wilderness, while also making entirely plain that it was only on account of the intercession of Moses and his appeal to the grace of God that they survived as a people.

When we are the beneficiaries of great fortune or favour that sets us apart from others, the natural underlying question that we and others are asking is, why us? And in such situations we are generally inclined to give reasons. We worked particularly hard. We used our smarts.

We were the most talented of the people in the situation. We like to believe that our good outcomes set us apart from others, not just in the outcomes themselves, but in some deeper way. Those outcomes reveal something about us that makes us special, that sets us apart, that demonstrates in some way or other that we are special, that we are above others.

And we should not only enjoy our good fortune, but we should feel entitled to it. We merit this. We are the type of people to whom this sort of fortune belongs.

While we might attribute negative results to our bad luck, whenever we have positive outcomes, we want to draw a line that connects it to our greater virtue, our greater capacity, our shrewdness, or some title that we have to it. And in a society that appeals to meritocracy as much as ours does, this is a particular problem. We often labour under the illusion that those who enjoy the best results in our society, who have the most wealth, the people who have the greatest power, the greatest positions of authority, the greatest status, whatever it is, we like to believe that that all comes down to some special characteristic in them, save, of course, for the occasions when this would cast an unflattering light upon us.

We have already seen that Israel would face the temptation when they enter the land to forget the Lord in their prosperity. This is another temptation that Israel would face, the temptation of attributing their blessings to their own righteousness. Moses has already talked concerning this to some extent in Deuteronomy 7, verses 7-8.

It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the house of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. Israel is not being given the land on account of its righteousness.

Indeed, the bringing of Israel into the land seems almost incidental here. The real point is driving out the wicked people before them, and they are driven out not because of Israel, but because of their own wickedness. At this point, Israel might still want to pat itself on the back for its supposed righteousness.

Perhaps they weren't given the land for this reason, but clearly they aren't that bad, and they can congratulate themselves to some extent. And the rest of this chapter is designed to puncture that illusion. Israel is a stiff-necked people.

It escaped destruction by the Lord in the wilderness only by the intercessions of Moses and by the skin of their teeth. Even at Horeb you provoked the Lord to wrath. Even at Horeb, the place where the covenant was established, where the law was given, where they saw the theophanic cloud and the fire, and when they heard the voice of God coming from the cloud, even at Horeb they rebelled against the Lord.

And Moses discusses the golden calf for the first time in the book, recounting the events of Exodus chapter 32-34, Israel's sin and his intercession for them. In that passage it was only because Moses stood in the gap between the Lord and his people and prevented the Lord from destroying them that Israel was saved. The Lord was about to blot them out and start anew with Moses, and Aaron also was about to be destroyed.

Moses had to intercede for both of them. And then he goes on to list sites of Israel's rebellion. Tabara, Numbers chapter 11 verses 1-3, the place where they complained.

Massa, Exodus chapter 17 verses 1-7, they tested the Lord there and he gave them water from the rock. Is the Lord truly among us? Kibrath, Hatahava, Numbers chapter 11 verses 31-35, the events with the quail. And then finally, of course, Kadesh Barnea, Israel's failure to enter into the land.

Israel must not forget these events. If at any point Israel forgets these events, they may fall into the trap of thinking that they entered the land because of their righteousness, because they were better than all the other peoples, that they enjoy these blessings on

account of some virtue in themselves. Once again, the task of memory is important here.

It will be as they remember their sin in the past and the way that God showed grace and forgiveness to them. It's only in their remembrance of that that they will be saved from deep error in the future and all the dangers that that would open them up to. Moses saves his most powerful argument till the end.

He mentioned his intercession earlier in the chapter, but he did not outline its contents. It is when we see the contents of Moses' intercession that it becomes plain. Israel has no claim by virtue of its own righteousness.

Indeed, if God were to judge Israel according to its own behaviour, there would be nothing but destruction awaiting them. What was Moses' argument? First, he spoke of the way that Israel is the Lord's heritage and that he has delivered them from Egypt. He then recalls the patriarchs and the covenant and the promises that God had made to his people.

Third, he speaks of the way that the Lord should do this for the sake of his own name among the nations. And then at the end he returns back to the claim with which he began. Israel is the Lord's inheritance and he has delivered them from Egypt.

He has set his name upon them. They are his own people. What should Israel notice? That there is no reference to their own behaviour here.

That indeed, the whole purpose of Moses' intercession is to draw attention to something that stands firm over against the fickleness of their behaviour, a generous grace that persistently resists their stubbornness. This, of course, has much to teach us too. We, like the Israelites, are tempted to attribute our favoured status, the blessings that we enjoy, the privileges that we have, and to attribute all of those to our own virtues, to some characteristic that we have, to some special entitlement that we possess, whatever it is.

And like the Israelites, we need to learn that we have been the recipients of completely undeserved divine favour. We are the recipients of grace and of mercy. God has not given us what is due to us.

If he had, we would be destroyed. And God has given us bountifully from his storehouses of favour things that we had no title to. God has blessed us richly with things that can only be attributed to his own kindness and goodness.

Like the Israelites, we should never forget our own sinfulness, lest we fall into the dark ingratitude of thinking that the grace and the goodness of our God has been received on account of something in us. One of the central themes of Moses' sermon is that there is nothing in the people themselves that merits God's goodness. To give them that vertiginous awareness that what holds them aloft in this position of incredible blessing is

nothing but the undeserved favour of God.

And this is no less true for us. A question to consider, how can we learn from Moses' example in our own prayers for the Lord's forgiveness and favour? Deuteronomy chapter 10 continues the narrative of the preceding chapter. At this point it is still not clear whether Moses' intercession had its intended effect or not.

But God re-establishes the broken covenant, writing the covenant on the tablets of stone which will be placed in the Ark. Moses points out that they are still there, a testimony to the restoration of the relationship. The fact that the tablets are placed in the Ark not only protects them, but it symbolically situates them in the presence of the Lord for his remembrance and for his enforcing of the covenant.

We don't know where the places that are mentioned after this actually are situated. Aaron's death is spoken of. But perhaps this is to make clear that the judgement for his sin with the golden calf finally came to him later.

In many respects these verses could be seen as diversion from the course of Moses' argument, because he returns to the subject of his intercession on Mount Sinai again in a few verses time. At that time Levi was set apart. Now it seems clear that this was not later on at the time after Aaron's death, but rather after the sin with the golden calf, when they rallied to Moses in chapter 32 of Exodus.

They had opposed idolatrous worship, so they are made the guardians of Israel's true worship. Their task is to carry the Ark, to minister to the Lord and to bless in his name. The benediction was a central part of the priestly calling, though its significance may often be understated by people.

Numbers chapter 6 verses 22-27 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his son, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel. You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So they shall put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them. The Levites have no inheritance in the land, but the service of the Lord is their inheritance.

This is in part in fulfillment of Genesis chapter 49 verses 5-7 Simeon and Levi are brothers, weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their counsel. O my glory, be not joined to their company.

For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. 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.

This is a negative judgment upon Simeon and Levi, arising out of their actions in chapter 34 of Genesis, after the affair with Dinah. While both of them were scattered, Simeon had an enclave within Judah, and Levi was scattered throughout the nation in its different cities. It seems that for Levi the judgment was turned into a blessing.

The very scattering among Israel that was their punishment became something that set them apart. Their inheritance was the Lord, and so they did not have a special inheritance within the land. Rather they had the tribal cities that were scattered as enclaves throughout the rest of the nation.

Likewise, the violence and the vengeance that characterize Levi in chapter 34 of Genesis, and in chapter 49 in the blessing and judgments upon the sons of Jacob, is something that is turned into a positive trait, as we see in the characters of Moses, in Aaron, the Levites in chapter 32 of Exodus, and characters like Phinehas in chapter 25 of Numbers. Their violence is tamed and used for the service of God, as their zeal is used to lead Israel out of slavery, and then as that zeal is used to guard jealously the holiness of Israel to the Lord. And the scattering of Levi is not merely something that sets them apart as a tribe.

It's a means by which Israel itself can be established in the common identity, as this one tribe is scattered throughout all of their tribal areas, constantly alerting them to the fact of their common identity, lest they should retreat into tribal separatism. Furthermore, at the heart of Israel's life are people who are dependent upon the hospitality of the nation, of the various tribes. These are people who will be identified with the aliens and the strangers, the poor and the marginal.

At the heart of Israel is a diaspora, and Israel itself will later become a diaspora, a scattered people among other nations, but yet set apart within them, a testimony to the God that they serve, as the Levites were a testimony to God, as they were scattered throughout the nation. If the various tribes were like great trees planted within the land, the Levites were like the birds that nested in their branches. There is a third reference to Moses interceding on the mountain here, which makes clear that this is a theme that's been running throughout.

Deuteronomy 9, verse 18, And then in Deuteronomy 9, verse 25, And now he returns to that again. The subject has been the incident of the golden calf, and what it proves about Israel's standing with the Lord throughout. And when that situation is finally resolved, there's a calling back to the beginning.

At the beginning, in Deuteronomy 9, verse 12, And then in chapter 10, verse 11, So that they may go in and possess the land, which I swore to their fathers to give them. By this point, Moses has made definitively clear that Israel's standing with the Lord is not upon its own righteousness. At this point, on the basis of the Lord's undeserved favor, he presents Israel with what the Lord calls them to.

As Geoffrey Taguey observes, as elsewhere in Deuteronomy, the accent here is upon underlying attitudes, not upon mere surface obedience and adherence to commandments. The letter of the commandments is not the primary thing, important though it is. Rather, true obedience will arise from a spirit of love, trust, and devotion.

Deuteronomy, among many other things, is a great body of teaching against legalism. Now, that seems surprising to us because it's a book about the law. Indeed, it's named after the law.

But the fact is, as we look closely, it's a book about faith. It's a book about devotion to the Lord, about love of the Lord. And these are the things that lie at the heart of Israel's relationship to the Lord, not mere external obedience to the commandments.

The commandments are given to them for their own good. And they will recognize this to be the case as a spirit of true obedience is cultivated in them. And such a spirit will naturally lead to willing and not grudging or resentful surface obedience.

This is the true obedience that is called for, obedience that springs from a willing and devoted heart to the Lord. Israel has been set apart by the Lord. But the Lord isn't a mere national deity.

Many have thought about the religion of Israel as a sort of henotheism, that there are many gods in the world, but there's only one god that Israel serves. So the Egyptians can serve these particular gods. The other nations around about can serve the Baals and these other sorts of gods.

But Israel is going to serve Yahweh. But God is the God of the whole earth and the heavens. This should heighten Israel's awareness of the depth of grace.

God is above all other gods and powers and rulers and authorities. God is unique. He's the uncreated one.

He's the one who has made all things. And Israel is faced with the reality of this God's immense grace towards them. The creator God has chosen them for himself.

Moses charges them at this point to circumcise their hearts. They're about to enter into the land and they must prepare their hearts accordingly. As they stand on the brink of entry, they must rededicate themselves to the Lord.

Circumcision was always a physical sign that needed to be confirmed in a posture of heart. It was a sign and seal of the righteousness that is by faith. Dedication of oneself to the Lord in a physical sign needed to be fulfilled in spiritual dedication.

The circumcision of your heart corresponding to the circumcision of your flesh. The Lord is not a partial God. He can't be bribed.



He's a God of justice. He regards the widow and the fatherless and takes up their case. Those who do not have a man in their life.

The widow who has lost her husband. And the fatherless who's not just an orphan but someone who does not have a father. God is the one who acts on behalf of such persons.

He also loves the sojourner. The one who does not have the security of membership of the society. The same political or civil privileges.

Israel itself is reminded at this point that they were once sojourners. And they must have an attitude to the sojourner in their midst that shows that they have learnt the lessons from how it felt when they were sojourners. Israel is to live as the firstborn son of this God.

Not trusting in their own righteousness. Not trusting in some special entitlement that they have. And they are supposed to reflect his character to the world.

The Lord is not a tame God. He's not a God in Israel's possession. Not a God under their control.

Not a God who is beholden to them. Or a God to whose favor they are entitled. Rather, he is the Lord of Lords.

The God of Gods. The creator of all, heaven and earth. He has graciously taken them for his own.

And they must never presume upon his grace. And persevere in sin. But they must cleave to him.

Moses' sermon continues to chart a way between the insecurity of fear and the over-security of presumption. A question to consider. How might the uniqueness and the character of God make devotion to him different from devotion to the gods of the pagan nations? Deuteronomy chapter 11 is the final chapter in the exhortation of Moses.

It leads into discussion of the commandments and rules in the chapters that follow. And a lot of the teaching of this chapter concerns the land that they are about to enter into. They're called to love the Lord.

And to keep his charge, his statutes, his rules, and his commandments always. This is how their future well-being as a nation in the land will be secured. The people Moses is speaking to still remember the events of the plagues in Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea.

While many of the younger people in the nation will not have experienced the events of the Exodus first-hand, it is a living memory for the people as a whole. And it is in reflecting upon this memory that Israel will be best served in their calling to be faithful to

the Lord going forward. They remember the plagues in Egypt.

They remember the crossing of the Red Sea and the judgment upon Pharaoh and his men there. They remember the judgments of the Lord upon the rebels in the wilderness, upon Dathan and Abiram and Korah. They know the power of the Lord's deliverance and judgment, and so they should live accordingly.

Their first-hand experience puts them in the best possible position to understand. Teaching and remembrance are so important for Israel, because of the primacy of historical event as testimony to the Lord's character and power. And as they reflect upon these events and keep returning to these events, they will find that they are spurs to trust and to faithfulness.

When the Exodus generation passes, obedience will be much harder, because there will not be that immediate sense of this is who the Lord is, this is what he has done. A people will arise who forget the Lord their God. They have not had that first-hand experience.

And so it is imperative that they remember and that they teach their children after them. Among other things that Israel should learn from the lessons of the destruction of the Egyptians at the Red Sea and of the swallowing of Dathan and Abiram in the wilderness, is the Lord's power over sea and land, issues that Moses will reflect upon within this chapter. Within this chapter, Moses often returns to the same sort of charge.

Verse 1, You shall therefore love the Lord your God and keep his charge, his statutes, his rules and his commandments always. Verse 13, And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul. And in verse 22, For if you will be careful to do all this commandment that I command you to do, loving the Lord your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him.

To this point, Moses has spent a lot of time reflecting upon the lessons learned from past disobedience. He's also taught them that they don't enjoy their possession in the land as an entitlement or as a result of their own righteousness. So the question is, how are they to live in it? For Moses, the answer to that question is loving obedience.

As they devote themselves to the Lord their God and obey God accordingly, they will find that they prosper within the land. Moses stresses that in the land they will have a much more obvious dependence upon the Lord, as opposed to the life in Egypt. Egypt depends for its irrigation upon the Nile and a human irrigation system.

The Promised Land, by contrast, depends upon the rains, and it can't be irrigated by the people themselves. Rather, they would have to look to the Lord for his provision of rain. And the Lord must tend to the land, and they must depend upon him.

If he does not give the rain, the land will be parched. But if he does give the rain, the

land will be fruitful like almost no other. The Feast of Tabernacles is associated with the provision of rain, coming before the early rains.

Zechariah 14, verses 17-18 describes it in this way. And if any of the families of the earth do not go up to Jerusalem to worship the king, the Lord of hosts, there will be no rain on them. And if the family of Egypt does not go up and present themselves, then on them there shall be no rain.

There shall be the plague, with which the Lord afflicts the nations that do not go up to keep the Feast of Booths. Within the Feast of Booths, among other things, there was a water-pouring ceremony, something that's mentioned in the background of John chapter 7. And this would involve pouring water on the altar, the water representing the rain, and the altar representing the land of Israel. Rain is a symbol of divine blessing.

The water cycle establishes communion between the heavens and the earth. There was no rain in the original creation when it was first created. It seems to have been irrigated with a mist or a surge, which may be similar to the way that Egypt was irrigated, with a surge of water coming up.

Rain in Israel was more seasonal. It's very important that the rains come at the right times for the agriculture to work, whereas most temperate countries have rains spread out over a long period of time. For Israel, it's far more condensed.

It happens within about a seven or eight month period, and there are about 40 to 60 days with rain. The first rains would occur in October to November. These would enable farmers to plough and sow, as it would soften the soil, which would otherwise be parched and hard.

After this, the rains would increase during December to February, where most of the rains fell. And then in April and May, just as the grain was reaching its full maturity, you would have the later rains, and it would enable the grain to reach its full height. The dependence upon the Lord for rains coming in their right times and in their proper measures was a very important spur for Israel.

Their dependence upon the rain forced them to look to the Lord, to be dependent upon Him as the giver of rain. In the story of the prophet Elijah, there is a drought declared upon the land, a judgment brought by the Lord upon an unfaithful people. The heavens from which rain comes are shut up, a natural symbol of the breaking of communion between God and His people.

As His people have not called to the heavens, the heavens are not open to them, and rain is not given. The description of Egypt as a vegetable garden here is an interesting one. It may make us think of the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings chapter 21.

There, King Ahab wants to take Naboth's vineyard and turn it into a vegetable garden.

He's taking the symbol of Israel, a vineyard, and turning it into a symbol of Egypt. In verses 18 to 21, Moses returns to instructions from the beginning of his sermon in chapter 6. He's given this charge at the very beginning, but now it's obvious why this is so important, why remembrance is absolutely imperative.

And so he charges them once again to remember in these particular ways, these very physical ways, by binding things onto yourself, and also by constantly teaching your children and those who come after you. Observing the commandment would also lead to them being successful in the conquest and possession of the land. Everywhere that they set foot would become theirs, as in the case of Abraham in Genesis chapter 13.

The Lord would go before them and strike fear into the hearts of all of their enemies. And Moses juxtaposes blessing and curse. Ultimately, what they have is a choice between life and death.

They have a choice between the way of the Lord and the way of their own rebellion. All depends on whether they will love and obey the Lord, or whether they will reject and rebel against him. When they enter into the land, they will have to perform a ceremony at two mountains facing each other near Shechem.

This will be a very powerful and visual representation of the choice that faces them. The choice between life and death. A choice that we find on many occasions in scripture.

This juxtaposition of the way of foolishness and the way of wisdom. The juxtaposition of the way of obedience and the way of disobedience. And then those things being connected with blessedness and judgement.

With beatitudes and woes. This ceremony gets returned to in chapter 27 of this book. In Joshua chapter 8 verses 30-35, the actual performance of the ceremony is described.

And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord and sacrificed peace offerings. And there in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the Law of Moses, which he had written. Just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded at the first to bless the people of Israel.

And afterward he read all the words of the Law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the Law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them. A question to consider.

What are some of the other symbolic associations and connotations that rain has in scripture? The book of Deuteronomy lays out the law given at Sinai once again, before Israel enters into the land. Chapter 5 contains the Ten Commandments, and the chapters that follow can be read as a general unpacking of those core commandments. With passages broadly devoted to each commandment in sequence from the first to the

tenth.

Chapters 6 to 11 unpack the first commandment, the core commandment, the truth that lies at the very heart of the covenant, the uniqueness of the Lord and his fundamental exclusive claim upon his people. In chapter 12, however, we move into exploration of the second commandment, the prohibition on idolatry and false worship. In chapters 12 to 13, there is discussion of true and false forms of worship and religious mediation, and the need to root out all false forms.

A key concern is that the Israelites don't adopt the religious practices of the Canaanites that they're coming in to dispossess. Israel must destroy the many sacrificial sites of the Canaanites, and establish just one in their place. The restriction of the site of sacrificial worship to a single location is the main subject of this chapter, and perhaps it may be a bit surprising to us, but this restriction would have very far-reaching consequences.

One of the temptations that the Israelites would have faced coming into the land would be that of religious syncretism, maintaining the pagan worship sites and many of their practices, but tweaking and mixing them with the worship of the Lord. The pagan sites of worship seem to have been, for the most part, outdoor sanctuaries associated with geographical landmarks, trees, or tops of hills or mountains, and these sites would often be named after the pagan deities that were worshipped there. Israel, however, is supposed to destroy these sites completely, and to obliterate their names, presumably by changing the name of the place that has been named after the pagan deity.

Israel, for its part, must worship only at one location, where the Lord determines to establish His name. The Lord establishes His name in a specific spot, the Lord dwells there, but only after a kind, not in the fuller literal sense. There seems to be something of a resistance to immanentization of God within this chapter, a containing of God within space, the way in which God can be located, pinpointed on a map.

That's not the type of God that Israel is supposed to worship. The Lord does dwell in the midst of His people and in a specific location, but He places His name there, and that placing of His name is a sign of ownership and possession, but it might also warn against the idea that the Lord is contained in buildings made with hands. Later in the history of Israel, we see that they often failed on these specific points.

They often established false worship, the sort of worship of pagan shrines or high places. Sometimes these had a syncretistic flavour, ostensibly dedicated to the worship of the Lord, but worshipping the Lord after a pagan manner. On other occasions, however, they were simply the worship of idols and false gods.

In 2 Kings 17, verses 9-11, we have an example of this failure of Israel. And the sons of Israel did things secretly which were not right against the Lord their God. Moreover, they built for themselves high places in all their towns, from watchtower to fortified city, and

they set for themselves sacred pillars and asherim on every high hill and under every green tree.

And there they burned incense on all the high places as the nations did, which the Lord had carried away to exile before them, and they did evil things, provoking the Lord. Why would the site of worship be limited to a single location only? Private altars, perhaps, can be a temptation to a domesticated God, a God who is placed at our own disposal, perhaps a territorial God tied to various locations, rather than the one creator God over and above all. Territorial deities are a feature of polytheism.

Often these would be deities with a specific portfolio, a God of the sea, or a God of this particular river, or a God of these particular mountains, whatever it is, and worshippers can bargain with these Gods. Israel's centralised worship and single site of sacrificial worship was connected to their firm monotheism. There was one God, and worship must be unified.

The worship of polytheism was typically characterised by varying customs and rituals that were changed from place to place, each shrine projecting a God suited to the needs of the worshippers in that specific location. All of Israel's sacrifices, however, have to be brought to the central sanctuary, and presumably this would mostly occur during the pilgrimage festivals. This chapter presents feasting before the Lord as a key feature of Israel's worship.

It's easy to call out to the Lord in our distress. That's the time when we think about the Lord. It's something different to rejoice in the Lord's presence, to enjoy His gifts before Him, and celebratory meals are a very important part of the religious worship presented by Deuteronomy.

This sort of festal worship is a worship that will protect Israel from forgetting the Lord in times of prosperity. It's worship that guards against decadence. And in these times of festivity, it's important for them to include the Levite.

Within every single one of their locations, there are Levites who are dependent upon them, who do not have the same stake in the land as they do. Rather, they are God's servants, and the attitude of the Israelites towards God's servants is expressive of their attitude towards God Himself. If they honour the Lord, they will honour His servants.

And the Levites, because of their dependence upon the charity and the hospitality and the tithes of the people of Israel, are associated with the poor of the land. The change to the sanctuary here is a movement from a situation that verse 8 describes as everyone doing whatever is right in his own eyes, to one of everyone doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God, in verse 28. Everyone doing what is right in their own eyes is not presented as a positive thing.

We have that as a refrain within the book of Judges. There's no king in the land, there's no one to unify the land under a single principle of behaviour, and so everyone does what is right in their own eyes. Once Israel is securely established in the land, the current situation, where they seem to be sacrificing in various locations, seemingly against the instructions of Leviticus chapter 17 verses 1 to 9, that would change.

Perhaps the situation had become one of the Israelites being semi-settled in the Transjordanian territory and their sacrificing animals for meat on private altars, as the tabernacle was now too far away from many of them. The requirement for centralised worship was emphasised in the Kingdom period, mostly against the practice of the people, which was a reversion to the habits of paganism. Israel is judged for setting up local shrines in high places and sites of sacrificial worship, most notably that set up at Bethel by Jeroboam the son of Nebat.

With the removal of these various sacrificial locations, there would need to be a change to Israel's eating practices. While they were in the wilderness, it wasn't too hard for them to sacrifice in the tabernacle if they needed to sacrifice. But when they became much more spread out, they either had to have these private altars, or they would have to go a long distance to sacrifice.

And so there needs to be a change to the practice. They could formally kill and eat non-sacrificial animals, but had to sacrifice the sacrificial animals first. Now this was no longer necessary.

They could eat the meat of animals that would be of the kind that could be offered, without having to offer them. If they were going to give a sacrifice, they would have to eat that in the presence of the Lord, and this would include voluntary sacrifices. So that meant that they couldn't have voluntary sacrifices on their own private altars.

They had to go to the altar of God at the temple or the tabernacle, and offer there, and then they could have it in the presence of the Lord in that location. The result of all of this is that much of their meat-eating, which formally would have been religious, they would have to sacrifice the animal to the Lord first, and then they would eat the meat as a sort of peace offering, is now secularised. They don't have to offer that in order to eat it as meat.

But if they are going to offer a peace offering, they have to eat it in the presence of the Lord. Moses charges Israel utterly to reject the religious practices of the Canaanites. They were being wiped out of the land for these things.

They should not enquire about the sort of ways in which the Canaanites worshipped their gods. It is not an example for them to follow. The most egregious practice, of course, is child sacrifice.

They must not adopt such practices, but must worship the Lord only as He commands. The centralisation of sanctuary worship is an important part of the reforms of figures such as Josiah and Hezekiah. We read of Hezekiah in 2 Kings 18 verses 3-4.

It was called Nehushtan. Part of the impact of all of this teaching is to establish a sense of orthodoxy in worship. Worship is not this superstitious thing, nor is it a matter of practice that is vernacular to a particular location, something arising out of the customs, the needs, the habits and the traditions of a specific location.

No, there is a single site of sacrificial worship, and there is a single mode of sacrificial worship. God must be approached on His own terms, not in terms of each location's customary religious traditions and practices. A question to consider.

How do you imagine that the centralisation of the sanctuary would have caused the average Israelite's experience of his faith to differ from those of the surrounding pagan nations? Deuteronomy chapter 13 continues to explore themes broadly related to the second commandment, concerning false forms of worship. Chapters 6-26 unpack the ten commandments of chapter 5. We see the core principles of the law refracted in many situations, and in the process we get a much better sense of how expansive their principles are, and we see more clearly how they touch upon different specific situations. Chapter 13 seems to come under the material concerned with the second commandment.

However, it doesn't seem to fit very neatly on the surface of it. This happens on a number of occasions in these chapters in Deuteronomy. The general pattern seems to hold quite strongly, but there are many particular parts that seem to strike a jarring note.

One might imagine that the material of chapter 13 would fit more neatly under the category of the first commandment, as it is concerned to ensure that Israel aren't led to serve other gods than the Lord. What could this chapter have to do with the second commandment? On such occasions, we need to beware of trying to force passages into patterns. There is always the temptation to see a nice pattern and to impose it upon unwilling texts, like someone hammering two puzzle pieces together.

Our reading must always be attentive and responsive to the guidance of the text themselves. However, some of that guidance is found in the patterns themselves, that emerge from the text, and that can help us to push our attention in specific directions. There are a number of ways in which we could respond to this situation.

First of all, we should provisionally weaken the strength that we attribute to the pattern. The pattern must arise from the text and it must be confirmed by the text. It is very important that we make such patterns vulnerable to challenge from the text.



When reading scripture, we often focus a bit too much simply upon whether something is right or wrong, and we fail to consider the strength of certain connections and patterns. Some connections and patterns are genuinely present, but they're weak. Others are very strong.

Others are uncertain and should only be weighted as weak. We wouldn't have to worry about breaks so much upon our readings, if we were much more cautious about our use of the accelerator. Second, we should hold it up to question.

Perhaps the pattern isn't there at all. Perhaps the problem is that much material can be connected to one of several different commandments, for instance in this particular part of scripture, and we, having presumed that the connection must be with one specific commandment, are over-determining texts that are actually more ambiguous. This is a trap that's very easy to fall into.

Much of the material in these chapters could have been classed under one of several commandments, and the fact that it is classed under one particular commandment, presuming for the sake of argument that our pattern is correct, provides little evidence for the truth of the pattern itself. Perhaps the pattern is a weaker or more general one, and we are mistaken in expecting it to follow through exactly in every single passage. Third, we should consider the possibility that the pattern is real, but that a meaningful divergence from it is taking place.

Scripture is musical, and its motifs are seldom played out exactly. Many people think that scriptural patterns are merely about the similarities between passages. However, the similarities are often there to highlight important differences.

They almost invariably involve variations, divergences, and other surprises. The patterns are real, but they occasionally set up expectations precisely in order to confound them. Fourth, we should consider the possibility that the pattern is real, but that it needs some tweaking.

Perhaps in this particular instance, the material related to the first and second commandments are mixed together. Perhaps they overlap. There is another possibility.

Holding the pattern lightly, open to the possibility that it doesn't apply in this particular instance, or may even be undermined by it, we should tentatively explore the possibility that a pattern that seems to be borne out elsewhere might fruitfully direct our attention at this particular, less obvious juncture. Perhaps if we follow where the pattern is directing our gaze, we'll notice something that we might not otherwise have done. It is my belief that this occurs at several points in these chapters of Deuteronomy.

There is material that is placed at points where we would not naturally have placed it, but when we think about why it's placed there, we find illumination. Maybe that's what's

happening here. But we should suspend judgement until we see whether closer examination of the text itself bears this out.

Deuteronomy chapter 13 deals with three different cases in which Israelites might be tempted to forsake the Lord. Following from chapter 12, which requires Israel to uproot idolatry from the land, it ensures that it is never allowed to take root in the land again. However, if it might try to insinuate itself into the life of the people, it must be fiercely and uncompromisingly resisted.

And the first case is that of a false prophet with lying signs. The second is in the private statements of a close friend or relative. The third is in the apostasy of an Israelite city.

They are warned about being led astray to gods that they and their fathers have not known. In essence, gods that Israel has not experienced in the way that they have experienced the presence and salvation of the Lord. They are warned against straying from the path that God has placed his people on.

And there is, in each of these cases, an emphasis upon strong, decisive and merciless judgement, with reasons attached. Geoffrey Tague observes that within the reasons we see the lineaments of a broader theory of punishment. They must remove evil from the community, they must deter wrongdoing, they must guard the relationship between the Lord and his people.

The first case is that of the false prophet. And the false prophet is a challenge because he appears to have divine validation. He is a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, these two ways in which people might come up with prophecies and messages purportedly from the Lord.

His signs, which seemingly would have been declared in advance, seem to demonstrate the truth of his message. Now this might be a real prophet who has apostatised, or it might be a prophet who always has been a false prophet. The signs themselves might be tricks, they may be demonically empowered.

Perhaps they are produced through natural knowledge and abilities that others mistake for supernatural. We might consider the signs of the Egyptian magicians here. In opposing Moses and Aaron, they perform actual signs.

How are these signs performed? We don't know. They might have been performed through actual demonic activity. They might have just been magic tricks.

They might have been exploiting the knowledge of lesser known natural phenomena. We don't know. Maybe, in some occasions, these things might even be produced by God himself.

There seem to be occasions where God is involved, at the very least, in giving some

persuasive power to false prophets and allowing people to be deluded by them. In 2 Thessalonians 2, verses 11-12, Moses declares that in such an instance God may be testing his people. See an example of this in 1 Kings 22, verses 19-23.

And the Lord said, And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, I will entice him. And the Lord said to him, By what means? And he said, I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.

And he said, You are to entice him, and you shall succeed. Go out and do so. Now therefore behold, the Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets.

The Lord has declared disaster for you. Perhaps the interesting thing about this is that Micaiah is telling this to Ahab himself. He's being warned that there is this lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.

And so he needn't be blind to the situation. If he's blind to the situation, it's because he wants to be. God tests his people with false prophets on a number of occasions.

This seems surprising and even shocking to us. An especially unsettling example of this, perhaps, is found in the story of the man of God from Judah in 1 Kings 13, who ends up being killed by a lion for believing a false prophecy purporting to be from the Lord. However, the Lord has already proved himself to his people.

He delivered them from Egypt. He protected them and provided for them in the wilderness. He's going to bring them into the Promised Land.

The problem is that people want to go astray. And when they want to go astray, they will desire these false prophecies. And in judgment, the Lord lets them fall prey to the delusion.

He allows people to believe what they wish to believe and makes the error really convincing to them. This is worth bearing in mind when dealing with some people. Some people are confirmed in their willful blindness by the Lord as a sort of judgment upon them.

God allows them to believe what they want to believe and to really believe it. There's a second case, and that's the friend in secret. There are a number of examples of the person that this could be.

It could be your brother. It could be your son or daughter. It could be your wife.

It could be your closest friend. All of these people who are nearest to you, that you have the strongest attachment to. The pull here isn't that of signs and false religious authority, but of love and intimacy.

This is a different sort of temptation. It's an enticing. It occurs in secret.

And it's likely an ongoing thing. We're told, you shall not yield to him or listen to him. Yielding suggests something of the personal pressure that's being exerted over time.

And you feel that pressure building up over many, many days. And you should not yield to that pressure. The person is a traitor to the covenant and they must be reported.

All of the natural attachments, love, empathy and pity that we feel for those who are closest to us must be resisted. People must be merciless in these sorts of situations. The apostasy must be declared and dealt with publicly and decisively.

They must report the person and deal with the issue publicly. Even if it were your own child who you cared about more than anyone else in the world, or your own spouse, you would be expected to play the part of the witness and take responsibility even for enacting the judgment that came with that. The secret enticement leads to a public stoning as all of the people participate in the judgment of removing that person from their midst.

The third case is that of the apostate city. And this is the most serious case in many respects. It's an entire city that has apostatized.

Such a case must be responded to with a thorough investigation of the claim. Diligently establishing whether it is in fact the case. If it is the case, the entire city is subject to the ban.

They suffer the same fate as the Canaanites that went before. Israel is not immune on account of their ancestry. If they commit the same idolatry as the Canaanites, they will suffer the same fate.

Something like this happened in Numbers chapter 25 to those who yoked themselves to Baal Peor. All of the chiefs had to be put to death unless they decisively disassociated themselves from their idolaters. I think that in reading these verses we might also get an indication of what the judgment of the Canaanites could have involved.

Any who abandoned their idolatry could be saved and could be made part of the people of Israel, could move out of the land or could be sojourners among Israel in the land. However, any who held on to their idolatry would be destroyed. So, what are we to make of the question that we started with? How does this fit into the broader pattern of the commandments? First, we should note that it continues on naturally from the previous chapter.

The previous chapter is about uprooting idolatrous worship, and this chapter is about ensuring that it never takes root again. Also, the second commandment covers the actual practice of worship, whereas the first focuses upon its proper and exclusive

object, the Lord. The second commandment itself is a way in which the first commandment is enacted in practice.

After treating the exclusivity of our relationship to the Lord, we are taught how to relate to the worship of the Lord. These are principles in this chapter for maintaining the purity of the practice of worship, and so it seems appropriate that they come under the second commandment. Perhaps we could also see false prophets, family members and friends and cities of the land as potential false mediators, things that could get between us and God and lead us astray if we become wrongfully attached to them.

I wouldn't put too much weight upon that particular explanation. Rather, I think that the answer is found in its relationship with the previous chapter, and in the way in which the second commandment focuses upon the actual practice of worship. Unlike chapters 6 to 11, the focus of this chapter isn't directly upon the God-Israel relationship.

It is indirectly upon that, but its more direct focus is upon the relationships within Israel itself to ensure that the true worship of God is maintained, and in that recognition I think we have moved some distance towards understanding why it might appropriately be classified under the second commandment. A question to consider. What might we learn about the potential dangers of our natural attachments with others from this chapter? How can we practice such attachments in a healthy way, without them threatening our proper relationship with God? As we've been going through the book of Deuteronomy, I've noted the way in which the laws of this book loosely follow the order of the Ten Commandments.

Chapters 6 to 11 are an exposition of the first commandment, of having no other gods beside the Lord. Chapters 12 to 13 relate more to the second commandment, not to make a graven image. And chapter 14 contains material relating to the third and fourth commandments.

As we go through this passage, I will discuss more why I think this is the case. Israel is a people consecrated to the Lord their God, and for this reason they must avoid certain mourning practices. The practices in question, cutting themselves for the dead, or pulling out their hair in mourning, are contrary to their holy status.

The people of the Lord must not mark themselves out by death. Leviticus chapter 21 verses 1 to 6 and 10 to 11 describe similar requirements for the high priest and the other priests. The priest who has made himself unclean as a husband among his people, and so profaned himself.

They shall not make bald patches on their heads, nor shave off the edges of their beards, nor make any cuts on their body. They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God. For they offer the Lord's food offerings, the bread of their God.

Therefore they shall be holy. The priest who is chief among his brothers, on whose head the anointing oil is poured, and who has been consecrated to wear the garments, shall not let the hair of his head hang loose, nor tear his clothes. He shall not go in to any dead bodies, nor make himself unclean, even for his father or for his mother.

The people of Israel more generally, like the priests, are holy to the Lord, and they must not be a people marked out by the marks of death. God is the Lord and the giver of life, and he does not want his people to become people associated with death. The food laws we have here are far more condensed than those of Leviticus chapter 11, but here they are fundamentally the same.

However, certain parts of the law associated with much less commonly eaten animals are not filled out. We aren't sure about the identity of all of the animals mentioned in this chapter, although we have a pretty good sense of most of them. The big question, however, is how are we to make sense of the dietary laws? We should start off by trying to feel around the subject a bit.

First of all, the dietary laws seem to be connected with Israel's holiness. This section immediately follows after other material associated with Israel's holy status, and it's bracketed on the other side with a statement about Israel's holiness. For you are a people holy to the Lord.

The association between the dietary laws and holiness is not just found here, it's also found in Leviticus chapter 20, verses 24 to 26. But I have said to you, you shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey. I am the Lord your God, who has separated you from the peoples.

You shall therefore separate the clean beast from the unclean, and the unclean bird from the clean. You shall not make yourselves detestable by beast or by bird, or by anything with which the ground crawls, which I have set apart for you to hold unclean. You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.

So it's holiness to the Lord, but also separateness from the peoples. Israel is distinguished, and part of the means by which God distinguished his people is through the dietary requirements. The dietary requirements would seem to be in the category of a symbolic law, similar to the law of circumcision.

There is reason to it, a sort of symbolic rationale of fittingness, but it wouldn't be classed as a dimension of natural law in the same way as the prohibition on murder would be. A second thing to observe is that sacrificial creatures, oxen, goats, sheep, doves and pigeons, are a subset of clean animals. God consumes sacrifices, and the altar is a sort of table, but fish are never offered on the altar.

In the sacrificial system, animals seem to represent Israelite persons. So the bull represents the high priest, the goat represents the leader of the people, the sheep represents the average person, the turtle dove or pigeon can represent the poor of the people. These animals are all domesticated animals.

However, Israel's diet could exceed this. They could eat certain game meats, they could eat fish from the sea, they could eat certain types of insects, and certain birds other than the dove and the pigeon. However, if the animals of the sacrificial system represent Israelites and are symbolically consumed by the Lord, then perhaps the dietary requirements are related to symbolic inclusion and exclusion of other persons.

This particular line of reasoning would seem to be given some weight from the New Testament, where Peter's vision in chapter 10 of Acts, concerning the sheet and the various unclean foods in it, is connected with the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. A third thing to note. Contrary to much popular thought on the subject, these things do not seem to have to do with health, hygiene or dirtiness.

The more closely you look at the requirements, the more they don't really fit that paradigm at all. Fourth, the commandments seem to be exclusive to Israel. They're signs of Israel's holy status.

It marks Israel out and teaches Israel to be a people who make distinctions concerning what they assimilate into their life. But God-fearers, other nations round about, and the foreigner were all able to eat many of these foods, without being seen to have done something wrong in the process. Like circumcision, then, it seems to be a sign of inclusion in the people of God, and of the nature of the people of God relative to God, and also to the nations.

It is not an absolute moral commandment. Fifth, we should observe that there are various detailed criteria according to which we determine whether a creature is to be eaten or not. They seem to be there for a reason, they're not just arbitrary.

A lot of this material in Leviticus chapter 11, and in this chapter, is explaining what you can and cannot eat according to specific principles. And those principles invite explanation and exploration. Sixth, the forbidden creatures are typically carnivores, predators and carrion creatures.

Animals that chew the cud and have split hooves are creatures that are herbivores. Jewish oral law argued that you could also tell forbidden animals by their teeth. If they had incisors suited for eating meat, then they were not kosher.

This suggests that what we have here are rules of thumb by which you can tell whether something is a herbivore or not, by whether they are ruminants, and whether they have cloven hooves. But there might be something more to this. So while this is part of the

picture, in all likelihood, I think we are justified in looking further.

A seventh thing, the limitations on eating in Eden and after the flood should be noted. In Eden, the food that was explicitly given to Adam and Eve was all plant-based. After the flood, however, we are told that Noah was given to eat meat.

And as that permission is given, he is instructed not to eat the flesh with the blood. The blood must be poured out. The blood of the animal is the life of the animal, and it is important that he does not eat the life with the flesh.

Such restrictions upon food were important. It involved, among other things, a recognition that all comes from God and is subject to him. A mindfulness about food and where it comes from alerts us to the fact that God is the Lord and the Giver of life.

We can't treat the animal creation as if it were ours to dispose of however we will. There is some commonality between human life and animal life, and even though we are permitted to eat animals, we must do so in a way that dignifies the creatures that we eat and does not treat them as ours to dispose of however we will. An eighth point is that it seems that these animals are the ones that are most different from the serpent.

The serpent swallows its food. It has a very strong degree of contact with the ground. Serpents are associated with death and prey.

Clean quadrupeds, by contrast, do not touch the ground with their skin. They do not have the contact with death of predators and carrion birds. They are herbivores.

And Israel's distancing from death is also seen in the fact that they do not eat things that have died naturally. Israel is a people of life, so their exposure to death is limited. The water animals, they are animals without fins and scales, and in that respect they are closer to the serpent in certain respects.

They are not to eat carrion birds or birds of prey. Again, these are animals that are associated with death. When we are trying to understand the meaning of these things, we should pay attention not just to the content of passages, but also to the form and the structure and the literary situation of passages.

It's like doing a jigsaw puzzle. You pay attention both to the details of the picture and to the shape of the pieces. And Leviticus chapter 11 gives us real insight here, I believe.

The literary structure of the book of Leviticus betrays some of the deeper meaning of what's taking place. There is the establishment of this new garden scene, this new tabernacle, and the worship is being set up. The man is being placed in the garden, the high priest, and then everything's set up for this great celebration, and then there's a fall event with Nadab and Abihu and their sin, the forbidden fire that they bring in.



And from there, chapter 10, there is a series of chapters, and those chapters play out fall themes. So chapter 11 concerns the judgment upon the animals. The judgment upon the serpent followed immediately after the fall.

After that, it was the judgment upon the woman. And sure enough, in chapter 12, we have a chapter devoted to the question of childbirth and how that's to be treated. Chapter 13 and 14 concern skin diseases, the judgment upon the sweat of the brow, as it were, and the body.

And in chapter 15, it's omissions from the body, and the body as a site of death, the body as a spring of uncleanness. Chapter 16 is the day of coverings, when God covers his people. It deals with themes of expulsion as well, as the goat is sent out into the wilderness.

Once that pattern has been recognized, we have a lot more perches upon chapter 11. It is connected with the judgment on the serpent, and so the restrictive foods are foods that are associated with the serpent. Clean animals are animals that are distinguished from death.

They are animals that are herbivores. They are animals that do not have the same direct exposure to the polluting dust. Animals with cloven hooves wear, as it were, shoes, in sharp contrast to the serpent who crawls on his belly and eats dust.

Unlike the serpent who swallows things whole, ruminants take a long time digesting things. Not only are they not connected with death, they consume their food in a way that makes a far greater distinction between inside and out. A final point we could make.

Maybe there are some eschatological themes that can tie into this. We have statements about creatures in places like Isaiah chapter 11 verses 6-8. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together, and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. Isaiah chapter 65 verse 25.

The wolf and the lamb shall graze together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and dust shall be the serpent's food. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says the Lord. The distinctions between animals here seem to be related to their tameness and their engagement in predation.

The Lord only consumes domesticated herbivores in the sacrifices on the altar. Israel would mostly eat those animals as well, but they could also eat some other herbivores, creatures that weren't domesticated. The Lord is forming a people that are the polar opposite of the serpent, and Israel's eating of food is a sign of what it should and should

not assimilate into its life.

By this it is marked out as a holy people, special to the Lord. However, the time would come when animals formerly unclean would be rendered clean. The inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God is marked by an extension of the sorts of food that people like Peter could eat.

Straight after this we have one of the strangest commandments in the whole body of the law. Israel is instructed not to boil a kid in its mother's milk. And this, of all things, is a command repeated three times.

It's also found in Exodus chapter 23 verse 19, and in chapter 34 verse 26. On the other occasions where we find this, it's a climactic statement. In chapter 23 verse 19 of Exodus, it concludes the body of legal material in the book of the covenant.

In chapter 34 verse 26, it concludes the words of the renewed covenant. This suggests that this law is of great importance, and is almost certainly symbolic of something important. There have been a number of suggestions.

Howard Eilberg Schwartz makes an interesting case that there is an allusion to mother-son incest here, or some other form of inappropriate closeness between a mother and a son. I'm not persuaded that this accounts for the prominence that this particular commandment has given on these various occasions. There are almost certainly important symbolic meanings to be discovered in this law.

It's repeated three times at pivotal moments in the law, in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, as I've mentioned. And it's likely I'm missing several of these entirely. But a meaning nearer to the surface concerns the importance of keeping life and death very strictly separate.

That makes sense in the context of what we've just been reading in terms of the dietary requirements. This distinction between the animals is designed to keep death at a distance. It's designed also to distinguish oneself from the serpent.

Before that, we have the laws concerning mourning, that Israel should not mark itself out by death. Once again, life and death being kept separate. Even in a context like preparing a meal, where you might not be immediately alert to their proximity, the milk of the mother and the flesh of her child, the law charges us to separate them.

This fits in with surrounding themes of this chapter then. Israel is a people that has been delivered from death to life, and they must live as a living people, as a people that sharply separate their life from the reality of death. This really doesn't seem to relate very naturally to the third commandment.

You shall not bear the name of the Lord your God in vain. How might we explain the

connection? The answer is found in what it means to bear the name. Israel is holy to the Lord.

God has placed his name upon his people. They are his firstborn son. Leviticus 21 verse 6 reads, Not bearing the name of the Lord in vain is not profaning the name of the Lord, and that is profaned by living in a way that is not holy to the Lord, when he has set us apart.

The purpose of the laws concerning mourning and the dietary requirements are all about Israel maintaining its distinctiveness. Its distinctiveness from death, its distinctiveness from the other peoples, and its separateness to the Lord. At this point there is a shift to material associated with the Sabbath law.

This is material concerning tithe feasts. We should harmonise the teaching here with various other parts of the law. It would seem that there were different tithes.

The first tithe was given to the Levites. The second tithe was for the owner to celebrate feasts. And every third year the second tithe was devoted to the use of the sojourner, the widow and the fatherless and the Levite.

In the seventh year there would be no tithe, as it was the sabbatical year. The tithe served the purpose of connecting Israelites with the sanctuary and making the sanctuary a site of feasting and celebration. Shared rejoicing in God's presence was a central feature of Israel's life then.

The Lord wanted his people to delight and to know joy before him. The amount of food involved would suggest a really great feast. This is over a month's worth of food.

And yet they would only go to the sanctuary nine days a year by the requirements. So it suggests that they would be encouraged to go more often. And when they did go, to celebrate a really bumper feast.

Finally, their concern for the marginal persons and the Levite within their community would be a cause for God to bless their work. He who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. A question to consider.

How could we incorporate feasting more into our worship? Going through the book of Deuteronomy, we have observed the pattern of the Ten Commandments being fleshed out in verses 6 to 26. What we see is in each part the core principle of the commandment refracted in many different situations, revealing secondary principles. And these serve to illumine the deeper reality.

In the relationship between the exposition and the condensed principle, we develop an understanding of the unity, the coherence and the integrity of the law as a body of material. In chapter 15, we continue looking at the fourth commandment, the law

concerning the Sabbath day. At the end of chapter 14, it was themes of rejoicing and charity that came to the surface.

And now it's themes of liberation and the concern for the poor. In such material, we gain a better understanding of what the purpose of the Sabbath law actually is. Without such passages, we probably wouldn't think enough about the Sabbath law as deeply concerned with liberation and provision for the poor.

Likewise, in considering the connection between the tithe laws and Sabbath, the facets of the Sabbath connected with joy are emphasised. In Exodus, the Sabbath is the great sign of the covenant. Exodus chapter 31 verses 12 to 18 reads, And the Lord said to Moses, You are to speak to the people of Israel and say, Above all, you shall keep my Sabbaths.

For this is a sign between me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you. You shall keep the Sabbath because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death.

Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Six days shall work be done. But the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the Lord.

Whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. Therefore the people of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a covenant forever. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.

And he gave to Moses, when he had finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God. Now in Deuteronomy chapter 5, the law of the Sabbath day is connected not with the original creation and God resting on the seventh day, but with the event of the Exodus. And here we see that being fleshed out further.

The Sabbath is refracted into a much larger set of Sabbath-related times. It isn't just the seventh day. It's connected with seven weeks at Pentecost.

It's connected with the seventh month at the Feast of Trumpets, with the seventh year as the Sabbath year, and seven weeks of years in the year of the Jubilee. The Lord is the Lord of Israel's time, and he has delivered them from slavery. And now that principle of liberation and release is to be written all over their calendar.

This institutes the fact of the Exodus into Israel's life. The historical event becomes an enduring reality of life. It also becomes a principle to be extended further.

Israel must enjoy its liberation, but it also must extend that liberation to others. Jonathan

Sacks helpfully discusses the way that this chapter reveals an approach to justice. Justice is not merely restricted to retributive justice, but also includes distributive justice.

Distributive justice has often been misused and misapplied, but it remains exceedingly important. Distributive justice ensures that no one is stripped of a stake in society, and that society abandons its stake in no one. The Sabbath year and the year of Jubilee are concerned to ensure that no one gets stripped of their inheritance, of their stake in the land.

Mere retributive justice could allow for people to get dispossessed, impoverished and marginalised. Huge divides could arise between rich and poor. The Lord repeatedly declares his concern for such persons, and institutes principles, practices and provisions to ensure that they are not abandoned.

This is not an individualistic society of absolute private property. It is a covenantal society where the poor had a claim upon the divinely granted inheritance of the land that had to be honoured. This, it should be stressed, is not just about charity.

If you failed to leave grain for gleaning in your fields, for instance, you were robbing the poor. They had a right to grain from your fields. This was seen as a matter of justice.

In the land that the Lord gave to his people, everyone must be able to enjoy the benefits of the inheritance. Everyone should be able to make a living for themselves. The year of Jubilee and the Sabbath year ensured that disparities between rich and poor could never grow too large.

This chapter has three separate principles that it discusses. First of all, there's the remission of debts. That in the seventh year debts would be released, and so people could not be destroyed by crushing debt.

It's a principle not too dissimilar from our principle of bankruptcy. It allows for some sort of relief from debt that would otherwise crush people. Following this, there's a complication that arises.

The complication is that people would not want to lend to the poor and people in need if they saw that the Sabbath year was approaching. And God deals with this very directly, calling his people to engage in charitable lending. They should not be calculating, trying to avoid lending money to people that they fear they might not get back.

The final principle places limits upon indentured servitude, and encourages a practice of indentured servitude that is benign and gracious. The Lord lays an obligation of charity upon his people in this chapter, an obligation that he himself will enforce. They must not be calculating in their dealings with one another, each trying to secure his personal advantage over against the other.

Israel is to enjoy loving fellowship with each other in the land. They should pursue a common good, a way that they can all prosper together, rather than each at the expense of others. This would inform the way that they did business with each other.

It would limit the degree to which parties in business transactions would be separated from each other. The ideal would be both parties prospering together, or if they did not prosper, that one party wouldn't take advantage of the other, but both would bear the loss. Israelites had an obligation upon them to assist the poor in their midst, to try and get the poor back on their feet again, not just as a matter of voluntary choice, but as a duty placed upon them by the Lord, who gave them the land.

But the obligation isn't the same as coercion. The Lord's intent is that they would do this joyfully and willingly. Much attention is given to the appropriate posture of heart to the person in need.

In verses 9-10, And then in verse 18, It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years. The Lord cares what's in the heart of his people when they're engaged in these acts. He wants them to do it willingly, not as a matter of coercion, but as an obligation that they're fulfilling from the heart.

The law of the Book of Deuteronomy is not regular law, merely enforced upon people from without by magistrates and civil authorities. It's ethical instruction. It's designed to be internalised, to be lived from the heart.

How you feel about fulfilling the law really matters. And there's teaching within this law that simply couldn't be enforced. The idea of the duty to give a charitable loan is enforced by the Lord himself.

Indentured servitude was supposed to function as a means of security for the destitute and the indebted. Here it's presented as something that should be ordered towards manumission. The intent of slavery is to give someone the means by which they can live as a free person.

The slave should be provided for. The slave should be set free in the Sabbath year, and liberally given both training and resources to get himself started an independent life for himself. The story of Jacob might be in the background here.

Jacob, who was not treated righteously by his uncle Laban. Israelites should remember their own liberation from slavery. They have been in the position of the servant, and they must treat their servants in the way that they would like to be treated.

Such indentured servitude was supposed to be so benign that a desire to remain in the state on the part of slaves, on account of their love for their generous and good masters, was supposed to be common enough that there would need to be a law made about it.

Much of the logic of this chapter depends upon beliefs concerning the Lord. The Lord is the guarantor of all debts, and so you should be generous.

You should give freely, knowing that the Lord will repay. The one who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. If you minister to those in need, the Lord will bless you in your labours.

That's the message of this chapter. The Lord has entrusted his people with great gifts, in order that they might share in his giving. He has blessed them so that they might bless others.

And all of this is fleshing out some of the meaning of the Sabbath commandment. The meaning of the Sabbath commandment is not just that you must take rest. It's that you are now put in the position as one who has been liberated from slavery, to give liberation to others, to give release and rest to the people who work for you, to the people in your own household.

The chapter concludes with instructions to dedicate the firstborn males of the herds and the flocks to the Lord. Israel is God's firstborn son, and the Exodus is the birth event. In the dedication of the firstborn males, their minds were always being brought back to their liberation event, their deliverance from slavery, that they should be, in turn, a people who liberate others.

There are, however, changes that have occurred in the law here, changes from the law that's given in Exodus. No longer are animals to be sacrificed just on the eighth day, but they will be brought on one of the pilgrim festivals to the central sanctuary. Now that there aren't many different altars, and they will live at a distance from the central sanctuary, the firstborn males will be offered on specific occasions, rather than just on the eighth day after their birth.

A question to consider, what are some of the principles that we could learn from this chapter that would teach us how better to relate to our own property? In Deuteronomy chapter 16, we continue to unpack the Ten Commandments. Moses has already presented us, under the category of the Sabbath, with the tithe feasts, with the Sabbath year, and with principles of charity. And now we discuss the pilgrimage festivals.

Passover, or unleavened bread, the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, and the Feast of Booths, or in-gathering, or tabernacles. These are associated with grain harvests, with barley and wheat, in the case of Passover and the Feast of Weeks, and with the gathering in of the produce for the winter, in the case of the Feast of Booths. They're connected with agricultural events, but also with redemptive historical events, something seen more clearly in Leviticus chapter 23.

Passover, with the original event of the Exodus, leaving the land of Egypt. Feast of Weeks, with arriving at Sinai. A more implicit connection in scripture, but more explicit

within the later tradition of Israel.

And the Feast of Booths also looks back to leaving Egypt. The connection between redemptive history and agricultural events invites people to see some sort of symmetry or connection between these two things. In Exodus chapter 23, verses 15 to 17, we have another list of these pilgrimage feasts, and instruction to keep them.

You shall keep the feast of harvest, of the first fruits of your labour, of what you sow in the field. You shall keep the feast of ingathering at the end of the year, when you gather in from the field the fruit of your labour. Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord God.

This material also comes under the Sabbath principle then. The Sabbath is refracted into the larger cycle of feasts. So it's connected with the Sabbath year, the year of Jubilee, it's connected with the weekly Sabbath, and it's also connected with the annual feasts that come year upon year.

The Passover and unleavened bread and the Feast of Booths are feasts of seven days in length. The Feast of Weeks is a feast that's numbered by a Sabbath of Sabbaths, seven sevens. The seventh day of the Passover is a solemn assembling.

The Feast of Booths is celebrated in the seventh month. And there's a symmetry between the Feast of Booths and the Passover. The Passover happens at the beginning of the year in the first month, and the Feast of Booths happens at the corresponding time in the seventh month.

They are precisely six months apart. Once again, celebration and rejoicing are foregrounded. These really matter.

Israel, if it's going to remember the Lord, if it's going to prosper in the land, they have to learn to celebrate. They have to learn to rejoice in the presence of the Lord, to present the good fruits of their labour to the Lord as a sign of their gratitude. Practices of thanksgiving and rejoicing help Israel to get its bearings, to understand where their wealth, where their prosperity, where their blessing comes from.

Abib is the first month. This was instituted in Exodus chapter 12 verse 2. This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you.

They're called to observe the month. It's the same language as we get for the Sabbath. Instructions concerning these feasts are given to us on a number of different occasions in Scripture, not to mention descriptions of how they're celebrated.

The differences between them are worth noting. The emphasis or accent of a feast can change from one account of it to another. So, for instance, in Leviticus chapter 23 verses 15 to 22, the emphasis of the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, falls slightly differently.



You shall count seven full weeks from the day after the Sabbath, from the day that you brought the sheaf of the wave offering. You shall count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath. Then you shall present a grain offering of new grain to the Lord.

You shall bring from your dwelling places two loaves of bread to be waved, made of two-tenths of an effort. They shall be of fine flour, and they shall be baked with leaven, as first fruits to the Lord. And you shall present with the bread seven lambs, a year old, without blemish, and one bull from the herd, and two rams.

They shall be a burnt offering to the Lord, with their grain offering, and their drink offerings, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. And you shall offer one male goat for a sin offering, and two male lambs, a year old, as a sacrifice of peace offerings. And the priest shall wave them with the bread of the first fruits, as a wave offering before the Lord, with two lambs.

They shall be holy to the Lord, for the priest. And you shall make a proclamation on the same day. You shall hold a holy convocation.

You shall not do any ordinary work. It is a statute forever in all your dwelling places throughout your generations. And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest.

You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner. I am the Lord your God. The emphasis in Leviticus, then, is more upon the sacrifices, whereas within the context of Deuteronomy, the emphasis is upon the rejoicing and the celebratory feast in the presence of the Lord.

On these feasts they would have to present themselves to the Lord. They would not be empty-handed. They would come before the presence of the Lord to do homage to Him.

Every Israelite male was expected to go to the central sanctuary each year at these three festivals. At the very least, many of them would presumably go up on multiple other occasions. The duration of the time of these feasts varied.

So for the Passover, they only had to be there for one day, and then they could travel back and engage in the harvest. In these feasts, they would bring the first fruits of their crop. They would also bring the firstborn of their animals to sacrifice that they couldn't sacrifice when they were living at a distance from the central sanctuary.

If having a Sabbath every week challenges you to step outside of the normal rhythm of time and to stand outside of it and to look at it and to appreciate the reality of time in a different way, the celebration of these feasts would do things like that on a grander scale. These feasts, connected with the agricultural patterns, but also with the events of redemptive history, would encourage them to reflect upon and to appreciate time on a different level and to relate this time in its variegated character to the Lord. On one

level, this would be the seasonal pattern.

Every agricultural year, they would be relating the key events of the year to the Lord in expectation of rain, in thanksgiving for the food that He has provided in the harvest. And then they would also be thinking about the events of redemptive history, looking back to the Exodus and what happened in the deliverance of the people from Egypt. Whether they were thinking about God's provision for them season by season or thinking about God's provision for them in the historical challenges that face them in the future, these feasts would direct their attention to the Lord.

And as feasts, there were times of rest and celebration. They would stand back from all of their work and rest in their labours, in the fruit of what they had created. In this way, they would share in the Lord's Sabbath.

For them, this Sabbath was connected with redemptive history. It was the Sabbath of God bringing His people into the land so that they might have rest and peace within it. It was also the Sabbath of their labours.

As they do the work of the agricultural year, they can rest and celebrate and enjoy the fruit of the produce of the land. It's also a time of communion, communion with God and communion with others. All the males of the people gathering at this time would create a sense of commonality, that they are one people under God, they all belong to the Lord, He has delivered them all and now they can rejoice together.

Some people seem to have the mistaken notion that the life of Israel in its worship was glum and joyless. But yet, there is only one day in which they are called to fast, in connection with the Day of Atonement. And all the other days are feast days.

They are supposed to celebrate, to know joy, to eat bountifully. Indeed, over the course of the year, they are probably putting aside enough food and resources for about a month's worth of festivals. And these festivals, as extensions of the Sabbath principle, were signs of the covenant.

They were ways in which God confirmed His love and His grace and His goodness to His people, not just in the past, in their history, but in the present and for the future. From this we move into a new section, concerned with judges and officers, priests, kings, Levites and prophets. These are all authority figures and honouring father and mother, the fifth commandment, is about submitting to authority.

It's the principle that gathers all these things together at this point. We move then from the fourth commandment to the fifth commandment. The people are charged to appoint judges and officers.

And these figures do not seem to be so much governors as judiciary. Presumably, Israel had their elders and chiefs as rulers. But they were bound to appoint judges.

Israel's government, as envisaged in Deuteronomy, is one in which the power of the executive and sovereignty is downplayed, and the task of judgment is elevated. Judgment must be an expression of truth and goodness. It must be righteous judgment, not just an expression of the autonomous will of the sovereign.

And the emphasis upon judgment and authorities here are authorities that are very clearly under God. These are authorities who are submitted to the law, who are subject to the law, and who must enact and establish and enforce the law in the life of Israel. Like fathers and mothers, these authorities are authorities under God's authority.

Ultimately, the great authority is God's alone. There must be no perversion of justice. Everyone must be given justice, no matter how poor, no matter how rich.

There must be no partiality, no bribes. Leviticus 19, verse 15 articulates many of these principles. You shall do no injustice in court.

You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great. But in righteousness shall you judge your neighbour. At this point, we have a very surprising shift.

Following these laws concerning justice and judges and officials, we have a law about asherah trees and pillars. And it seems very much out of place here. We might be led to scratch our heads and wonder why God inspired Moses to put this material at this particular point.

However, when we see things that seem to be out of place, we should usually pause over them and consider reasons why they may not actually be out of place at all. Before we do that, though, let's first consider why this seems to be out of place. The surrounding material is about structures of judgment and justice in Israel and authority figures.

And the material here is about false worship. It seems like it might belong back in chapters 12 and 13, concerned with the second commandment, if we believe that that pattern holds. So what is it doing here? This isn't the only time in the book of Deuteronomy that we have such material that seems to be out of place.

But yet, often when we look more closely, we'll find that, although material might have been placed elsewhere, where it invites a certain sort of reflection that can yield insight. The effect of putting it here is to juxtapose the practice of worship with the practice of justice, showing that the two are connected. Adulterated justice and adulterated worship are similar, and the Lord abhors them both.

It also has the effect of highlighting that the Lord is our real Father, and that He must be honoured. The forms of worship that are prohibited within these verses and the next verse in chapter 17 are willful forms of worship that actually dishonour God. Whether you're setting up an asherah tree or a pillar, or you're offering a blemished lamb, these are all ways in which people are purporting to be serving God, but actually adulterating

their worship.

And ultimately the result is that they dishonour God. Placed here, it invites us to consider the parallel between the justice that the Lord requires, according to very strict and clear guidelines, and the worship that He requires. These things are not dissimilar, and a society that takes the one seriously will usually take the other one seriously too.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which Scripture presents the task of judgment as the central task of government? Going through the book of Deuteronomy, we have noticed that it follows the order of the Ten Commandments in chapters 6 to 26. The material of chapter 17 falls under the category of the Fifth Commandment, to honour Father and Mother.

And here it's about authority structures within the life of Israel. What does a free society look like? Israel has been delivered from Egypt in the Exodus, and in Egypt they were under the tyranny of Pharaoh, a king who functioned more like a god. It would be very easy for Israel to fall back into that pattern of society.

Moses could disappear from the scene, and then they would establish a king with absolute divine-like authority, and fall under a new form of tyranny. Political structures are of course complicated things. On the one hand, there's the disorder of anarchy, every man doing what's right in his own eyes, a society without coordination, without security, and without a strong common life.

On the other hand, there's the danger of tyranny, of oppressive, arbitrary government, of being subject to the capricious whims of a willful monarch. Israel had hopefully learned some lessons on this front from the hard-heartedness of Pharaoh and its consequences. There are great benefits in having a strong and effective government, if you want to have a common life, if you want to forge an identity that extends over territory and across different periods of time.

Deuteronomy exhibits a centralising impulse when it comes to the worship of Israel, moving everything to a common central sanctuary, so that everyone doesn't do what's right in their own eyes, but there is a common form of worship. The establishment of a more centralised government, not an absolutely centralised government by any means, has similar benefits. Yet in the task of establishing a polity, any benefits come with great risks or associated costs.

There's no way to opt out of this. In the book of 1 Samuel, for instance, we see a number of different forms of government in operation. We have Eli the High Priest, functioning as a sort of judge.

Then we have the prophetic judge in Samuel. And then, of course, we have the first king in Saul, followed by David. None of these systems of government is perfect.

All of them are affected deeply by sin. Yet there are differing advantages and disadvantages associated with each one, and the fact that a more centralised monarchical system comes out on top doesn't seem to be merely an accident of history. In chapters 17 and 18 of Deuteronomy, we're dealing with priests, with kings, and with prophets.

One of the first things we should notice is that there is a division between these different offices. Absolute power is not concentrated in any one of these particular offices. Rather, they are all subject to each other in different ways.

In verses 21 and 22 of the preceding chapter, we notice some odd commandments concerning asherah trees and pillars that seemed out of place. And these commandments are followed by another commandment that seems to belong with them, concerning blemished sacrifices. The importance of unadulterated worship is highlighted at this point.

They must not worship the Lord on their own terms. Verses 2 to 7 deal with cases of idolatry and rejection of the covenant. This is connected with the preceding verses concerning false worship.

You can notice, for instance, the use of the term abomination in both. It is, however, more directly connected with the surrounding theme of judgment and justice. Justice here is seen as something that is a communal responsibility.

The entire people need to be actively committed to upholding the will of the Lord in their life, as a people. The case of the person rejecting the covenant is the most fundamental case. This is an act of treachery against the sovereign of the people, the Lord himself.

We think of the law often as the responsibility of the government. And individuals within the nation, provided they are law-abiding, don't really have to think much about the law. However, the vision of the law in Deuteronomy is one in which the people play a much larger and more active role in upholding the law.

The entire people are responsible to uphold the righteous standard of God's law and to establish just processes. Injustice in authorities and wickedness in neighbours makes everyone culpable. None of these things should be tolerated, and they must be dealt with as a matter of the greatest severity.

Israel was to have higher courts to which lower judges could send cases that they weren't competent to adjudicate. This is similar to the role of Moses in Exodus 18. The judges and the chiefs of the people would rule in the lesser matters.

If they were not competent to judge in a particular matter, they could put it up to Moses. Specific types of cases seem to be in view here, and these would be ones that would be sent up to the Levitical priests and the chief judge. When a decision had to be made in a

potentially capital crime concerning what type of homicide had occurred, it was supposed to be sent to the higher court.

Now, this is not a court of appeal, as we might have for defendants. It's a court to which the judges were expected to direct the cases. The prominent role of the Levitical priests in these courts probably depends in part upon their expert knowledge and familiarity with the law.

They were the ones who most meditated upon and studied and taught the law, and so they were in the best position to adjudicate according to it. The authority of the priests and the chief judges had to be honoured, and it would be through this that the authority of the law itself would be rendered effective in practice. Moses now moves on to teach concerning the king.

Having a king is not here presented as illegitimate in principle, I don't believe. However, in wanting a king, we're told that they wanted to be like the nations surrounding them. In 1 Samuel 8, verses 10-18, we have Samuel's long warning given from the Lord himself about the potential actions of the king and the dangers in taking a king.

So Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking for a king from him. He said, And he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers.

He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his servants. He will take the tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and to his servants. He will take your male servants and female servants and the best of your young men and your donkeys and put them to his work.

He will take the tenth of your flocks and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day. Although the monarchy is presented as, in many respects, a positive development in Scripture, there remains a very strong note of ambivalence.

Like entering into the land, the monarchy is a levelling up in maturity, responsibility and capacity, but it is one that comes with considerable dangers and temptations, temptations that must be mitigated by adherence to the law. This isn't an institution immediately established by God, it's interesting to note. It's presented as something established in response to the people's request.

Is the monarchy merely a concession to human sin? Or is Moses just speaking about a prediction of some future sin on the part of the people? I'm not sure that's the case. It is presented as a concession in 1 Samuel chapter 8. The Lord says that the people are

rejecting him in their desire for a king. However, a righteous king, who ruled under the Lord, is a good and a desirable thing.

Unfortunately, Israel failed in this respect. The monarchy proved to be a gift that they were not mature enough to handle. Nor is it just presented as a permission.

Christ, of course, would ultimately fulfil the purpose of the Davidic king. What would the king do? The king would defend the nation from its enemies, he would assemble and lead its army, he would establish and maintain civil order, he would maintain peace, and he would also, as the guardian and the establisher of civil order, be the one who established the worship of God within the land, and maintain that. Perhaps the most arresting feature of this teaching concerning the king is the fact that the king is so clearly subject to the law of God.

The king is not a god. The king is not himself the law. The king is not even the lawgiver, the one who makes up the laws and teaches the laws as his own wisdom.

No, the law is the Lord's and the king must come under that law. He's a servant of that law, someone who's responsible to study the law, to understand it deeply, and then to rule in terms of it. Not only then is there a challenge to unchecked sovereignty in the separation of powers between king, priest and prophet, there is also a challenge to unchecked sovereignty in the way that the king comes under the law of God.

This is a society with a constitution. It's not something established by the king himself, it's something to which the king himself is subject. The king isn't the priest.

However, he does function as the representative of the people, and as such, as something akin to the chief worshipper. He's also the one who's responsible as the representative and leader of the people, and the guardian of civil order, to establish the worship of God within the land. He builds the temple, among other things.

We can see this in the story of David as he establishes the worship of the tabernacle, singing within the tabernacle, these sorts of things, and then in the story of Solomon, of course, who builds the temple. The king must be an Israelite, one of the brothers. He must be someone that the Lord himself chooses.

The king is not elected by the people. He's a servant of the Lord. He represents the Lord's authority in his law to the people.

He's supposed to be a minister of the law of God to the people of God, but he is supposed to remain one of his brother Israelites, and that will happen as he is humbled by submission to the law. He is not over the law. He is not the source of the law.

He is not someone who rules apart from law by his own capricious whim. He is under the law, just as the rest of the Israelites, and he rules by the law. There are three key limits

here placed upon the king's quest for glory.

The first one, he shall not accumulate horses. There should not be this great military build-up. He shouldn't return to Egypt to get them.

The Lord brought them out of Egypt, out of that particular sort of kingdom, and they are not supposed to go back to try and recreate that kingdom in themselves. Second, he should not multiply wives, lest his heart be led astray. Multiplying wives hold a number of dangers.

First, in the king's natural love for his wives, it will be very easy for him to be led astray into idolatry and other things. We see great examples of this in the story of Solomon, of course, and then in the story of characters like Ahab. A woman has great power over the heart of the man who loves her, and a king who has not mastered his love for women will find that his heart is easily led astray.

He will give his strength to women when he should be giving it to upholding the law of God among the people. And third, the king must not acquire excessive silver and gold. It is certainly not inappropriate for a kingdom to be glorious, but a king that accumulates wealth beyond limits is a king who is tyrannical to his subjects.

We see in the story of Solomon that he falls into each one of these sins. In 1 Kings 10, 14-11, 10, every single one of these sins is mentioned, and as we read on in the story, we see that Solomon starts to take on the character of Pharaoh himself. Israel, having been delivered from Pharaoh in Egypt, ends up recreating Egypt in their own land.

There is a real danger that the king is idolised, that the king becomes a god-like figure. The king could easily serve as another god besides the Lord. This is why it is so important that the king is subject to the Lord and to the law of the Lord, and both as a symbol and as a practical means of this submission to the law of God.

The king is required to write his own copy of the book of the law for the purpose of his own meditation throughout his life. He must do this under the supervision of the Levitical priests, who are the stewards of the house of the Lord, and in the fact that they supervise this, it's a sign that he comes under the authority of another. The king is not the absolute authority within the land of Israel, but the priests can represent the authority of God relative to the king, and the prophet too.

The prophet can rebuke the king, challenge the king in the name of the Lord, as we see Nathan challenging David after his sin with Bathsheba. The king is expected to be literate. He's expected not merely to know the contents of the law, but to meditate upon them for wisdom.

His relationship with the law is even more intimate because he's supposed to write it out all for himself. These are all ways in which the king is supposed to take the law into



himself, to internalize in himself the law that he will rule in terms of. The king's self-mastery according to the law is the basis by which he will rule the nation.

In places like the Psalms and the book of Proverbs, we see the result of this. The faithful king is the archetypal Israelite, who has become wise through meditation upon the law day and night, who can think about the world and speak about the world with wisdom because he has internalized the principles of wisdom in the law. Earlier in the book of Deuteronomy, we were told that the peoples around would see the wisdom of Israel in the law and come to hear that wisdom.

We see that happening in the story of Solomon, someone who meditated upon the law, and as a result could speak with wisdom into the world, so that people would come to hear Israel's king. Now ideally, what was true of Israel's king would become true of the people as a whole. The king then is a model for the rest of the people.

We see the same thing in the Psalms. The Psalms are the songs of the king, the king who has meditated upon the law of God day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water giving forth its fruit in season.

He is someone who is wiser than all of his teachers because he meditates upon God's law, and as the law has been taken into him, he can be someone who rules wisely within the world in the name of the Lord. If the priest is a steward and a servant, the king is more of a son. A question to consider.

Many people, when they're thinking about our political systems, focus upon the ancestry of the ideas that ground our systems to ancient Greece and Rome. But yet, when we look at the history of political thought, we see a great deal of influence from Scripture, particularly the Old Testament and places like this. What might be some of the distinctive ways in which the teaching of chapters like this has influenced politics within the modern world? Deuteronomy chapter 18 continues the section of the book of Deuteronomy devoted to the fifth commandment.

It speaks about the Levites and about the prophets. The Levites have no territorial portion within Israel. This goes back to Genesis chapter 49 verses 5 to 7 and the blessings and judgments of Jacob upon his sons.

Simeon and Levi are brothers. Weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their counsel.

Oh, my glory, be not joined to their company. For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. 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, 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, 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-guerant 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's 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's 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's someone who declares the word of the Lord as he teaches the law.

The king is someone who meditates upon the law, who's 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? In Deuteronomy chapter 6 to 26 we work through the Ten Commandments, commandment by commandment. In chapter 19 we reach the second half of the Ten Commandments, concerned with our duties to our neighbour.

The sixth commandment, you shall not murder, is the one that begins. Apart from that devoted to the first commandment, this is the longest such unit in the book of Deuteronomy. It runs up to chapter 22 verse 8. Chapter 19 falls into three sections.

First there's the law concerning the cities of refuge. Then there's law concerning landmarks. And then there's laws concerning witnesses.

One of the chief concerns of the material in this section is to establish institutional structures that protect the innocent, especially those who might otherwise be institutionally vulnerable, such as those who had committed accidental homicide and the wrongfully accused. The first half of this chapter concerns providing means of sanctuary. That had already existed in some form, but now it needed to be set up for a new form in their entrance into the land.

In Exodus chapter 21 verses 12 to 14 we see that the altar was a place of sanctuary previously. Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee.

But if a man willfully attacks another to kill him by cunning, you shall take him from my altar, that he may die. The land has to be divided into three parts, and three cities have to be chosen at an accessible distance from any point in the land. This law was already given in Numbers chapter 35 verses 10 to 34.

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there. The cities shall be for you a refuge from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation for judgment. And the cities that you give shall be your six cities of refuge.

You shall give three cities beyond the Jordan, and three cities in the land of Canaan, to be cities of refuge. These six cities shall be for refuge for the people of Israel, and for the stranger and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills any person without

intent may flee there. And there has to be distinction made between different types of murder.

So the passage goes on to distinguish between murder with various instruments, and then how to distinguish between these. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, that the manslayer who kills any person without intent may flee there. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities of refuge for you, But after the death of the high priest, the manslayer may return to the land of his possession.

And these things shall be for a statute and rule for you throughout your generations, in all your dwelling places. Numbers 35 then goes on to discuss laws of witness in capital cases, and the fact that ransom could not be taken for the life of a murderer. Behind all of this, there is the concern that is expressed in the final verses of this section.

You shall not pollute the land in which you live, for blood pollutes the land, and no atonement can be made for the land for the blood that is shed in it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in the midst of which I dwell, for I, the Lord, dwell in the midst of the people of Israel. Within the law of the manslayer is the need to distinguish between malicious and premeditated homicide, and negligent or accidental homicide.

The example of a man accidentally killing his neighbour, with whom he had no prior quarrel with the head of an axe that accidentally came off, is the example that Deuteronomy chapter 19 gives. Now this man may have been negligent in not looking after his tools, but this is not assumed, it is not necessarily the case. The avenger of blood would presumably have been a close relative or kinsman of the person who lost their life, not just a bounty hunter.

In a society where you do not have an established police force, some allowance is made for vengeance in this way. There is a limited power of policing, but yet it is necessary that some people face the consequences of their action. The concern though is that this should be dealt with in a just manner, and that people should be protected from the cycles of vengeance and vendettas.

Much of this chapter, when considered carefully, seems to be designed to work with a society where vengeance is a very powerful and dangerous and volatile force, trying to put curbs upon it, trying to ensure that it does not get started, trying to ensure that the law takes priority, and that brakes are placed upon vengeance's characteristic lack of proportion. The purpose of the city of refuge, among other things, is to ensure that people get just trials, preventing vengeance from taking its effect before people can actually be heard and have their case considered by the judges. Cities of refuge had

already been set up in Deuteronomy chapter 4, in verses 41-43 of that chapter.

Then Moses set apart three cities in the east beyond the Jordan, that the manslayer might flee there. Anyone who kills his neighbour unintentionally, without being at enmity with him in time past, he may flee to one of these cities and save his life. Beza in the wilderness on the table land for the Reubenites, Ramarth in Gilead for the Gadites, and Golan in Bashan for the Manassites.

The extra three cities that Moses speaks about here are set up in Joshua chapter 20, in verse 7 of that chapter. So they appointed Kiddesh in Galilee, in the hill country of Naphtali, and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-Aba, the Hezhebron, in the hill country of Judah. In this chapter, however, Moses goes on to speak of three further cities that they should set apart, if and when their territory was enlarged.

There is no reference to this ever taking place, though. Deuteronomy chapter 11, verses 22-24, does speak about the territory that they will get, if they are faithful to the Lord. Now that never actually happened.

They didn't get all that territory. It didn't extend up as far as the Euphrates. As a judgment upon Israel, they never entered into the full measure of what the Lord held out to them in His promise.

Judges chapter 2, verses 20-3, verse 4, describes this. I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did or not. So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and He did not give them into the hand of Joshua.

Now these are the nations that the Lord left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had not experienced all the wars in Canaan. It was only in order that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, to teach war to those who had not known it before. These are the nations, the five lords of the Philistines, and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-Herman as far as Lebo-Haimath.

They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which He commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses. The purpose of the extra cities of refuge is to make adequate provision for the protection of the innocent from vengeance. It is important to recognize the logic of this.

A failure to provide such sufficiently accessible institutional structures for the protection of the innocent means that Israel will be guilty of the blood of the innocent. This suggests, then, that injustice can be, among other things, a matter of institutional omission, the failure to provide institutions to protect the innocent. The asylum that is

offered here is a limited right.

It was only for accidental or negligent homicide. People could be extradited or removed from the horns of the altar and put to death if they proved to be guilty of actual premeditated or intentional murder. This section is followed by another odd commandment about removing landmarks or boundary stones.

Once again, it is important to consider why it is here, and it might seem strange. Why don't we have this under the 8th commandment, not to steal? Or the 9th commandment, not to bear false witness, you're telling a lie about the way in which the land is divided. Or the 10th commandment, not coveting your neighbor's field and property.

It might seem that it would fit more neatly under any one of those single commandments. So why on earth place it alongside the material concerned with the commandment, you shall not murder? First of all, we should notice that placing it here doesn't mean that it would not have been appropriate elsewhere. Nor does it necessarily mean that it most naturally belongs under the 6th commandment in the broader scheme of things.

Rather, I believe it is here to invite reflection. And why is that? It seems to me that this is a law designed to prevent homicide, more particularly vendettas and cycles of vengeance from building up. The desire for another man's land so often leads to murder, or to escalating cycles of vengeance, as in the case of Ahab and Naboth's Finyard, for instance.

Directly attacking such boundaries is a predatory act, is more than merely a matter of trespassing over them. We might think about the difference between wrongs that occur within the borders of a territory, that are criminal offenses to be dealt with by the law of that territory, and wrongs that threaten the very borders themselves, which are enemy attacks generally dealt with by a violent assertion of sovereignty. Of course, the boundaries of an Israelite family were within the general territory of the land, and fell under its law.

However, honouring and protecting the internal boundaries, not merely the external borders, is absolutely essential to protecting the peace and the integrity of the land. There are few things more likely to result in unnecessary bloodshed than the failure to honour the internal boundaries and the external borders of the land. The chapter concludes with laws about witnesses.

These are in close connection with the laws concerning cities of refuge, as we see in Numbers 35, verse 30. We might again wonder why it is placed here. Why not place this section under the 9th commandment, concerned with prohibiting bearing false witness? Once again, I believe we are being encouraged to consider a facet of the law that we might not otherwise consider.



The concern of this chapter is upon avoiding and avenging the shedding of innocent blood, and false witness can be a means by which people seek the life of their neighbour. The judges must carefully investigate all cases. They must ensure that appropriate standards of evidence and testimony are met.

Accusations that are proven false, and proven to be malicious, render the false accuser liable to the same judgment that he sought to bring upon another. For false testimony in a capital case, then, the false accuser could face the death penalty himself. Once again, judges are warned against inappropriate pity.

The justice they are supposed to mete out is not that of vengeful passion, or familial vendetta, as the avenger of blood. But nor is it a matter of pity. They must be impartial and give people what is due to them.

Equitable, retributive justice is absolutely non-negotiable. Punishment must be proportionate to the crime. Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

When we hear such a list, we think that it is a cycle of vengeance. But it is precisely designed to prevent the cycle of vengeance. This is a task committed to public justice, not private vengeance.

And more importantly still, it is calculated to prevent the disproportionality that is characteristic of vengeance. Vengeance in an honour society is disproportionate. If you kill a member of my family, I will kill three members of yours.

In laws targeted against the reality of vengeance, then, Israel is being presented with a way in which the Sixth Commandment can be honoured within its public life. A question to consider. How might the story of Cain and his descendant Lamech in Genesis chapter 4 provide some helpful background for considering the laws of this chapter? In Deuteronomy chapter 20 we have laws relating to warfare falling under the rubric of the Sixth Commandment.

When Israel goes out to war, the priests must address the people on behalf of the Lord. They must assure the people of the Lord's strength and assistance in their conflict. They are assured so that they need not be afraid.

And then at that point, the officers speak to the people. And they go through the camp to find out four kinds of persons who are then told to go home. First, the person who has built a house and not lived in it yet.

Second, the person who has planted a vineyard and not tasted its fruits. Third, the person who has betrothed the wife and not taken her. And fourth, the person who is fearful, who might make others fearful.

The first three are told to go home for their own private sake. It seems strange to us. Why send them home? Why care particularly about the death of persons under such circumstances? Surely death is the greatest tragedy whenever and whoever it hits.

What does that little bit of extra tragedy really count relative to it? However, what is highlighted here are some of the things that people live for and find value in and meaning in. Building a house and settling down somewhere. Planting a vineyard and reaping the fruits of the land.

And then marrying and starting a family. These are the sorts of ends that people work towards in their lives. The sorts of goals that give life meaning and value.

It's a tragedy if you come close to these things and don't actually achieve them. In Deuteronomy 28, verse 30, it speaks about these specific instances. And the judgment that will befall Israel if it is not faithful.

Now implicit in that text is the fact that you'll be dead. If you're dead, why care about these things? Because the meaning of our lives has a lot to do with our enjoyment of the fruits of our labours. A life that is characterised by futility is not a good life.

The Lord, having brought his people into the land, wants his people to enter in to rest in their labours. Israel has been given inheritance of the land by the Lord and it is important that they don't refrain from enjoying it. We should observe the democratic nature of this law.

It's addressed to any man, however rich or poor, who might have just fallen short of entering in to rest in his labours. The rest that belongs to the people of God. He must be allowed to enjoy his Sabbath while his companions labour and fight for him.

The people must be careful to guard the work of their neighbours from the potential of futility. The exemptions are presented in a way that highlights the risk of someone losing his enjoyment of the benefits of rest in the land to another man. The commitment here is not to let this happen to anyone and it binds the Israelite men together in a sort of commitment to brotherhood.

This is not to be a society of every man for himself. What is this somewhat strange law doing under the principle of not murdering? The commandment itself is framed by the notion of fear in verses 1, 3 and 8. It protects, we could say, the stuff of life so that life and its fruitfulness is always prioritised and we don't end up allowing the fear of death to eclipse everything else. The work of war to quench the enjoyment of the rest that belongs to the people of God.

The urgency of combat to condemn people's labours to futility. Some people need to go to war to put themselves in the line of fire. But it is important that we jealously value and guard the milestones that give meaning to our lives.

Hebrews 2, verse 15 speaks of the fear of death as a means by which the devil holds people in slavery. Israel must not operate out of a fear that is simply preoccupied with the enemy of death, with the enemy at the border. But must operate out of a commitment to protect and value the good life that God has given them, the rest that God has granted them within the land.

Aversion to death is not the same thing as the valuing of life. This law, placed under the 6th commandment, teaches Israel that not murdering also involves protecting and valuing the conditions of shalom, of peace and life where they can, even in and perhaps especially in the precarious times of war. The relationship between this and the principle of not fearing is important.

Deliverance from bondage to the fear of death requires trust in God. This doesn't mean that there is nothing to fear in death, or that great sacrifices don't need to be made. The people who do go out to fight would be putting their lives in jeopardy.

They would come back and they would not be sleeping with their wives, they would not be eating the fruit of their vineyard, they would not be enjoying the security and rest of their house. However, in a society that was vigilant to ensure that every person did get to enjoy these things, their lives would not be characterised by futility. This sort of approach was only possible for Israel when they did not lose sight of the fact that they served a God who was greater and more powerful than the forces of death.

When Israel attacked a city outside of the land, they had to offer it terms of peace first, terms that were rather harsh by any modern standards, but not by those of the day. Israel was given strict limits upon the sort of warfare that they were permitted to engage in, so attacking cities in such a manner would not be typical, but would generally be a response to aggression on the part of the other nation. Israel was not an expansive imperialistic power.

Cities of the land were not offered, however, the same terms. What exactly is involved here should be considered. We shouldn't necessarily assume that the entire population of the Canaanites were being eliminated.

That clearly didn't happen. Still less that ethnic cleansing was the goal. The emphasis throughout is upon the behaviour of the Canaanites, and Israelite cities would be subject to the same fate if they sinned in a similar way.

We should also consider that most of the population of the lands did not live in the cities, or in many cases we might think of them as citadels, which Israel attacked. Israel clearly left many of the people of the land, while utterly annihilating their centres of power and their rulers. We can see something of this in 2 Chronicles 8, verses 7-8.

All the people who were left of the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and

the Jebusites, who were not of Israel, from their descendants who were left after them in the land, whom the people of Israel had not destroyed, these Solomon drafted as forced labour, and so they are to this day. Was the continued existence of these people in the land proof of Israel's unfaithfulness? Not necessarily. We also see Canaanites who became members of Israel, perhaps most notably someone like Rahab, but also people like Uriah the Hittite.

Israel's warfare in the land was a divinely mandated war against idolatry, and it had to be uncompromising, giving no quarter, and Israel are seen as the instruments of the Lord's judgement. They are not conducting this war on their own terms, they are not conducting this war for their own sake. They must obey the Lord, even when it's difficult.

Placing this material under the 6th commandment is really striking. If the 6th commandment calls us not to murder, surely this directly contravenes it. Yet careful reflection reveals a more complicated view.

While this does challenge the absolutism of many forms of pacifism, by situating the commands of warfare under the commandment not to murder, it demands that we reflect carefully upon the relationship between these two things, and the way in which warfare itself should be carried out in a way that honours life, that maintains a commitment not to murder, even in that situation where it may seem to be suspended. This is not a suspension of the commandment not to murder. Rather, even in the context of war, where life may legitimately be taken, the force of the 6th commandment must still be felt.

Scripture recognises but places limits upon the necessity of war in a fallen, sinful world. The principles here cannot and should not be spiritualised away. The struggle against spiritual evils in the world sometimes requires killing persons who have committed themselves to advancing those evils.

Just as Genesis chapter 9 mandates the death penalty in the context of the prohibition of murder, so Deuteronomy chapter 20 mandates war in the same sort of context. All of this requires careful discrimination, and the recognition that war, like everything else in the life of Israel, falls under the rule of the law and its principles of righteous judgements. It must not be treated merely as an amoral exertion of power over others, nor as a straightforward permission that the Lord has extended to them, exempting them from the force of that commandment.

The Christian tradition, taking this very seriously, has tried to subject warfare and its practice to the principles of justice. It has talked about just war reflecting upon the ends of warfare, the manner of warfare, and other considerations and discriminations that help us to speak appropriately about the character of warfare, about its evils, about some things that may be permissible and even necessary in the waging of warfare, that are nonetheless not good in themselves, results of being in a fallen universe. Taking life

in warfare is not necessarily sinful, indeed under some situations it may be a righteous thing to do, and something praiseworthy, but in scripture, peace takes priority over war, and men of warfare bear the stains of the tragedy of the fall.

Much of the Bible's teaching concerning war appalls modern sensibilities, even though within living memory, Britain firebombed Dresden, or America dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While our distance from these events may I believe help us rightly to see some of the brutality and the cruelty and the injustice that was characteristic of them, that same distance can make it difficult for us to perceive the necessary evils of war, profoundly sanguinary actions that may be legitimately undertaken, but with tragic and horrible consequence. Overcoming the evils of the Nazi and Imperial Japanese regimes required the willful taking of a very great many lives.

It is very easy looking at our distance to blanch at the horror of the actions required to dislodge evil, and it is essential that we recognise that Deuteronomy chapter 20 is not looking at matters from such a privileged distance vantage point. This chapter ends with another strange law. It's a law about fruit trees.

This law, again relating to warfare, prohibits wreaking devastation upon the land, engaging in a scorched earth policy. The tree is not your enemy. Humanity is called to serve and to protect the land, and the principle of not murdering requires an active concern for the protection of nature from devastation, and carefully bounds the destructive forces of war.

War can be undertaken in a way that cares nothing for the environment, that reduces the landscape to a hellscape. An example of this could be the Red Zone in France, 460 square miles that was utterly devastated by the First World War, and is largely still uninhabitable on account of unexploded ordnance and poisonous chemicals. War may be a tragic necessity under some conditions, and even sometimes a moral imperative, but we should do what we can to protect life, not to allow everything to get sucked into the vortex of conflict and destruction.

This chapter then presents bounds upon warfare, upon the people that are to be sent out to war, ensuring that war does not condemn people to futility, upon the forms of warfare to be adopted with different enemies, to ensure that not all peoples are treated as servants of great evils that must be absolutely uprooted, and finally upon the scope of warfare, to ensure that we do not engage in devastation of the good earth that God has given us. A question to consider, how might we fill out the ecological concerns of this chapter elsewhere in scripture? Deuteronomy chapter 21 continues the section devoted to the sixth commandment, and this section contains laws related to discovered corpses in verses 1-9, women taken in war in verses 10-14, children concerning the rights of the firstborn, and then the law concerning the rebellious son in verses 15-21, and then the law concerning the hanged corpse in verses 22-23. This is perhaps one of the most

troubling chapters in the book of Deuteronomy, with laws that greatly unsettle some modern sensibilities.

Considering the law for unsolved murder with which this chapter begins, we should probably relate it to the law concerning cities of refuge in chapter 19. Both involve a concern for distance between cities, about murder and the shedding of innocent blood. Both of the laws relate to the community's responsibility both to avoid and give count of the shedding of innocent blood.

This law provides a ritual to deal with cases of unsolved murder, and like the law of the cities of refuge, it expresses the community's responsibility both to avoid and give count of the shedding of innocent blood. Once again here we are seeing the way that concerns of holiness and atonement interplay with concerns of justice. Innocent blood polluted the land and needed to be atoned for, and the justice system was always supposed to serve the end of guarding the people's holiness, not just the deterrence of crime and retribution to criminals.

What does the ritual mean? First of all, the ritual is not a sacrifice. There is no mention of sprinkling of the blood, it does not occur in the context of the tabernacle. While the priests are present, they do not seem to be doing most of the actions.

What can we make of this as an unsacrificial ritual then? Some have seen it as a symbolic execution of the murderer, others have seen it as a self-maladictory oath, that if we are guilty of this, then we should suffer the same fate. I believe it is most likely to be a symbolic reenactment of the murder. By using a heifer that had not been put under a yoke or worked by man, the animal and also the murder victim were presented as not being subject to human responsibility.

Not only was this the case of the animal, but it was also the case of the location in which it was killed. By performing the ritual in an unworked valley that has not been ploughed or sown, there is also the statement being made that the murder did not occur within the city's direct jurisdiction. Nevertheless, in performing this ritual, they are making formal testimony concerning the murder, giving account of it to the Lord.

This occurs in the presence of the priests as the representatives of the Lord, but the action seems to be largely that of the elders of the town. By so making account of the blood of the victim, they make a non-sacrificial form of atonement for the victim. The next law, concerning the taking of female war captives as brides, is more immediately troubling to us.

Why would God give permission to Israelite men to take prisoners of war as wives in such a manner? Before considering the law, it is important to consider the purpose of law in general. Laws like this are not an idealistic council of perfection. They are an attempt to regulate messy and imperfect realities.

War would render a great many women, widows and orphans, and in a society where survival largely depended upon the family structure, such women would be incredibly vulnerable, not just economically, but also vulnerable to predatory males and to rape. Then there is the fact that the rape of women was regarded as a natural part of ancient warfare. It is also a feature of modern warfare.

After World War II, the Red Army is supposed to have raped over 2 million German women, many of them gang-raped, by some descriptions from the age of 8 to the age of 80, and a great many of those women went on to commit suicide. In ancient and in modern warfare, if you defeat your enemies, it is presumed that you get to ravish their women. Judges 5, verses 28-30 gives us a picture of this in the Song of Deborah and Barak.

A womb or two for every man was the reality within ancient society, and this is the reality to which this law is speaking. A good law in such a society is an enforceable law that will effectively both condemn and mitigate such cruelties. A law requiring ideal practice might not be a good law.

It might effectively condemn the wrong, but it wouldn't be effective in mitigating it, and it might not be enforceable, both of which are criteria for good laws. This law then speaks directly to the sexual desire of the victorious Israelite warrior. He has been without sexual relations for some time.

He sees an attractive female captive. What is he to do? Can he just have his way with her, as most others would in the ancient world? No. He must take her under his care.

She must have the status of a wife. She must not be raped or treated as a concubine enslaved for sex. She must be given time to mourn and adjust to her new situation.

He must not take her as soon as he wants, making her a plaything of the imperatives of his lust. She must be allowed to wait for a month. She must be allowed to go free if he does not want to take her as his wife.

She must not be reduced to slavery. All of these, then, are ways in which the ugly realities of war, ugly realities that can't just be wished away, are mitigated significantly. Marrying a war bride would be a means by which she could be provided for within the family structure.

It would give security to people who might otherwise be destitute and preyed upon. When we read such laws, however, we should be very careful to recognise that they are laws of their time in many cases. These are wise laws addressing timeless principles of morality in a timely way into specific situations.

When we interpret these laws, we should be very careful to be able to distinguish these different things, to recognise the inner principles of justice, what is the law trying to do,

and then to understand the contingencies of the situation it is speaking into. It would not be just if we applied this law today in the same way. However, that does not mean that we should condemn it as a law in its own time.

It was appropriate within its time. Nor does it mean that there is nothing for us to learn here. If we understand the inner principle and how the central realities of the law are being addressed to specific situations, we can learn a lot about doing the same thing in our own day.

This is followed by a law concerning the inheritance of the firstborn. One of the features of the Pentateuch is the presence of law alongside history. And there are many places in which the law and the history comment upon each other.

This is one such occasion. There is a wife who is loved, and a wife who is unloved. And we have seen that story before.

It is the story of Jacob with Rachel and Leah. So Jacob went into Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.

Genesis 29, verse 31. The firstborn son was Leah's. The firstborn son was Reuben.

And what should get our attention here is that the language of this text is the language that is used in Genesis. Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, preeminent in dignity, and preeminent in power. Genesis 49, verse 3. Jacob's love of Rachel over Leah, and his favouritism in his practice, led to so many forms of tragedy within his family.

It led to the rivalry between his wives. It led to rivalry between their sons. It led to the great tensions and disaster that followed the seduction of Dinah.

It led to the attack upon Joseph, and sending him down into slavery in Egypt. All of this conflict in the life of Jacob's family was caused by his failure to practice justice within his own household. The fact he allowed the favouritism of love to go over the requirements of justice and fairness and equity.

Indeed, when the brothers present the bloodied robe of Joseph to their father, they use language that reminds us of this text. Then they took Joseph's robe, and slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. And they sent the robe of many colours, and brought it to their father, and said, This we have found, please identify whether it is your son's robe or not.

And he identified it, and said, It is my son's robe, a fierce animal has devoured him, Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces. That same robe was an expression of Jacob's favouritism. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons, because he was



the son of his old age, and he made him a robe of many colours.

But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peacefully to him. This is not the only commandment in the Pentateuch that retrospectively comments on the Rachel and Leah situation. Leviticus 18 verse 18 What is the commandment doing here? It does connect with the surrounding commandments.

It connects with the preceding commandment by protecting unloved and vulnerable women from the unchecked will of men, and the injustice that they might wreak upon them. It also connects with the following commandment by requiring justice between the generations. It connects with the sixth commandment, in which section this occurs, because the favouritism of Jacob was a sin that led to disastrous consequences and attempts at murder in his family.

It provoked the attempt upon Joseph's life. It likely provoked the rebellion of Reuben. While the sons were clearly at fault in these instances, the father also bears his responsibility for what happened too.

If society is to avoid strife that might lead to murder, justice must prevail in families, and not favouritism. The law concerning the rebellious son connects with the one that has preceded it. This is a son that is entirely unworthy and rebellious.

It is important to consider that this is not a young child, it is presumably a grown man, and this is in a context where the family was the basic structure of civil society. To rebel against that, to rebel against your father and mother, is a very serious thing. Such a son is supposed to provide for and to honour his parents, but is instead rebelling against, ruining them, and wasting their property with his gluttony, and even terrorising them with his violence.

In the face of such a breach of the honour that is due between the generations, serious judgement was called for. This is one area where the law of Deuteronomy and Exodus is stricter than that of many of the other societies around it. Nevertheless, there are also ways in which this is a curbing form of practice.

In the story of Genesis chapter 38, with Judah and Tamar, we see the absolute authority of the patriarch in a society where there is not a surrounding network of families. And in that sort of society, Judah can summarily declare the death penalty upon his daughter-in-law Tamar. The responsibility of the elders to be involved in this places limits upon that.

Once again, the point of such a law is not a timeless ideal, but to establish a just way of dealing things within the constraints of the existing society. A question to consider. The law concerning the son of the unfavoured mother comments upon the previous history of Israel.

Can you think of any other examples of laws within the Pentateuch that comment upon the stories of the Pentateuch? In Deuteronomy chapter 22, we reach the end of the section devoted to the sixth commandment. And in verse 9 of this chapter, we move on to the material associated with the seventh. Verses 1-4 concern brothers' animals gone astray or in need.

Lost animals should be returned, and animals in need should be assisted. This is related to earlier commandments in Exodus chapter 23 verses 4-5. If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him.

If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it. You shall rescue it with him. There seem to be a number of things going on.

First of all, there is the concern of love for neighbour. Your duty to return anything to your neighbour, not just an animal. But there seems to be something more than this.

It's not just about the preservation of your neighbour's property. There is a focus upon animals for a reason, upon living things. Do not let an animal suffer on account of your disputes or your neglect.

This is something that comes, again, under the sixth commandment. If you're truly caring about life, if you're truly opposed to the wrongful taking of life, then you will take care for animals. You will not let them suffer on account of your hatred.

Verse 5 is a very unusual one in this particular context. A woman is not to wear a man's garment, nor a man a woman's cloak. Now, why this is found under this particular section is not entirely clear.

What does this have to do with the sixth commandment? It would seem to belong more naturally with the section that follows concerning the seventh. It seems to be premised upon the need for a distinction between the sexes. The distinction between the sexes being considered here are conventional.

Like language, conventional forms of attire for the sexes change from society to society. Likewise, the implements that they use and the other things that they are associated with. However, God is concerned that there is not any confusion between men and women.

That distinction is meaningful and important, and it must be preserved in language, it must be preserved in dress, it must be preserved in custom and convention, and all these different ways. The actual form that living out such a commandment would take would differ from society to society. In no two societies are customs and conventions surrounding male and female behaviour exactly the same.

But every single society draws a distinction between male and female. While behavioural and dress norms for men and women radically differ from society to society, and in no two societies are the same, every single society has such distinctions. And it is important that we preserve them and honour them, that there is not confusion between these things.

Some have suggested that perhaps there is a reference to the woman dressing for war here, that she should not dress for war, she should not go out to war. That's a possibility. Either way, it is odd in its place.

What might it have to do with the Sixth Commandment? I really don't know. One suggestion would be that an attack upon differentiation is presented as an attack upon life itself. Life is formed by differentiation.

Differentiation is what makes us fruitful as male and female, different from each other, but yet fruitfully related. And an attack upon that differentiation is an attack upon life itself. It breaks down life.

It attacks that core symbol of the fruitfulness of life, the difference between male and female. And for that reason, perhaps, it comes under the commandment not to murder. But I suspect that something more still is going on here.

It's worth looking at more closely. Right now, our understanding of this text might be something like a loose thread that threatens to unravel a few things. It needs closer thought.

The commandment that follows in verses 6-7 concerning the bird's nest is another odd one. Like the commandment against boiling kids in their mother's milk, some concern is shown in it for the relationship between the mother and the child. There's an honouring of the maternal bond here.

Do not take advantage of the maternal bond in order to kill a creature. The person who finds this nest happens across it. The person doesn't seem to be purposefully hunting for bird's eggs.

Rather, they chance across it. And they chance across it with the mother there. And the mother's there because she wants to protect her nest.

In that situation, the mother is vulnerable precisely because of her maternal instinct. And refusing to take advantage of that maternal instinct, to take her along with her young, is a way of honouring the maternal instinct more generally. We have a similar expression used in Genesis 32, verse 11, where Jacob speaks to the Lord.

Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. The situation would be

one of Esau attacking the children, and the mothers being defenceless but not being able to run because their children are being attacked. An interesting feature of this law is that it comes with a promise, that it may go well with you and that you may live long.

This is the same promise that is attached to the fifth commandment. And so honouring father and mother, and in this case particularly the mother, is related to the commandment here concerning the bird. Yet this comes under the sixth commandment.

And under the sixth commandment, it's about the preservation of life. And in this particular case, it's about the honouring of the maternal instinct. Even in its most fragile and small form, in a little bird, that you will honour that instinct.

And as a result of that, you will be honoured in the land. That instinct is one of the reasons why you enjoy life. And so you do not use that as a means of bringing death.

Verse 8 and the parapet law is the last material that falls under the sixth commandment. Israel is required to be proactive in guarding life. Once again, there's concern for the guilt of spilled blood.

Even in an accident, a failure to take concern for safety of people on your property can make you culpable for your negligence. Such case laws are exemplary. They're not comprehensive.

There are very glaring gaps in the material that we have in the law here. It's not a comprehensive legal system. It was never intended to be.

Rather, it gives us principles by which we understand justice. And the more that we learn justice and its principles through reflecting upon these laws, the more that we'll be able to apply them to novel situations. In verses 9 to 11, we move into a new body of material.

This is material associated with the seventh commandment. You shall not commit adultery. Yet it seems a strange body of material with which to begin.

To appreciate what's going on in the laws concerning unlawful mixtures, we need to think about the symbolism of commandments. The commandments of the law often have a symbolic import. They represent bigotries in symbolic categories.

Human realities are mapped onto animal realities and agricultural realities. Israel is a vineyard. But Israel as a vineyard must not be sown with two kinds of seed.

Human persons are described as seed elsewhere in Scripture. In Jeremiah 31, verse 27, Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. The commandment not to have mixed seed within your vineyard is a commandment to ensure Israel's purity as

a nation.

God's concern here isn't really with what Israel sows in their physical vineyards. That's a symbol of what He really cares about. What He cares about is their faithfulness as a people, their purity as a people.

And the way they treat their vineyards will be a symbol of that. Likewise with the ox and the donkey. The ox is clean and the donkey is unclean.

Others have suggested that this may be a reflection upon events within Israel's history. Jacob is the ox. In the blessings and judgments upon his sons, he speaks about the hamstringing of an ox by Simeon and Levi.

And it is likely that he's talking about himself. What then is the donkey? Donkey is Hamel, the wild ass, as his name means. This is a mixture of two households, a mixture of an unclean and a clean household, an attempt to bring them together as one people so that they intermarry.

They are not to do that. The commandment not to mix wool and linen seems to be an unlawful mixture for another reason. Such a mixture is holy.

It's a mixture that you find in the garments of the priests. And so purity on the one hand requires refraining from impure mixtures. And on the other hand, it requires refraining from mixtures that are holy to the Lord.

Verse 12 concerning tassels on garments again relates to the principle of purity. In Numbers chapter 15 verses 37 to 41, the rationale of these tassels is explained. The Lord said to Moses, speak to the people of Israel and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner.

And it shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. So you shall remember and do all my commandments and be holy to your God. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God.

I am the Lord your God. The purpose of the tassels was to preserve Israel from spiritual adultery, to whore after their own eyes and heart. These tassels are, as it were, signs of Israel's marital status, that they are holy to the Lord and they must live in such a manner.

The tassels also seem to be connected with the garments of the high priest. And so there is a natural association between this commandment and the one that immediately precedes it concerning the wool and the linen. Verses 13 to 21, the law concerning the

woman accused of infidelity, is an incredibly difficult one to read.

It offends many of our modern sensibilities and we need to read it with care. First of all, how do we read difficult passages like this? The first thing to do is not to dodge the problems. Be honest about the difficulties that we have.

Look at the passage carefully. Be patient. Don't panic.

Don't get tunnel-visioned. Recognize the limitations of your understanding. Draw encouragement from your past experience.

If you're anything like me, there have been many, many times that you have looked at a passage and felt daunted by it. You've not known how to understand it. And then you've spent a lot of time with it and it's opened up.

The more that you've done that, the less threatened you are by passages and their challenges. In all likelihood, if you give time to it, this passage will open up too. Most importantly, trust the author.

We know that the author of this text is God himself. And we believe he is a good God. We have learned so much about him elsewhere that we can trust him with those things that we do not know.

Be prepared to continue to wrestle with the text in the darkness until you're blessed. While admitting that you are in darkness, that you really do not know what it means, be patient and wait for things to open up. When dealing with the laws, we should also be clear that the laws are dealing with a fallen world.

The laws are accommodated to such a world and to the sinful people within it. Jesus' teaching about Moses' permission of divorce is a good example here. The permission of divorce is not the ideal.

It's not the way that God designed things to be. God's intent is that marriage should be indissoluble. But in the sinful and fallen world, allowance has to be made for divorce.

The laws are also accommodated to a far less socially and politically complex society, where social, political, police and legal structures were very limited, and laws had to function within those limits. Laws such as these had to function in a society that was much more patriarchal, where men as the physically and socially stronger sex had social, legal and political power and agency, and women had very little. This was less the result of direct oppression than it was the result of limited structures in society, where the fact that social institutions and power structures overwhelmingly arise out of male power was far more immediately felt, because there was much less abstraction of that power from the immediacy of the family structure into strong social institutions that could limit men.

Consequently, the policing of men and the protection of women generally had to arise from men of her own family or from the wider congregation of men. While we should be mindful of the patriarchal origins and the foundations of social, political and legal structures, we should be very thankful that we have moved beyond them in a great many ways. We should not idealise the situation here, but we should recognise that the law is speaking into it.

Getting then to this particular law is one in which the man accuses his wife of sexual infidelity, and the charge of infidelity is taken very seriously. It seems that he hates her and wants to put her away, he wants to divorce her. It is interesting that this is presented in a way that puts forward the false and malicious charge as if it were the typical case.

What is happening here is seemingly an attempt of a husband to get out of an unwanted marriage by blackening the name of his wife, and the deterrent for false charges is very significant. There is a whipping, 100 shekels of silver he must pay to the family of his wife, and no right to divorce his wife because he had brought a bad name upon her. This would serve to give security to the woman, and security to women more generally from such false charges.

We can also see the test of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5 which deals with a similar case. In that case the woman must be brought towards the Lord, and the Lord will cast judgement in her case. Her case is not left in the charge of men.

The concern here is less with virginity as such as it is with the honour of the woman. I think that there is a clue to the actual nature of what is taking place in the fact that the man does not suffer the death penalty for his accusation. Usually there would be the death penalty for any false accusation in a capital case.

Rather, it seems that the man is trying to initiate a divorce by the false claim that she has been unfaithful. He is trying to put her away. He is not trying to put her to death with that claim.

This explains why the law starts with the false charge. The law is really about the way that a family could protect their falsely charged daughter. This is then why the punishment of the man is focused on his loss of right to divorce, and his being dishonoured and required to give money to the family of his wife, which like the bride price they would presumably keep in trust for her.

If she were not in fact a virgin, the family could just let the divorce go ahead. Perhaps the death penalty comes when the woman and her family refuse to let the divorce go ahead, and try and trap the man in the marriage. But it is shown that she was in fact not a virgin.

In that case, she is to be put to death for her infidelity. The law protects women's reputations then. It also gives them security against divorces undertaken on false grounds by providing strong deterrence.

However, it also provides strong deterrence against non-marital sexual relations. Verses 22-29 are laws concerning seduction, rape and adultery. The punishment for adultery is severe.

Adultery is taken extremely seriously, and has implications for the entire community. They must purge the evil from Israel. Unfaithfulness in marriage is a dishonouring of an institution that lies at the heart of Israelite society.

This, like many other sexual sins, is not seen as a private matter. This is followed by the twin cases of the betrothed virgin, one in the city and one without. One is a situation where the relationship is presumed to be consensual, because the woman didn't cry out or protest.

The other is one in which it is presumed to be non-consensual, because there was no one to hear her. It is important to recognise that what we have here are illustrations of principles of justice, not so much laws that must be woodenly applied. What happens if the woman in the city is prevented from crying out by her rapist? What if she doesn't cry out from fear when being raped, but runs for help as soon as it is over? I presume that this would satisfy the principle.

However, if no protest or reporting occurs, there is good reason to believe that the act was consensual. The law of the man who lies with the unbetrothed virgin comes next. This law has a parallel in Exodus 22, verses 16-17.

If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall give the bride price for her and make her his wife. If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride price for virgins. Here it seems to be applied to someone who had forceful relations with a woman.

If she wants to go ahead and marry him, and have father consents, he must pay the bride price, and he has no right to divorce her. One could perhaps imagine this law being invoked in a situation where a man forced himself upon a woman against her protestations, who was attracted to him but did not want to have sexual relations before they were properly married. What it most definitely does not do is give the rapist the right to marry his victim.

The bride price that would have to be paid even if she did not want to marry him, was in part designed to ensure that she would not suffer on the account of his rape with potential suitors. The final law of the chapter concerns incest. Not taking your father's wife, not uncovering your father's nakedness.



This language is language that we have already encountered in Leviticus. A question to consider, what are some specific applications that we might make in the modern day of the law of the mother bird? Deuteronomy chapter 23 concludes the section devoted to the seventh commandment, and moves into the material associated with the eighth. It begins with entrance into the assembly in verses 1 to 8. The assembly is presumably the gathering of all the males ruling and worshipping on behalf of the nation.

It's a matter of full citizenship and participation in Israel's public life. They would be the people responsible for crowning kings, for making war, for administering justice, allocating land, participating in worship, these sorts of things. And there would be an assembly operative at both the national and at the local city or town level.

The public life of Israel was formed by men and almost entirely run by them. The public worship of Israel was also especially focused on men for this reason. It was the men who had to present themselves before the Lord at the pilgrim feast, for instance.

The women could attend, but their attendance was more optional. From the perspective of the modern reader, it can easily be falsely presumed that the exclusion of women from the public life of Israel, for the most part, was because they were being oppressed and purposefully excluded. What this misses is that the public life of Israel and other nations was largely created by groups of men.

It wasn't this pre-existing neutral space that was colonised by men in a way that prevented women from coming in. The men would create the wider political structures, forge the realm of public life, forge unities between families and clans and the larger life of the nation. It was the men who had to create and preserve the realm of public life through their force of arms and their creative power.

The realm of public life would be forged through their collective exertion of social, physical and institutional power. And it would have seemed very strange to them that someone who wasn't ever expected to fight as one of the military assembly should have a place in the assembly when it exercised its rule. It was a male realm at its origin.

It is only in fairly recent history that the realm of public life has been greatly abstracted from the work of male groups in guarding the realm of the polity and also establishing its institutions and power structures. The idea that men and women should be interchangeable in their status as citizens is only something that really develops as there is an abstraction, for instance, of the enjoyment of political citizenship from the military responsibilities of the citizen, things which would have been seen as naturally going together in most ancient societies. Finally, it is also important to recognise that the men weren't participants in public life as detached individuals, but rather persons were deeply embedded in families, standing for and symbolising their families.

They maintained the interest of larger groups and the members of those groups would

see themselves in the men that stood for them. As people who think in terms of a more atomised and individualistic society, we find it very difficult to understand how such people would have thought. However, some sort of understanding along these lines is important if we are to appreciate what is taking place in scripture, that on the one hand it isn't merely this power grab by men over women, it's a far more complicated reality than that, and scripture's use and handling of such structures is an accommodation to them, often an accommodation less to sin than to immaturity, to a society that has not yet been able to develop the structures that would allow for a more free and equitable way of living.

With such an understanding of these structures, on the one hand we learn not to condemn them so instinctively, and on the other hand we learn not to idealise them. The person excluded from the assembly could still live in Israel, they weren't exiles, however they lacked the civil rights enjoyed by full citizens. The eunuch, or the person with crushed testicles, is probably someone who was mutilated in the service of a false god.

However, priests were also disqualified from ministry by defects of this type, which may suggest that such emasculation was seen as unfitting in the holy assembly of the men of Israel. The next restriction is upon someone born of a forbidden union. Many readings have seen this as a bastard, or perhaps it's a child of incest, or a forbidden marriage of some other type.

Ammonites and Moabites are then set apart as groups that would not have the right of citizens for a long period of time, if at all. Both of these nations were descendants from Lot, and both of them were born through incest. But here they're seen as nations that were inhospitable to Israel in their time of need, and also nations that explicitly tried to subvert them.

It's on account of that history that Israel is supposed to be careful about their dealings with these peoples. The Edomites and the Egyptians are different though. The Edomites are related to Esau, they're twins, and they're close kin.

And Egypt, before the pharaoh of the time of the Exodus, showed hospitality to Israel. For this reason, Edomites and Egyptians could assimilate to Israel and become members of its assembly far more rapidly than other nations. Israel was supposed to welcome the stranger, but in many ways aliens and strangers were prevented from participating in Israel's life as full members of the people until a few generations of assimilation and other factors.

The nation of Israel had to preserve its religious character. Foreigners in the land were not given the right of free worship of their foreign gods. They were not permitted to participate in some of Israel's worship without being circumcised and becoming Israelite themselves.

They were also restricted in their ownership of the land. They would probably live in the cities, as ownership of the land was largely restricted to those who had ancestral holdings within it. We shouldn't assume that such sorts of legislation were timeless, however.

Israel's relationship with surrounding nations could change, and it might be prudent to admit some earlier and exclude others for longer. Ruth is an example of a Moabiteess who became part of the people of God. Her offspring became members of the assembly earlier than ten generations.

This wouldn't be the only example of a law that changes in scripture as the times change and the context change. We get another hint of this in Isaiah chapter 56 verses 1-8. For thus says the Lord, to the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters.

I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

The Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares, I will gather yet others to him besides those already gathered. This material falls under the 7th commandment against committing adultery. Israel's sexual fidelity and integrity is important for its public life.

It also needs to beware of intermarrying with and having union with peoples of other nations, particularly nations that are not faithful to the Lord, nations that have proved to be enemies of Israel in the past, that have drawn them astray. Verses 9-14 concern the holiness of the war camp. The war camp has a special state of holiness, higher than the regular camp.

This enhanced status comes from the fact that the Lord is fighting with his people and is in the camp with them. And so, for instance, men must refrain from sexual relations. In 1 Samuel 21 verse 5, And David answered the priest, Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition.

The vessels of the young men are holy, even when it is an ordinary journey. How much more today will their vessels be holy? Nocturnal omissions mean that someone has to leave the camp. They have to become clean again before they can come back in.

Defecation has to occur outside of the camp. The military are in jeopardy because the Lord's holy presence is in their midst and they must behave accordingly. This again

comes under the 7th commandment.

It's about maintaining the purity of the body, the purity, sexually and otherwise, when you're in the presence of the Lord. And it's also about the holiness of the people to the Lord. This is followed by the law of the fleeing slave in verses 15 and 16.

And now we've moved into material related to the 8th commandment. You shall not steal. Man-stealing is a form of stealing that suffers the death penalty.

We don't know if the slave was stolen in such a way. There's no reason to presume that he was. The slave here is presumably a slave from a foreign country who is permitted to live in Israel as a free man.

They would not engage in extradition of slaves, unlike other ancient Near Eastern societies. And they don't just give this man temporary asylum. He enjoys permanent asylum in Israel.

Israel were once slaves and they must treat slaves with dignity. It's not clear that this applies to slaves within Israel who would have had the right to go free in the 7th year. And so fleeing before that time might not have been viewed in quite the same way.

This comes under the law for stealing then. The escaped slave has the right to his freedom. And it takes priority over any supposed claim his master has upon his service.

Verses 17 and 18 are unusual verses in this context. It would seem to belong with the preceding material, the material concerning the 7th commandment. It's about the wages of a prostitute.

Some believe that this is to be classed under the 7th commandment, but I don't think that's the case. The point is less about not being prostitutes, although that's part of the point, but it's about what happens with their money. We like to think of money as an abstract medium of exchange.

Any money is as good as any other money. But money has a history. And money associated with prostitution should not be allowed anywhere near the Lord's house.

This comes under stealing as the money is a sort of cursed possession. And presenting it to the Lord is robbing him of his due, giving him something that is polluted by sin. Verses 19-20 concern the restrictions on interest.

The type of loans generally in view here are charitable loans for poor Israelites. Money did not play anything like the same role in Israelite society as it does today. Theirs was not, primarily, a money economy.

They can charge interest to foreigners, but not to their brothers. The suggestion seems to be that they have a cooperative and a more mutual economy. Rather than one party

potentially prospering from the losses of another, both parties would either prosper or suffer together.

As a money economy grew, some of this legislation would presumably have been relaxed in various ways. In Exodus 22 and Leviticus 25, there is the suggestion that the people receiving such loans would have been poor. But fear your God, that your brother may live beside you.

You shall not lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. Leviticus 25-35-37 The principle then seems to be focused upon the poor and charitable loans. But the principle does seem to have some more broad applications, even though the poor were mostly the ones who were borrowing.

The ideal is a society where everyone prospers together, rather than one of privatised interests at competitive odds with each other. Israel is a nation of brothers, and they must all take an active concern for and invest themselves in each other's wellbeing. The foreigner would most likely not be the poor person.

He would be a trader. He would be someone looking for money for a venture for his business. And so the considerations regarding the poor Israelite would not necessarily apply in his case, not just because he was a foreigner, although that's important, but because he was using the money for other means.

Not stealing, then, involves not taking advantage of the poor. It involves the responsibility to be prepared to give a loan to such a person when they need it. It also pushes in the direction of a society of brothers where, although differences in personal wealth are quite permissible, the ideal is that all should prosper together.

Verses 21-23 concern the keeping of vows. People would make vows to the Lord for particular purposes, perhaps as thanks for something that the Lord had given them, perhaps in order to seek some blessing from his hand, perhaps in response to God's answer to prayer. And vows, when made, should be paid, and quickly.

To vow and not pay is to be guilty of a serious offence, though there is nothing wrong with not vowing. The final verses of this chapter, verses 24 and 25, concern the right to eat unharvested crops. Private property rights are relaxed in Israel under the principle of not stealing.

The land has been given to all of Israel, and the right of every Israelite, no matter how poor, is to have some right of way in and right to eat of the land. The owner of a vineyard or a field would be stealing if he denied such rights to a fellow Israelite. On the other hand, if the person going through a vineyard or a field started to harvest the crop, rather than just taking what they could eat on the spot, they would be guilty of stealing from the owner.

A question to consider. The law concerning the prostitute's wages suggests that God is concerned with the history of the things that people sacrifice or give to him. How might this principle inform our approach to Christian worship? Deuteronomy chapter 24 has material related to both the 8th and the 9th commandments.

Like the previous chapter, it begins with laws concerning marriage, and ends with laws relating to the needy having access to other people's crops. Verses 1-4 in the beginning of this chapter has law concerning a divorce. It is less a law about divorce than a law that deals with a situation that might arise after a divorce had occurred.

Like many aspects of the law, divorce is not directly covered in the book of Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy isn't a comprehensive body of law. It's an exemplary body of law.

The point of it is to promote meditation upon the principles of justice that it discloses. Divorce seems to have been a matter of customary law, not something derived from explicit divine revelation. Moses tacitly permits the continuance of such customary law, but curbs it in one particular respect.

The woman who has left her husband and married another cannot return to her original husband if she divorces the second man. This would be a sort of adultery, and indeed the custom might have served as a cover for adultery in some instances. This law is alluded to at some points in the prophets, in Isaiah 50, verse 1, and also in Jeremiah 3, verse 1. If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man's wife, will he return to her? Would not that land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers, and would you return to me? declares the Lord.

Jesus also teaches concerning this law quite famously in Mark 10, verses 2-9. Moses' permission of the custom was on account of the hardness of the people's hearts. He curbs it, but he does not forbid it.

Jesus places the practice of divorce in the light of God's original intent for marriage, and curbs it yet further. If marrying another man, then divorcing and marrying the original man again is a form of adultery within Moses' teaching, then divorcing and marrying is too. Jesus' teaching may be seen more as a matter of divorcing in order to marry.

The person who is divorcing is divorcing precisely with the intent to marry another party. The woman in the scenario that Moses presents was legitimately divorced and remarried to the second husband. The problem was that remarrying the original man again would make the union with the second man adulterous after the fact, even if he had died.

As regards the woman's relationship to her first husband, she was defiled. But there is probably more going on here. One of the mysteries that we have to address is why this material is found where it is, along with material related to the 8th commandment, you

shall not steal.

The answer to that may be found in the marriage customs of the time. Either the divorce or the remarriage may have been incentivised by a desire to profit, either from retaining a dowry or gaining money obtained through the divorce from or the death of the second husband. The situation of the commandment then might give us some clue as to its purpose.

One of the things that both Moses and Jesus are challenging in their teaching is the use of law and custom to give a veneer of legitimacy to the corruption of the institution of marriage and what God created at the beginning. In the case of the law that Moses gives here, it seems to be aimed at stopping a practice that is designed to circumvent the purpose of marriage and to use divorce as a way to get out of the responsibilities of marriage in order to achieve some personal end. Jesus' teaching seems to be designed with the same purpose.

While the law is rightly accommodated to our sinfulness and our fallen condition, it is not supposed to be a cover for that, a means by which our sinfulness is given legitimacy. Indeed, on this front, it is interesting that almost all the material that we have in scripture related to divorce is not instituting or mandating practices of divorce, rather it is trying to curb existing practices. Divorce then, while tolerated and accommodated, is not granted the sort of weight of legitimacy that it might otherwise have.

While God allows for its practice, it is very clearly not His intent for marriage. Verse 5 is the law for the newly married man. As the flip side of their public privileges, men in Israel could be required to perform public duties, not least going to war and then also doing some other business in the assembly.

The law about the newly married man concerns the rights of the newly married couple to each other. The newly married man must either be free at home to be happy with his wife or, in another translation, to make happy his wife. Requiring the man to go to war or to perform a public duty during this time would be wrongfully stealing him from his wife and stealing his right to enjoy the beginning of his marriage and family, especially if he were placed at risk of losing his life.

This law is pretty much given in an earlier section in chapter 20, in the laws concerning warfare. What is it doing here? In the earlier section, we see it under the aspect of the commandment not to murder. It's about protecting life from falling under the shadow of death and ensuring that people do not have the tragedy of their lives being condemned to futility by warfare.

However, here we see it under a different aspect. Here we see it under the aspect of the 8th commandment. It's the same commandment, but we're seeing a different facet of it.

Placed in this context, for instance, the loss that the wife would sustain as her new husband might potentially be taken from her by being lost to warfare is something that is placed in sharp relief. That was not the case in chapter 20, where it was a different set of facets of the situation that were more clearly seen. Verse 6 prohibits taking an upper millstone in pledge.

Pledges as securities on loans were commonplace, but certain items were placed off limits for such purposes. A mill or an upper millstone is a person's means of production. Taking that prevents him from providing for himself or making a living.

As such, it is like taking a life itself, a very serious form of stealing. The principle beneath this law opposes exploitative business dealings more generally. People don't all have equal bargaining power, and certain transactions must be off-limits for that reason, lest people with power take advantage of that to oppress others.

Verse 7 addresses the most serious form of stealing of all, man-stealing. This carries the death penalty, and is focused upon Israelites here, presumably not because Israel was permitted to go around stealing foreigners as slaves, but because prisoners of war could be slaves. The use of prisoners of war as forced labour comes down to the modern times.

In 1947, a quarter of Britain's land workforce were POWs. At many points we've encountered verses that have caused us to wonder what they're doing in their particular place, and verses 8-9 of this chapter are no exception. The instruction that the Levites must be honoured in the case of leprosy is maybe an unusual one to find in this particular section.

The Israelites are to learn from the example of Miriam in this regard. And this seems strange. Miriam certainly had leprosy, but what does this have to do with the attitude to the Levites in a case of leprosy? I believe that looking back at the story of Miriam will help us to find the answer.

Numbers 12 1-10 Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married, for he had married a Cushite woman. And they said, Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also? And the Lord heard it. Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth.

And suddenly the Lord said to Moses and to Aaron and to Miriam, Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting. And the three of them came out. And the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam.

And they both came forward. And he said, Hear my words. If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision.

I speak with him in a dream, not so with my servant Moses. He is faithful in all my house.



With him I speak mouth to mouth clearly and not in riddles.

And he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them. And he departed.

When the cloud removed from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous like snow. And Aaron turned toward Miriam, and behold, she was leprous. The Levites' management of cases of leprosy would presumably not be particularly popular.

They could remove people from the camp, they could require them to live away from others, to cry out unclean, and even to tear down their houses. One could imagine that, like Miriam did with Moses, people would be tempted to speak against the Levites in the case of leprosy, spreading slander and false reports and cursing the authorities. Yet the Lord gave the commandment to the Levites.

And this is emphasised within these verses. The people must honour the Lord by honouring his servants. Leprosy was the punishment for Miriam's false witness against Moses.

So leprosy is a situation where Israelites should beware of the danger of falling into the sin of false witness against their leaders. As should now be apparent, we've just moved from the 8th commandment to the 9th. Verses 10-13 return to the subject of pledges, but now not under the 8th commandment, under the 9th.

Showing dignity to others in the handling of pledges is the point here. For many, if someone owes you something, you are permitted to offend against their dignity to get it back. However, once again, there are boundaries that should not be trespassed.

This is incredibly important when it comes to the most vulnerable in society, especially as people can use violence, intimidation and oppression to force people to repay loans. People who show dignity to their debtors will have that counted as righteousness for them before the Lord, as evidence of their faithfulness as members of his people. Now this is a peculiar law to find in this context.

Most commentators who note the patterning of Deuteronomy's material according to the 10 commandments are clear that this law belongs in this section, but few of them elaborate how it fits under the 9th commandment. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. We've had material related to pledges just a few verses earlier, in the 8th commandment.

What's going on? Is this something that really belongs elsewhere? Here's a possibility, which I think is amply borne out in the verses that follow. Sometimes in the structuring of the material of chapters 6 to 26, the relevant one of the 10 commandments really serves to illumine the specific case law. Sometimes both illumine each other, but sometimes the case law is that which most powerfully illumines the specific one of the

10 commandments, and here I think that is what's taking place.

Bearing false witness against one's neighbour may be a much broader principle than we initially think, and in this law, and in those which follow, it clearly relates to treating people with fairness, and resistance to oppression. False witness against a neighbour is a paradigm case of oppression. It uses the power of the law to oppress someone, perverting its power structure.

If we were to write the 10 commandments, we would probably have something about oppressive power structures in it. That's very much a concern that we have within our society. Now, it seems strange that there isn't such a commandment within the 10 commandments, not only in the light of our modern ethical sensibilities, but also because so much of scripture speaks against oppression.

However, when we get into the material devoted to the 9th commandment, we discover that in fact there was a commandment devoted to this purpose all along. The 9th commandment is a heading under which all these principles related to oppression come. Handling pledges, then, is not only governed by the commandment not to steal, which this material could also reasonably have been classed under, but also under the 9th commandment's concern with fairness and the avoidance of oppression.

Verses 14-15 concern the treatment of workers. Verse 16, justice in punishment. Individuals should be punished for their own sins only.

A legal principle, but this is more broadly applied. It applies, for instance, to vendettas, where the sin of one member of a family can be used as warrant to deliver vengeance upon other members of the family. That should be ruled out.

This law is referenced at various other points in scripture. In 2 Kings 14, verse 6, it explains why Amaziah does not kill the children of those who murdered his father, but he did not put to death the children of the murderers, according to what is written in the book of the law of Moses, where the Lord commanded, Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers, but each one shall die for his own sin. The application of this principle is complicated by the fact that there are various non-legal contexts where people clearly suffer for the sins of their parents.

Sometimes we are members of solidarities, and those solidarities commit themselves to ways of action that bring down guilt and judgment upon themselves and their members, for instance. For instance, the judgment on the Canaanite nations was built up over generations and then fell upon the whole nation, even their young children. Likewise, there are situations in the law itself where a group's failure to deal with a particularly serious sin in their community, their town, or their city, or their family, brings judgment upon them too.

Ezekiel 18 is an important passage that is often referenced in the context of these discussions of the relationship between the sins of parents and the guilt that is placed upon children. Verses 1-4 The word of the Lord came to me. What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel? The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.

As I live, declares the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine. The soul of the father, as well as the soul of the son, is mine.

The soul whose sin shall die. The sins of fathers can be used as an excuse for those who are continuing in their ways. The scribes and the Pharisees would blame their parents for killing the prophets, and yet continue to oppose and to kill the messengers that God sent to them.

Although we often like to blame the failures and the sins of our parents for our own failures, they cannot be used in such a manner. Everyone must take responsibility for their own sin. In some way this could be seen as a conversion of the principle of this particular law.

When we are condemned with our parents, we are suffering for our own sins, not just for theirs. Verses 17-18 Focus upon the principle of not perverting justice more directly. Once again, we must show justice and avoid oppression with the most vulnerable and marginal, strangers, the fatherless and widows.

If bearing false witness is the paradigm case of using the legal system as a form of oppression of neighbour, the principle of the Ninth Commandment stretches to refer to the use of perversions of the law more generally and its structures as forms of oppression. The Lord designed the law as a means of release for his people, of deliverance, so that the case of the widow and the fatherless and the stranger might be heard, that they might be saved from tyrants, not subjected to them. And when the law is made into a means of oppression, it becomes the very opposite of what God designed it to be.

The final verses of this chapter return to a theme that we had at the end of the last chapter, provision of access to crops for people who have need. Beyond not perverting justice for them, Israelites must, as a positive act of justice, allow widows, the fatherless and strangers to glean from their crops, ensuring that they leave enough to provide for them. A question to consider.

There appear to be some close affinities between the Eighth and the Ninth Commandments at points here. Are there ways in which exploring these affinities could give us a deeper sense of God's justice? In Deuteronomy chapter 25, we're continuing to work through the Ten Commandments in the penultimate chapter of this section. Chapter 25 begins with the Ninth Commandment, You shall not bear false witness, and

ends with the Tenth Commandment, You shall not covet.

As we have already seen, the Ninth Commandment includes a prohibition upon oppression. Verses 1 to 3 continue this theme. It preserves the dignity of the beaten man.

It deals with a case that has gone to court and someone has been found guilty. Not bearing false witness against one's neighbour includes the concern that punishment not be excessive. The judge supervises the execution of the sentence, ensuring that it is carried out appropriately.

It's important that even a guilty person not be degraded by vicious punishment. No one should be treated like an animal in such cases. The language of being degraded in your sight is very important.

It's all too easy to regard the criminal as subhuman, to care little for their proper treatment, or not to take due concern for their protection from harm or mistreatment. Note that the focus is less upon what excessive punishment does to the person receiving it, but what it does to those giving it, to the way that it dehumanises others in our perception. The punishment must occur in such a way that they never forget that the person receiving the punishment is a brother.

Part of the point here is that the person who has committed a crime can and should be rehabilitated at the end of it. Verse 4, which says that you should not muzzle the ox as it treads out the grain, is a peculiar commandment for several reasons. First, unmuzzling the ox would make it difficult for it to do its job and be extremely impractical.

It needed to be muzzled while it worked the grain, then unmuzzled and fed. If the animal weren't muzzled, it would probably need to be driven with prodding and whipping. So being humane to animals may not necessarily be in view here.

Rather, the potential impracticality and the counter-productivity of the commandment should suggest that something symbolic is going on here, and we must determine what that thing is. This commandment is referenced in the New Testament in 1 Timothy 5, verses 17-18. In 1 Corinthians 9, verses 7-14, it's referenced again.

It's not the law saying that you should not eat any of its fruit, or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, you shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain. Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope, and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this

right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel. Paul makes clear that he does not think that oxen are the chief point of the commandment here at all. Rather, it is symbolic of something else.

In these cases, the ox is the Christian minister who is working in God's field, preparing his people. The minister must be permitted to eat from God's field, being materially provided for by the people to whom he is ministering. Paul compares this to the priests in the temple.

Interestingly, the priests were symbolized by oxen, and the temple was built on the site of the threshing floor. It might seem from this that the commandment fits well under the principle of not bearing false witness, in its extended sense of resistance to oppression. We must take concern that people are not oppressed, that they are given their dues for their labor.

However, there might be something more going on here. We'll revisit it in a moment. Verses 5-10 that follow concern the law of the leveret marriage.

It's a law about taking concern for the preservation of the name of your brother, so that his name not be blotted out. It begins with brothers living together in a yet undivided property. One of the brothers dies, and the other brother seeks to raise up his name by bearing a child for his dead brother, with the widow of his brother.

This is a very great act of charity, as raising up a child for your dead brother would mean that there would be much less of the inheritance left for you. Leveret marriage depended upon the institution of marriage being ordered primarily towards the bearing of seed, not so much of a strong emphasis upon companionship and sexual pleasure. It seeks to preserve the name of the dead brother, and to raise up seed for the dead person.

Perhaps the first example that we find of this in the story of scripture is Nahor taking Milca, the daughter of his dead brother Haran. Some have also argued that Sarai is the daughter of Haran as well, so Abram is performing something similar to a leveret marriage for his brother also. The raising up of seed for the dead brother in this fashion is a new life after death.

It's a sort of resurrection. Beyond the concern to provide for the widow of the dead brother, it suggests that even after death, the dead brother was seen to have some active investment in life, in the continuation of his legacy and his name. One of the most important stories of the performance of the leveret is found in Genesis chapter 38, where

we read of the sin of Onan, who despised his brother and spilled his seed.

This Calum Carmichael suggests helps us to understand the strange ritual of the removal of the sandal, as a symbolic inversion of the sin of Onan. Genesis chapter 38 verses 7-10 reads, But Ur, Judah's firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death. Then Judah said to Onan, Go into your brother's wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother.

But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his, so whenever he went into his brother's wife he would waste the semen on the ground, so as not to give offspring to his brother. And what he did was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and he put him to death also. Onan did not want to raise up offspring that wouldn't be his, so he degraded his sister-in-law and wasted his seed on the ground.

His motive was greed, he didn't want to create an heir to the firstborn son ahead of himself. And the removal of the sandal from the foot corresponds to Onan's withdrawal from intercourse. Elsewhere in scripture the foot is symbolically and poetically associated with the genitals.

The pulling off of the sandal is related to sexual withdrawal. The woman then spits in the man's face, corresponding with the degrading spilling of bodily fluids in Onan's action. The person who failed to perform the duty of the lover then receives a dishonorable name for his house, and is shamefully associated with Onan, the great example of someone who failed to perform this duty towards his brother.

There's a further twist here though. The most famous and the fullest example of the performance of the Leveret commandment occurs in the book of Ruth, even down to the removing of the sandal, although in the book of Ruth that isn't presented as a shaming ritual, even though the near kinsman's reasons for not performing the Leveret is concern for his own inheritance. Ruth chapter 3 verses 1-9 reads Ruth chapter 3 verses 1-9 reads Ruth chapter 3 verses 1-9 reads Ruth chapter 3 verses 1-9 reads The interesting thing that we see here is that all of the elements of the law of the ox treading out the grain are present, and they're performed as a symbolic representation of the law of the Leveret.

Boaz is on the threshing floor, Ruth lies at his feet as if he were treading her out, then at the end he presents her with grain, placing it into her garment which is held in front of her like a pregnant stomach. Treading out the grain then serves as a sort of metaphor for having sexual relations with the woman to raise up seed. Ruth chapter 3 then suggests that the law of the un-muzzled ox is a symbolic expression of the law of the Leveret.

How then would this relate to Paul's use of the law? The point is that those raising up the sons of God, children for God's name, should enjoy fruit from their work for his glory,

much as the person performing the Leveret should enjoy the use of the inheritance of his dead brother while he was raising up an heir for that brother. This also suggests that the law of the un-muzzled ox begins the section devoted to the tenth commandment. Performing the Leveret was the paradigm case of not coveting one's neighbour's possessions or their station in life.

It was a willingness to sacrifice your own interests in order to raise up your brother's name. The commandment that follows this is stranger still. It's a law concerning a woman who takes the genitals of a man who's fighting with her husband.

This is reminiscent in some ways of Exodus chapter 21 verse 22, when men strive together and hit a pregnant woman so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. We can see some similarities here. First of all, there are two men fighting and there's a woman caught between them.

In the first case, the man hits out and hits her pregnant stomach, threatening the lives of her children. In the second case, again, there is a woman between two men, and in this occasion she attacks his genitals, his capacity for fertility. However, the oddness of Exodus chapter 21 verse 22 suggests it is a symbolic commandment, and I have argued that it is related to the story of Rachel.

Something similar might be going on here. Whereas in the first law the woman is wounded by one of the men, here the woman grabs the man attacking her husband by the genitals. This is a very strange and specific situation to legislate for.

In the preceding commandment, the woman shamed the man by uncovering his foot, removing his sandal, an action symbolically related to uncovering his genitals. Here the woman takes hold of a man's genitals again. Literally, the two men fighting are a man and his brother.

The woman seeks to rescue her husband by taking the assailants' privates, perhaps designing to crush them and render him incapable of bearing offspring. If he is symbolically attacking her dead husband by failing to raise up offspring for him, then she will grab hold of his genitals to get back at him, preventing him from having offspring either. However, what we see here is not dissimilar from the action of Tamar, who took Judah's privates in a sense when he was threatening her dead husband by refusing to give his son Shelah to her to perform the leveret.

By subterfuge in disguise, she lay with Judah, her father-in-law, and conceived through him. The woman's hand must be cut off for this action. Her assault upon the privates of a man who failed to perform the leveret for her husband would be a vicious act of envy or some other sort of assault.

Why lose her hand in particular? It's the offending limb, but that seems like a weak explanation. Is it because she is trying to rescue him out of the hand of his brother? Again, that seems weak to me. It does remind me of the scarlet thread tied around Zerah's hand at the end of Genesis 38, though.

The woman's hand was cut off, and the infant of Tamar with the scarlet cord around his hand had his line cut off, while his brother broke through ahead of him. Once again, this raises the possibility that this law is a symbolic reflection upon the history of Israel and some events within it. Verses 13-16 concern fair weights and measures.

Use of different kinds of weights was often designed to gain more when purchasing and pay less when buying. This could easily have been placed under the 8th or 9th commandment, but it is here, and it highlights the covetousness that drives such action. Such dishonesty in trade is firmly condemned.

Verses 17-19, with which the chapter ends, concerns blotting out the memory of Amalek. It's a very shocking commandment, and it looks back to the events of Exodus 17, verses 8-16. Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim.

So Moses said to Joshua, Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand. So Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek.

While Moses, Aaron and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed. And whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed.

But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. While Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun.

And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the Lord said to Moses, Write this as a memorial in a book, and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The Lord is my banner, saying, A hand upon the throne of the Lord, the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.

Perhaps one of the strangest things about this commandment is that it is found at this point, sandwiched between a law concerning just weights and measures, and another concerning offering first fruits, in a section of Deuteronomy devoted to the tenth commandment, You shall not covet. It certainly seems badly out of place. What might it be doing here? When we're faced with such strange things in Scripture, people often throw up their hands.

But such strangeness in the Scriptures is seldom without a discoverable purpose. What it does require is much closer attention to the context and listening to the clues, not least



the clue that is found in a section concerning not coveting. What might it reveal? As we look, the answers are near at hand, and the following observations largely come from Ammi Silva.

The commandment speaks of blotting out the memory of Amalek, but there has already been a reference to blotting out in verse 6, And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. In the Leveret Commandment, a brother comes to the aid of a brother in the most vulnerable position of all, in death, without anyone to continue his legacy. Amalek did precisely the opposite.

When Israel was at its very weakest, Amalek attacked his brother and killed its stragglers, its very weakest members. For Amalek, vulnerability is a target. Amalek prevailed over Israel whenever it was weak.

But Aaron and Hur presented an alternative approach to the weak brother in need, when they lifted up the heavy arms of Moses. Amalek was a descendant of Esau, and continued Esau's rivalry with his brother Israel down through the generations, a rivalry that Esau himself abandoned. Amalek acted as a predator towards his brother.

Whenever Israel was weak, Amalek would turn up to try and destroy him. For instance, Haman, in the story of Esther, was a descendant of Agag, the Amalekite. Amalek was the exact opposite of the faithful brother who performed the Leveret.

Amalek is the anti-Leveret people. Amalek was a hateful and envious brother who could not be reasoned with. He sought to blot out his brother Israel's name when his brother was at his most vulnerable, having just left Egypt.

Consequently, his name must be blotted out. And the point here is less the physical people of the Amalekites, although Israel did have an enduring conflict with the Amalekites, who retained their determination to prey on the vulnerability of Israel and blot out their name, the issue is more with what the Amalekites stand for. They face such severe judgement because of their deep, held desire to destroy their brother.

Israel, by contrast, should be defined as a people who come to the aid of their brothers when they are in need and vulnerable. A people who are not concerned with making their own name great, but who give themselves to making great the name of the Lord. And they will be blessed as they do that.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which we might raise up the names of others, in ways like the brother performing the Leveret marriage? Deuteronomy chapter 26 marks the conclusion of Moses' second sermon, which began at the end of chapter 4. Within this sermon he laid out the Ten Commandments, and then commandment by commandment unpacked their import. The point of all of this was to

encourage Israel and its leaders to meditate upon the law.

When we first see the Ten Commandments they can seem fairly commonsensical, and we might wonder why they are seen to be so important. However, I hope that as we draw to the end of Deuteronomy's unpacking of them, we're beginning to appreciate their power as a source of wisdom. This chapter concludes the great sermon of Deuteronomy then, and the central section of the entire book.

However, it is much more than simply another collection of laws. Such as those we've seen for the preceding sections. Much as chapter 6 to 11 is an extended sermon upon the general theme of the First Commandment, but one which sums up the entire meaning of the covenant, so chapter 26 is the same for the Tenth Commandment, and it returns to the theme of worship.

This chapter can be divided into three sections. The first section, verses 1 to 11, deal with the theme of God's grace to Israel and to Israelites, as they were made fruitful within the land. The second section, verses 12 to 15, concern the obedience of Israel in response.

And then verses 16 to 19, the theme of blessing and covenant commitment on both Israel and the Lord's part. It is a chapter with a number of different declarations within it, in verses 3, 5, 13, 17 and 18, and it functions in part to ratify the covenant. There are three great declarations.

In verses 1 to 11, declaration of what God has done for Israel in the presentation of the firstfruits. Verses 12 to 15, declaration of Israel's obedience in the context of the tithe of the third year. And verses 16 to 19, reciprocal declarations of covenant commitment.

Verses 1 to 4 prescribe the offering of firstfruits. Firstfruits are a sign of entering into the possession of the land, and of the Lord's blessing within it. As part of the ritual, the offerer of the firstfruits formally declared the Lord's fulfillment of his promise.

In verses 5 to 11, there's a confession and celebration of the Lord's acts for Israel. Following the handing of the firstfruits to the priest, the worshipper makes a formal declaration of the Lord's great acts of deliverance. From Jacob, the wandering Aramean, to the Exodus, to their entry into the land.

The offering of the firstfruits is situated within the context of this story, as a demonstration of the Lord's fulfillment of his word, a promise. The declaration is powerfully personalized. The offerer places himself within the story, within the history himself.

Jacob is my father. The events of the Exodus happened to us. Once again, the importance of memory is being emphasized and underlined.

It's been so prominent a theme at the beginning of the section of Deuteronomy that we're in, and it's foregrounded again here. The worshipper situates himself in an ongoing history, reminding himself who he is in the light of God's work with his people. Personally retelling the history is an obligation for each Israelite man.

The offerer then rejoices before the Lord, understanding his own harvest as a participation in the redemptive history of the Lord's dealings with Israel. He celebrates with his household, and then also with the Levite, with the sojourner and others, expressing thanksgiving coupled with generosity. Verses 12-15 speak of obedience and the third year tithe.

Every third year Israel had to lay up the tithe within its towns for the use of the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow. This is described earlier on in chapter 14 verses 28-29. At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns, and the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

The blessing experienced by the Israelite, the blessing he declared in his offering of his first fruits in verses 1-11, had to be enjoyed by the poor and the marginal of the land too. Once again Deuteronomy returns to the need to have a society in which it isn't everyone for themselves, but in which every person gets to enjoy the fruits of the Lord's blessing, and everyone has a duty to ensure that the labour and the life of their brother isn't one marred by futility. The tithe wouldn't be offered before the Lord, but a declaration was made concerning it before the Lord, the Israelite declaring that he had done as the Lord required.

He had to remove the sacred portion from his house, as to hold on to it or to consume part of it would be a very serious transgression, taking what wasn't his. As a person keeping the covenant, he calls for God to bless Israel. And it is important to note here that covenant keeping is not presented as something that's impossible to do.

It's presented as something that's to be expected. The commandments of the covenant are fairly straightforward, and provision is made for sin. Israel's failure isn't because the covenant requires absolute sinlessness, it doesn't, but because Israel rebels against the Lord even when the Lord did everything to make it possible for them to live in fellowship with him.

The chapter ends on a fitting note in verses 16-19, with a pledge and ratification. It sums up the entire speech, and returns to the themes that began the exposition of the commandments in chapter 6. Now this entire section falls under the 10th commandment, as the conclusion of the entire teaching concerning the commandments. Something that we're seeing here that we see at various other points is that the law is

not fulfilled primarily in do-nots, but in positive practices, and the positive practice of thanksgiving before the Lord, remembering what the Lord has done for you, sharing with the rest of the Lord's people, and knowing joy and contentment in all that he has granted you, is how you fulfill the commandment not to covet.

The law is fulfilled not by avoiding sin, but by pursuing righteousness. Also, problems of the heart, problems to do with covetousness, can be helpfully addressed by healthy practices, by practices that commit us to remembering what God has done, committing us to celebration of his goodness to us, commit us to charity and sharing with those in need, and commit us to practices of contentment. Such practices are good ways to smoke out the sin, and to provide a context and a stimulus for the corresponding virtues to take root in people.

If you want to deal with your heart, give thought to your practices. A question to consider, why might it be appropriate that this section gives so much attention to the context of a celebratory feast? Deuteronomy chapter 27 begins the third speech of the book of Deuteronomy. Within it, Moses instructs Israel to perform a ceremony after they enter into the land, and this corresponds with the end of the great sermon upon the first commandment that begins the central section of Deuteronomy, consequently framing the intervening chapters 12-26.

Deuteronomy chapter 11 verses 26-32 reads, You shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim, and the curse on Mount Ebal. Are they not beyond the Jordan, west of the road, toward the going down of the sun, in the land of the Canaanites, who dwell in the Arabah, opposite Gilgal, beside the Oak of Moreh? For you are to cross over the Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land that the Lord your God has given you. And when you possess it and live in it, you shall be careful to do all the statutes and the rules that I am setting before you today.

Mount Ebal and Gerizim were in the region of Shechem. Ebal is associated with the curse, Gerizim with the blessing. And Moses is here joined by the elders for the first part of his instruction concerning the establishment of the stones with the law upon it and the altar.

The elders lead and they represent the congregation, and so it's fitting that they are involved at this point. There may also be a theme of succession, because the elders will take the place of Moses when he leaves. The stones covered with plaster on which the words of the law are written are a testimony to Israel on Mount Ebal, the mountain associated with the curse.

Why are these things placed on the mountain associated with the curse rather than on Gerizim, the mountain associated with the blessing? Partly because as witnesses they would be summoned against Israel in the case of Israel's unfaithfulness, and oath-taking occurs with reference to curses. They're supposed to build an altar of uncut stones, as

we've seen described earlier in Exodus 20, verse 25. The erection of the altar and the sacrifice of burnt offerings and peace offerings is reminiscent of Exodus 24, verses 3-8, and the establishment of the covenant at Sinai.

And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord.

And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.

And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words. In the second part of the ceremony, in Deuteronomy chapter 27, Moses is accompanied by the Levitical priests, who represent the Lord. Just as there is a transition from Moses to the elders, there's also a transition from Moses to the Levites.

They will take the place of teaching the people the law. While the elders represent the Israelite people, the Levites represent the Lord to the Israelites. That day was one in which Israel formally ratified the covenant, becoming the people of the Lord, and they are charged to perform a covenant ceremony when they arrive in the land.

The Levites are the ones who will read the curses of the law, to which the congregation must respond, Amen. The tribes are instructed to divide into two groups. The tribes on Gerizim are Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin.

The tribes on Ebal are Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. The rationale for this division is not entirely clear. It is possibly ordered geographically, with the northern mountain of Ebal associated with the northern and Transjordanian tribes, Dan perhaps being included among them, as it moved north at a later point.

Gerizim is associated with the southern tribes and with Levi. The tribes are also roughly divided according to the mothers, listed in birth order. Rachel's two sons and the eldest sons of Leah, minus the judge Reuben, are in the Gerizim group.

The other group contains the hand-made sons, with Reuben and Zebulun. This ceremony was actually performed in Joshua 8, verses 30-35. At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, just as Moses, the servant of the Lord, commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool.

And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of

Moses, which he had written. And all Israel, sojourner as well as native-born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim, and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses, the servant of the Lord, had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel.

And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before the assembly of Israel, and the women and the little ones and the sojourners who lived among them. The verses that follow this are a sort of oath-taking on Israel's part.

The blessings are not attended by the amens, but the curses are. Israel is accepting the sanctions of judgment upon themselves, should they sin and break the covenant. There are twelve curses stated, and these correspond with the number of the tribes.

The twelve statements particularly focus upon actions that could be done in secret, or which wouldn't be brought before any human court. Where human punishments wouldn't occur, Israel called down divine curses upon the covenant-breaker. And the curses involve idolatry, the first one, dishonouring God, dishonouring father or mother, the second one, mistreating neighbours, in the third, the fourth and the fifth, the neighbour's landmark being moved, the blind man being misguided, and the prevention of justice for the vulnerable.

Sexual offences follow in curses six to nine, lying with your father's wife, with an animal, with your sister, or with your mother-in-law. Next we have two curses concerning murder. Secret murder, and also taking a bribe to kill an innocent person.

And then finally, curse number twelve, the failure to confirm the word of the law that has been given. Here as elsewhere, Israel is summoned to hear the voice of the Lord, not just blindly to obey. Jonathan Sacks observes the way that the law operates on two different levels.

On the one hand it speaks to people at a child-like level of understanding, where the aversion to negative consequences, the aversion to the curse and disobedience is prominent. If you do this particular sin, this bad thing will happen to you. However, the law also speaks at a higher level, communicating the truth that its laws are not arbitrary.

The Torah is remarkable in being law that gives a rationale for itself, and which seeks to persuade. Reasons are given for the commands. Narrative and law are mutually illuminating.

The law is grounded in the order of nature as an expression of natural law, and the law itself is shown to have an inner structure that will yield insight to the one who meditates

upon it. The law then is not just bare divine command, a word from the heavens for people thoughtlessly to obey. No, to those who meditate upon it, it is the unlocking of the world of wisdom.

A question to consider, what might the curses reveal about the dependence of the system of the law upon the Lord and his action? In Deuteronomy chapter 28, Moses lays out blessings and curses before Israel. The book of Deuteronomy is shaped like a covenant document. It begins with a preamble in verses 1-5 of chapter 1, then a historical prologue in chapter 1 verse 6 to chapter 4 verse 49, followed by general stipulations in chapters 5 to 11, which lay out the Ten Commandments, followed by a reflection upon the meaning of the First Commandment.

Then in chapters 12 to 26 we have specific stipulations. And now in chapters 27 to 28, blessings and curses. This will be followed by witnesses, and then a concern for succession at the end.

Here blessings are followed by curses. There are four times as many curses than blessings. Some commentators suggest that this is an indication of the fact that the curse would be a far more determinative reality for Israel's future, as a result of their unfaithfulness.

The juxtaposition of a way of blessing and a way of curse is found on various occasions in scripture. Perhaps we could trace the theme all the way back to the Garden of Eden. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which is associated with the threat of death, and the tree of life, on the other hand.

Which will they choose? Or we can think about Leviticus, which has a long section devoted to blessings and curses. The book of Psalms begins with a psalm speaking of the blessing of the person who meditates upon the law. Chapter 9 of Proverbs explores the contrast between the way of wisdom and the way of folly.

Matthew chapter 5 gives us the blessings of the Beatitudes, which correspond with the woes of chapter 23. Various other examples could be listed. Within the opening verses we have a list of different ways in which Israel will be blessed, a sort of formula of blessing, blessed are you.

And these blessings are paralleled closely with the curses in verses 16 to 19. The blessings here are followed by promises to Israel, if it is faithful. Promises of blessings upon their relations with the nations, their fruitfulness, the fruitfulness of their land and their animals, their standing before God and their standing among the nations.

And the curses which take up most of the chapter begin in verse 15. We should immediately recognise the symmetry between verses 1 to 6 and 15 to 19. There are two ways, one leading to life and the other to death.

Edward Woods observes a book-ended pattern to verses 23 to 42. It moves from agricultural disaster to Israel being a horror to others, to incurable boils, to madness and blindness, to exploitation of Israel, to the threat of futility. And then back again, exploitation, madness and blindness, boils, Israel being a horror to others and then agricultural disaster.

This is the sort of calamity that will befall Israel if they break the covenant. And at the very centre of it is the threat of futility, a threat of futility that reminds us of Deuteronomy chapter 20 verses 5 to 7 and the law for the men who would be exempt from being called up for war. Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it.

And is there any man who has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man enjoy its fruit. And is there any man who has betrothed a wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her. The Lord's intention for Israel is that no Israelite experience futility.

But futility will be the consequence of Israel's rebellion. If Israel turns against the Lord, they will not experience the fruitful and successful life in the land that the Lord has intended for them. Rather, their lives and their work will be rendered futile and be frustrated.

Much of what we read in this chapter exhibits the same sort of hypernaturalism as we saw in the book of Exodus. We can often think in terms of naturalism, the typical functioning of nature, and supernaturalism, God miraculously intervening in the course of nature. However, at many points in the Pentateuch, we see hypernaturalism, the manifestation of the Lord's power in the functioning of nature, not as a power over it, or a suspension of, or intervention within it, but as a power manifested through it.

Nature itself accomplishes the will of the Lord, not through a breaking or suspension of its rules, but as a demonstration that nature is the creation of the Lord, and is therefore subject to Him. The same hypernaturalism is displayed in these blessings and curses. The consequences of Israel's sin will come by active divine punishment, but they will also follow as a sort of natural consequence.

Israel's life is precarious in many ways. They aren't especially powerful or numerous. They will be in a land surrounded by many more powerful nations, a difficult land to keep hold of in certain respects.

They will be dependent upon the rain for their crops and agriculture. In the wilderness, the Lord showed that He would hypernaturally provide for and protect Israel, if they just depended upon Him. However, if they don't trust the Lord, nature will start to threaten



and turn against them in various ways.

The protective hedges that the Lord has erected around them will be removed, and the Lord Himself will drive them off. The comprehensive character of the Lord's blessings and curses also show the extent of His power here. God is active in every area of Israel's reality, not just in some areas.

The God of Israel does not have a limited divine portfolio. He's involved in every aspect of reality. In verse 45, the curses are described like pursuers that will overtake Israel.

They will hunt them down. There is, as there often is, a poetic justice to many of the judgments. For instance, if they will not serve the Lord, they will serve a foreign nation.

If they will not cling to the Lord, diseases will cling to them. There is a threat given of an iron yoke from a foreign captor in verse 48. This is referred to in Jeremiah chapter 28 verse 14.

And the warnings here anticipate the later Babylonian captivity that Israel will be brought into. As the chapter nears its end, there are the most horrific and chilling images of what will befall Israel, some of which were actually recorded in the histories of Scripture. For instance, 2 Kings chapter 6 verses 24-29.

Afterward, Ben-Hadad, king of Syria, mustered his entire army and went up and besieged Samaria. And there was a great famine in Samaria as they besieged it, until a donkey's head was sold for 80 shekels of silver, and the fourth part of a cab of a dove's dung for 5 shekels of silver. Now as the king of Israel was passing by on the wall, a woman cried out to him, saying, Help my lord, O king! And he said, If the Lord will not help you, how shall I help you? From the threshing floor or from the winepress? And the king asked her, What is your trouble? She answered, This woman said to me, Give your son, that we may eat him today, and we will eat my son tomorrow.

So we boiled my son and ate him. And on the next day I said to her, Give your son, that we may eat him. But she has hidden her son.

This particular act is seen as the most horrific act imaginable, the sign of Israel being reduced to the lowest possible condition. The final verses of this chapter describe a wasting away of Israel, as their entire history rots away and unravels. They will be afflicted by the diseases of Egypt.

They will wither away from a countless multitude into a few scattered and fear-ridden stragglers. They will eventually be shipped back to Egypt, but won't even be desired as slaves, so much will they be despised and abhorred by the nations. And this anti-Exodus will render them much worse off than they ever were even at the first.

God is the Lord and the giver of life, and those that forsake him choose death. A question

to consider. The purpose of laws and sanctions can be educative, designed to direct us towards that which is good for us in a liberating way, rather than being designed for the purpose of restricting and punishing us.

What are some of the ways in which the curses of Deuteronomy 28 could be argued to have such a purpose? In Deuteronomy 29-30, Moses exhorts Israel as they are about to enter the land. He looks back to Horeb and forward to entry into the land, and the destiny of the nation after that. Israel has just accepted and ratified the covenant prior to entering fully into the land, and now Moses discusses the implications of their accepting the covenant and its sanctions.

The summons in verse 2 looks back to the summons of chapter 5 verse 1, which looked back to the covenant of Horeb. However, now they have ratified the covenant themselves. Moses recounts the history that has brought them to this point, and verses 2 and 3 recall Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 34.

Or has any God ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders, and by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by great deeds of terror, all of which the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? However, despite the great deliverance, and witnessing such wonders and judgments, Israel had failed to reach a point of understanding. Geoffrey Tague suggests that verse 4 should be translated, But the Lord did not give you a mind to understand, etc., until today. The point then would be, not as it is in many translations, that Israel still didn't understand, but that now, on the brink of entering into the land, Israel has finally grasped what their fathers had not.

The Lord led them in the wilderness, and miraculously provided for them within it for forty years, and then gave them victory over Sihon king of Heshbon and Og king of Bashan, as a preliminary taste of the Lord's empowering of them for the conquest of the land, in order that they might learn the lessons that they had failed to learn earlier on. The purpose of the wilderness wandering then was not merely punitive, it was educative. Israel couldn't enter into the land in its ignorance and rebellion, so forty years of tough training was necessary before they could be prepared to do so.

Finally, now they have received their painful remedial training, and they are ready to graduate to life in the land. However, in this and the following chapter, we gather that even lessons so painfully learned can be easily forgotten, if they're not careful. This is why memory is such an insistent theme of the book of Deuteronomy.

If they do not remember, the lessons that they spent so much time and difficulty in learning, can be forgotten with devastating consequence. All Israel is standing before Moses, formally to ratify and enter into the covenant. This isn't just the typical public gathering of the male assembly of Israel.

The women, the children and the sojourners are present too. The covenant is made with the male assembly, but not with them only. The entirety of the body of Israel has to be personally present to enter into this, not just their public and representative persons.

The covenant isn't merely for the Israelites present at that time either. It's for all of their descendants. This covenant ceremony placed obligations upon generations yet to be born.

They could resist those obligations, but they had no choice in coming under these obligations. The verses that follow draw Israel's attention to what they have witnessed among the nations with whom they have had dealings to this point, and the idolatries of those nations. A solemn warning is given about anyone in the nation who presumptuously follows in the ways of those nations, confident that the Lord won't judge him.

This begins, as Moses makes clear, with the bitter root of a stubborn heart that turns away from the Lord. Such a heart will produce, if it's not dealt with, poisonous fruit that will lead to painful and signal judgment upon many. External conformity is not enough.

Hearts need to be ordered to the Lord. And if they are not, the long-term consequences will be horrific. This is something that the entire nation needs to be vigilant about.

If such bitterness is allowed to develop, it can lead to destruction falling upon all. And if this were to happen, all the curses that have been mentioned in the preceding chapter would fall upon Israel, and the next generation would look at the destruction of the people and wonder at the cause of such a devastation. They would learn that it was the result of the people's abandonment of the covenant and turning to other gods, gods whom they had not known.

The final verse of the chapter, The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law, has been taken in a number of different senses. Some have suggested that the secret things refer to sins, as we see in Psalm 19, verse 12. Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults.

Or Psalm 90, verse 8. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins, in the light of your presence. However, I think it is more likely that it refers to the larger hidden purposes and works of the Lord in history. There is much that Israel may be tempted to speculate about, especially when considering their future and the inscrutable ways and intentions of the Lord.

Yet what they need to know has been very clearly revealed to them, so that they might faithfully observe the law and know fellowship with the Lord. It doesn't depend upon speculations. Hebrews chapter 12, verses 5-15 allude to Deuteronomy chapter 29, verse

8. It describes the same sort of discipline of the Lord designed to lead to faithfulness and the concern about the threat posed to the entire community from unaddressed bitter roots of rebellion.

Those verses read, Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them. But he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.

For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled. The themes of this passage in Hebrews are very similar to the passage we've just read in the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy 29, Moses' concern is that Israel does not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.

They have been taught by the Lord, through his discipline, the experience of the wilderness, the experience of his provision for them, his judgments upon them, should have taught them lessons about faithfulness that will stand them in good stead in the land. What might have seemed merely punitive, can from this vantage point be seen to have been educative. God is dealing with Israel as his son, and it is important that those lessons be internalised and guarded jealously, that Israel not forget what it has been taught, and that it ensure that no one within the community stray from what God has taught them, because they know the devastating effects if they are not careful.

A question to consider. What are some of the secret things that we must leave with the Lord, and some of the revealed things that we should devote our attention to most closely? When the curse described at the end of Deuteronomy chapter 29 has fallen upon Israel, is there any hope left? In chapter 30, Moses makes clear that there is a way back from such a position. The language of returning, turning and restoring is prominent here, as is the expression, with all your heart and with all your soul, in verses 2, 6 and 10.

Moses speaks of a two-fold return, a return to the Lord and a return to the land from exile. It's a double homecoming, to borrow Jonathan Sachs' expression. This recalls chapter 4 verses 29 to 31.

The Lord will hear them and restore them from their exile. This chapter anticipates Israel experiencing a time of blessing and faithfulness in the land, but then turning away from

the Lord and facing the curse of the covenant described in different ways in the last few chapters. They will be in the state of exile, then they will call to mind the blessing and the curse, which explain the course of their history, and will wholeheartedly turn back to the Lord.

It will be the act of remembrance that provides a way back to the Lord and to the blessing. The devastating experience of the curses falling upon them need not be the end of the story. When they return to the Lord, the Lord will restore their fortunes.

He will even make them more numerous and prosperous than they were before. The Lord is not setting up his people to fail. His desire is that they thrive in his land, in fellowship with him, and he will ultimately secure the purpose of the covenant by bringing them back to himself.

He will accomplish their renewal himself, circumcising their hearts. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant, but the problem had always been that the covenant was just external to them. They had not taken it into themselves.

And yet God promises that he will internalise the covenant for them, marking their hearts with it. The Lord had earlier charged them to circumcise their hearts in chapter 10 verse 16. Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 4 is similar.

Yet God promises that this charge that he gives to Israel to circumcise their hearts will ultimately be something that he fulfills himself. In Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34 we have the great promise of the new covenant. The Lord says, The weak point of the covenant was always the wayward hearts of the people, and the Lord is promising that he is going to address this problem personally.

When this occurs, they will be blessed in all respects of their national life, as the Lord takes delight in prospering them. The covenant was never something that the Lord was ambivalent towards. His intent was always that the covenant achieve its purpose, and loving communion between him and the people be secured, and as the people themselves will prove insufficient for this, God assures his people that he will accomplish it in their hearts himself.

Verses 11 to 14 look back to chapter 29 verse 29. Robert Alter comments upon the teaching of these verses, remarking that in Deuteronomy, The law contains great depths and wealth of wisdom, but it isn't far off from anyone. This word is in the mouths of Israel, and can be in their hearts as they memorize it, meditate upon it, learn its principles of wisdom, delight in it, and sing it forth.

This was always the calling of the law. In Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4 to 6, Now on the immediate level, that's clearly a commandment, but we could also read it as a promise. God is promising that one day, these words will be on the hearts of his people.

He's going to write them on their hearts, so that each one of his people are acquainted with him, know his character, and feel that they can approach him. The law is, at its heart, a remarkably democratic document. It isn't written merely for a scribal, judicial, or royal elite.

It doesn't require the great feats of epic heroes, the deep learning of philosophers, or the wandering of mystical pilgrims. It is written for the learning, understanding, and practice of every Israelite, from the least to the greatest. It isn't a shadowy and arbitrary set of principles imposed upon them from without.

It's a book full of rationales, explanations, persuasion. It's designed to enlist the will, the desires, and the understanding. God is close to every single Israelite, not just the high priest, the sage, the prophet, or the king, but in his presence at the heart of the nation, every single Israelite can know what it is to have fellowship with the living God.

The reality of Israel's calling and the law has to be taken into the heart of each Israelite individual. Oliver O'Donovan describes something of this. We may say that the conscience of the individual members of a community is a repository of the moral understanding which shaped it, and may serve to perpetuate it in a crisis of collapsing morale or institution.

It is not as bearer of its own primitive pre-social or pre-political rights that the individual demands the respect of the community, but as the bearer of a social understanding which recalls the formative self-understanding of the community itself. The conscientious individual speaks with society's own forgotten voice. Each individual Israelite has to take the history of the nation into himself or herself, to make it their own, to make it part of the fabric of their being, to memorize this word, to reflect upon this word, to delight in this word.

They are to live out the word, to make it the source of their self-understanding, their sense of the world around them and their purpose within it. The chapter ends with Moses placing the choice that Israel faces before them in its starkest form, as a choice between life and death, prosperity and destruction. These two things are not symmetrical, as Moses makes very clear the Lord is on the side of life.

To reject the Lord and the giver of life is to choose death. Death isn't just a punishment that the Lord strikes Israel with if they reject him, rather it is the natural consequence of rejecting him. Heaven and earth are summoned as witnesses to the covenant that Israel is entering into.

With the blessings of the fertility of the earth and the rain from the heaven, they will be sources of God's blessing to Israel. While the Lord generally comes in the form of command, in this sort of chapter we see that the Lord is also a promise. The Lord will ultimately realise the intent of the covenant, so that people enjoy faithful life in

fellowship with him.

However, the challenge to Israel that day is whether they will achieve this end the easier way, by heeding the Lord's voice and responding to him, or whether they must learn the hard way through experiencing the devastation of the curse. A question to consider, in what ways could we see the work of Christ and the Spirit as fulfilling the promise of God in this chapter to circumcise the heart? Deuteronomy chapter 31 is a chapter of transition. It moves us from Moses to Joshua.

In verses 1-8 we are told that Moses is going to die. He is not going to be the one that leads them into the promised land. Rather the Lord and Joshua are the ones that are going to go ahead of Israel into the land.

Moses is 120 years old. This is 10 times 12, representing the whole of Israel perhaps. It's also 3 times 40.

His life can be divided into 3 periods of 40 years. In Acts chapter 7 verse 23 we are told that he went out to see his brethren at the age of 40. So that's the time that he would have gone into Midian, and then spent 40 years in Midian, followed by 40 years in the wilderness.

He's no longer able to go out and come in. This is the language of leadership. It's something that we see in Joshua chapter 14 verse 11.

Also in Numbers chapter 27 verses 15-21, which is a passage that corresponds to this, as Joshua is set up as the new leader of the people. Moses spoke to the Lord saying, Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who shall go out before them, and come in before them, who shall lead them out, and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be a sheep that have no shepherd. So the Lord said to Moses, Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him.

Make him stand before Eliezer the priest, and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey. And he shall stand before Eliezer the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord.

At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation. Moses cannot go over the Jordan before the people, but God and Joshua will. During his life, the people of Israel have been tempted to treat Moses as if he were some sort of God, dealing with Moses rather than God more directly.

The golden calf incident is a good example of this. When Moses was away from them for a period of time and they thought he might have died, they wanted to construct a God to

go in his place. They weren't replacing the Lord so much as Moses.

Moses was the one that was the God before Yahweh, the supposed lesser God that they had alongside the greater God of the Lord. Now as Moses dies, there is the possibility of a movement beyond this way of thinking. Joshua is a great leader, but he's not of the same stature or kind as Moses.

The Lord assures Israel that the Lord will do to the Canaanites as he did to the kings of the Amorites, Sihon and Og. They shall be strong and courageous, knowing that the Lord himself goes before them. Moses commissions Joshua as his successor before all of the people, and removing Moses allows for Israel to grow into a new level of maturity.

Leaders can run out of the capacity to change things, and sometimes there needs to be a new leader for significant change to be made possible. When long-term leaders are removed from a community, especially leaders of a stature as great as that of Moses, the community will have to reorient itself to find a new footing. After the removal of Moses, they will no longer have the same fixation on the leader.

Israel is also like a child growing up. They're leaving the direct oversight of the parental figure. Moses has acted like a parent figure to them in a period of childhood, and now he's gone, they're going to have to come of age.

They're going to have to enter the land and act in a new way. This will involve discovering new strength and resolve as they look to the Lord for themselves, and not just depending upon Moses to do these things for them. When leaders are removed, we can discover how much we rested upon them, and we must find alternative sources of strength, and this is going to be the case for Israel.

Joshua is not of the same stature as Moses, but yet the removal of Moses is good for the people. It gives them the opportunity to grow into something greater. In verses 9-13, the priests are instructed to read the Book of the Law on key occasions.

Moses writes the Law and commits it to the charge of the priests and the elders of Israel. The former represent the Lord, and the latter represent Israel. The Book of the Law that Moses writes is the covenant that's formed on the plains of Moab.

This is in addition to, and in association with, the covenant that was formed at Sinai. It might also be seen as a sort of last will and testament of Moses himself. The death of Moses will be connected with the closing of this book.

The priests are instructed to read the Book of the Law on the Feast of Tabernacles in the sabbatical year. It's a sort of covenant renewal. On that year, the entire population of Israel seems to be required to participate in an assembly, not just the males.

This is going to be for everyone, for the sojourner, for the women, for the children. It's



important also that the children who weren't present at the first giving of the Book of the Law, or of the covenant at Horeb, might be acquainted with it. And this ceremony seems to have been done at key moments in Israel's history, as a sort of national rededication.

We see this in 2 Kings 23, verses 1-3. ...that have been found in the house of the Lord. And the king stood by the pillar, and made a covenant before the Lord, to walk after the Lord, and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book.

And all the people joined in the covenant. There's a description of such a ceremony in Nehemiah 8, verses 1-8, that gives us a better sense of what would have been involved. And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the water gate, and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel.

So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women, and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it, facing the square before the water gate, from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.

And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Matithiah, Shema, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maasiah on his right hand, with Pedayah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashem, Hashpadana, Zechariah, and Meshulam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.

And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, Amen, Amen, lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Aqab, Shabbathi, Hodiah, Maasiah, Kalita, Azariah, Jehozabath, Hanan, Peliah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law.

While the people remained in their places, they read from the book, from the Law of God clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. This ceremony then seems to involve the public reading followed by some sort of exposition, where the people have the Law explained to them in ways that they can understand. In such ceremonies Israel returned to its first receiving of the Law, and it was also a return to first principles, to the foundations, so that the national life could be well founded.

In verses 14-23 the Lord gives instruction to Moses and Joshua concerning Joshua's succession and the teaching of the psalm. Once again themes of succession are prominent here, as they are throughout the rest of the chapter. This section is the centre

of the chapter in many ways.

God appears at the Tent of Meeting for the first time in the book of Deuteronomy, and the Lord foretells the fact that Israel will soon rebel against Him and reject the covenant. They will prove adulterous and idolatrous, whoring after other gods. And what God does is give Moses a song that will serve as an extra witness to and against Israel.

This is something that will stick in their memories and not easily be forgotten. The testimony of the book of the Law, the testimony of Heaven and Earth, and now the testimony of the song come together as witnesses to Israel. The song will stick in the mind, and unlike the book of the Law, which would only be read through once every seven years, the song could be performed far more easily and often.

A song is a way in which words can become part of us. In this way the testimony of the book of the Law could be internalised, in a particular condensed form of it. Moses writes down the song that very day, and then he also commissions Joshua once more.

In verses 24-29 Moses writes the words of the song and the entire words of the Law. The important words of the covenant are immediately committed to writing. The purpose of writing is partly to preserve a memory, but also to create a physical object that will serve as a symbolic witness.

On the one hand the Law is to be read out every several years. On the other it is deposited next to the Ark of the Covenant as a symbolic witness, that book representing Israel's covenant with the Lord. Moses assembles all of Israel to hear the song, which will serve as a testimony to and against them.

By converting the book of the Law into a particular volume, and expressing it in a condensed form in song, we see the word on the one hand embedded in a material thing, and then on the other hand the word internalised in a memorised song. Both express something about the intended character of the Law. The word is to be fleshed out in the world, in concrete structures and physical objects, and also internalised, supposed to be on their mouths and in their hearts.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which we might renew covenant with the Lord, as individuals and as churches? With the chapter that follows it, Deuteronomy chapter 32 is a poetic climax to the whole book of Deuteronomy. It's a piece of prophecy in the form of a song, and it's a sort of covenant lawsuit presented against Israel for its future unfaithfulness. It recounts their history and also declares their future.

It begins with an appeal to the heaven and the earth, calling them to witness the words of Moses. Along with the song and the book of the Law, the heaven and the earth are witnesses to the covenant. They also serve to mediate God's judgement to Israel for its

unfaithfulness, if it fails to keep the covenant.

Moses compares his prophetic speech to the rain and the dew. They give life and growth to the earth that depend upon them. And this is a way of thinking about the word of the Lord more generally.

The people, if they are to flourish as a planting of the Lord in the land, need to drink in the rain. And there are different kinds of rain. There's gentle rain, but there's also heavy, stormy rain, and both seem to be spoken of here.

Moses proclaims the name of the Lord. He summons the people to the faithfulness that the covenant calls for from them. He speaks of the Lord as the rock of Israel.

The rock is a source of provision, a source of security and refuge, a place of shelter, a foundation, something that is enduring. And this is a particularly powerful metaphor in the context of the wilderness experience. Moses also uses imagery of rocks and mountains in the great Psalm 90, which is the Psalm of Moses, verses 1 and 2. Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations, before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting your God.

The Lord is the enduring rock, the one who does not change, the one who is a secure place of refuge and shelter. There's a sharp contrast between the faithfulness and consistency of the Lord and the faithlessness and inconstancy of Israel. Their corruption undermines their status as his children.

Even though the Lord is their maker and their father, they reject and turn their backs on him. The Lord's election of Israel goes back to the very beginning. God appointed the barons for all of the nations of the world.

Israel is not the only nation for which the Lord has a purpose. When the Lord, as God Most High, established the nations, presumably in Genesis 10, he set their number according to the number of the sons of God. Some regard this as a reference to the number of the Israelites, the number 70 being associated both with Israel's ruling body, the elders, and the number of the nations.

However, this does not explain the contrast of verse 9, which suggests that the Lord has Israel as his own inheritance, presumably over against some other parties that have the other nations as theirs. The answer, I believe, is found in understanding that the sons of God are referring to the heavenly beings. This is a reading that is testified very early on, prior to the birth of Christ.

The teaching then is that God, when he established the nations, established them according to the number of the heavenly beings, with each being being appointed to oversee one of the nations. These heavenly beings were the God's and angelic powers.

They were created by God and under his rule, but the nations were put within their charge.

They mediated the rule of the Lord over these nations and participated in the divine council. However, the Lord himself claimed Israel for his own. Deuteronomy 4, verse 20 speaks of this.

Verses 10-11 speak of the time in the wilderness as a sort of origin to Israel's existence. He kept him as the apple of his eye, like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions. This is similar to Hosea 9, verse 10.

Like grapes in the wilderness I found Israel, like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season, I saw your fathers. But they came to Baal-peor and consecrated themselves to the thing of shame, and became detestable like the thing they loved. Notably, verses 10-11 of Deuteronomy 32 borrow the language of Genesis 1-2.

The word that Genesis 1 uses for being without form is the word used for waste in Deuteronomy 32. We might also see plays upon the word used for void in Genesis 1 in these verses here. The most significant parallel, however, is between the hovering of the spirit over the waters in Genesis 1 and the hovering of the eagle that represents the Lord in Deuteronomy 32, verse 11.

The establishment of Israel, then, is like an event of a new creation. It's a creation of something new out of nothing. As God created Israel, Israel's relationship with God is a matter of the very greatest importance.

The Lord is the source of Israel's life. The Lord brought Israel into a position of plenty without assistance from any other god. Yet Israel, enjoying the prosperity and plenty that God brought him into, rejects the Lord for other gods, turning its back on the rock that bore them.

The Lord responds to this provocation by hiding his presence from them and visiting judgment upon them by another people. If they left the Lord and turned to gods that were not gods, he will bring a people that's not a people against them. The result will be the devastating force of the curse falling upon Israel.

It will destroy their land and its fruit. They will experience famine, pestilence, plague, attacks from wild beasts, and war. In verses 26 and following, the Lord, however, stays his hand of judgment.

His name is upon Israel, and he doesn't want the nations he raised up against Israel to think that they achieved the victory over it, praising themselves, like Israel wrongly does, in their own strength. The enemy doesn't understand the reason for their victory, that God had given up his people to them. This was the only way in which they could ever

have won such dramatic and one-sided battles against Israel.

Their gods are not as the God of Israel, and their prosperity and seeming blessing is not the true blessing that Israel enjoys. It seems like a true blessing, but its reality is quite different. The time will come when the enemies that the Lord has raised up against Israel will themselves be destroyed.

And when that time comes, the Lord himself will have compassion upon his people and will deliver them. All of the gods to which Israel turned will have been proved powerless and futile, unable to come to Israel's aid in this time of distress. And this will serve to manifest the Lord's uniqueness.

The point of the song here is similar to one found throughout the book of Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 41 verse 4 Who has performed and done this, calling the generations from the beginning? I the Lord, the first, and with the last, I am he. Isaiah 43, 10-13 You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.

Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no saviour. I declared and saved and proclaimed when there was no strange god among you.

And you are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and I am God. Also henceforth I am he. There is none who can deliver from my hand.

I work, and who can turn it back? Isaiah chapter 48 verse 12 Listen to me, O Jacob, and Israel whom I called. I am he, I am the first, and I am the last. The Lord is the great warrior, and no rival can stand against him.

His action in the history of Israel, seen against the record of their stubborn unfaithfulness, will lead to the glorification of his name. The heavens will rejoice at his victory. All gods will bow before him.

He defeats his enemies. He avenges his people. He brings about atonement.

He will finally and decisively deal with his people's sins, the sins that are described within this great song. Joshua joins Moses in presenting Israel with the song. Israel is counseled to take its words, and the words of the Lord, to heart.

The words of the Lord are the very source of Israel's life. The life of Israel ultimately flows, not from any material prosperity and plenty, but from the Lord, and obedience to his word. Man does not live by prayer alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

Deuteronomy 8, verse 3. This chapter concludes with Moses being instructed to climb

Mount Nebo, where he will be able to see the land before the people enter into it. He, however, will not enter in, on account of his sin at Meribah Kadesh. A question to consider.

Verse 51 reads, You broke faith with me in the midst of the people of Israel, at the waters of Meribah Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, and because you did not treat me as holy, in the midst of the people of Israel. How does this help us to better understand Moses' sin in Numbers chapter 20? Like the preceding chapter of the Song of Moses, chapter 33 of Deuteronomy has a poetic form. There are a variety of genre types within it, and the blessings of Deuteronomy 33 focus upon Israel's life after it enters into the land.

Most of the blessings of Moses are written in a parallel form, consistent with the usual pattern of Hebrew poetry. It is a series of blessings upon the tribes of Israel, similar to those that we have in Genesis chapter 49, when Jacob blessed his 12 sons. Like Jacob, Moses is about to die, and he is blessing the nation before he departs.

If Genesis ended with the blessings and the death of Jacob, the Pentateuch ends with the blessings and the death of Moses. While there are some horrific curses in the book of Deuteronomy, ending in this way implies that the Lord's primary purpose for Israel is one of blessing them. Indeed, there are a great many points of similarity between the content of this and the material in Genesis 49.

For instance, Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 16, May these rest on the head of Joseph, on the pate of him who is prince among his brothers. And this can be compared with Genesis chapter 49 verse 26, May they be on the head of Joseph, and on the brow of him who is set apart from his brothers. However, the blessings of Jacob don't have the same sort of introductory or concluding poetic sections that Moses' blessings have here, even though the blessings of Jacob is the most similar other part of Scripture.

While Jacob's blessings were addressed to individuals that were going to become tribes, the blessings of Moses are addressed to tribes and to the larger nation that they form, which comes into focus at the beginning and the end of the blessings, where the whole nation is addressed. There are also similarities with this and the song of Deborah in Judges chapter 5 verse 4-5, for instance. Lord, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the region of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped, yes, the clouds dropped water.

The mountains quaked before the Lord, even Sinai before the Lord, the God of Israel. And then in verses 14-18 of the same chapter, From Ephraim their route they marched down into the valley, following you, Benjamin, with your kinsmen. From Acre marched down the commanders, and from Zebulun those who bear the lieutenant's staff.

The princes of Issachar came with Deborah, and Issachar faithful to Barak. Into the valley

they rushed at his heels. Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart.

Why do you sit still among the sheepfolds, to hear the whistling for the flocks? Among the clans of Reuben there were great searchings of heart. Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan. And Dan, why did he stay with the ships? Asher sat still at the coast of the sea, staying by his landings.

Zebulun is a people who risked their lives to the death. Naphtali too, on the heights of the field. Beyond this we might also see some ways in which this material could be compared to the blessings of Balaam.

In Numbers chapter 23-24, the language of the beginning and the end of the blessings also have various resemblances with elements of certain Psalms. There are ten blessings for the twelve tribes. There is no blessing for Simeon.

And Issachar and Zebulun are blessed together as a single blessing. Simeon was judged with dispersal in Genesis chapter 49 verses 5-7. Simeon and Levi are brothers.

Weapons of violence are their swords. Let my soul come not into their counsel. O my glory, be not joined to their company.

For in their anger they killed men, and in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen. 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.

As Simeon's territory would end up being an enclave of Judah, perhaps Simeon is here included under Judah. Some have noted the fact that Judah's blessing begins with Hear O Lord, with Hear being the verb from which Simeon's name was originally derived. Moses begins by recalling Sinai, where the law was given.

The Lord is presented as the great king of Israel. Having led Israel up from the south, Israel followed the Lord like a great military band. And the ordering of the blessings seems to follow a geographical movement through the places where they would finally end up settling in the land.

However, there are clear subgroups. The initial sons of Leah, Reuben, Judah and Levi, followed by the sons of Rachel, Benjamin and Joseph, followed by Issachar and Zebulun, the final two sons of Leah, followed by the handmaid's children. Reuben comes first.

He's the firstborn of Jacob's sons. He was judged in Genesis 49 on account of the fact that he went into his father's concubine Bilhah. Moses' blessing of Reuben has a sort of ambivalent character.

He desires that the tribe continue, but not that they truly prosper. Judah comes next, and

whereas Judah's blessing is quite extensive in Genesis 49, it is fairly short here by comparison. It's not one of the prominent ones.

Judah's blessing is a prayer. As I already noted, Simeon, while not explicitly mentioned, may be included under Judah. Judah's military role, and perhaps his leadership of Israel in this role, is suggested here.

In Numbers chapter 2, the tribe of Judah leads the entire camp as it marches. Levi comes next. Levi proved faithful in guarding the covenant when tested.

The Levites were prepared to slay relatives in Exodus chapter 32, after the sin with the golden calf. Likewise, in Numbers 25, Phinehas the Levite proved faithful in zealously defending the Lord's holiness. For the Levites, the covenant of the Lord took priority over all earthly ties, and Levi was entrusted with the priesthood for this reason, guarding and teaching the law and upholding the true worship of the Lord.

Benjamin follows. Benjamin is the son born to the loved wife in her death. He is referred to as the beloved of the Lord, who is given secure rest in the land.

Joseph follows. He is the older brother of Benjamin by Rachel. In Genesis 49, the two great sets of blessings belong to Judah and Joseph.

Here they belong to the Levites and Joseph. Joseph, of course, includes the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. Joseph's blessing is one of the bounty of the fertile earth, but also strength in war and leadership.

Elements of the blessing recall parts of Joseph's blessing in Genesis 49. For instance, in verses 25-26 of that chapter. There are several parallels between this and Deuteronomy chapter 33, verses 13-16, not least the reference to the blessings of the heavens above and the deep that crouches beneath.

In both places, Joseph's blessing focuses upon elements of the fundamental order of creation. One interesting feature of Joseph's blessings is the apparent reference to the Lord as him who dwells in the bush, presumably looking back to the story of the burning bush in Exodus. Zebulun is next.

The blessing of Zebulun includes Issachar. Zebulun was the younger of the two sons, but he comes first here before Issachar. We see these two brothers listed as a pair in this order elsewhere in Genesis 49 and also in the Song of Deborah in Judges 5. Judah and Levi in this chapter and Benjamin and Joseph are also reversed in birth order.

In their blessing, Judah and Issachar are said to enjoy the blessings of the sea, but also to be a territory in which a divine sanctuary would be located, presumably Mount Tabor. Now we move on to Gad. The blessing of Gad might refer to the fact that Gad was one of the tribes that went ahead of the others in taking possession of the land in the



Transjordan region.

Dan is described as a lion's cup, perhaps associated with Gad in some ways, but also with Judah, which is described as a lion in Genesis 49. Woods suggests that Israel is guarded by lion tribes in both the north, where Dan finally ended up, and in the south, where Judah was. Naphtali comes next, and Naphtali is in the far north in the Galilee region.

Asher ends the list. His territory may have been more vulnerable to attack, which might explain the blessing upon bars and strength. The end of the blessings frame the entire central section with the introductory section.

The Lord is the unique God of Jashurun, a warrior god who will give his people security on all sides and richness of blessing in the land. These are the verses on which the main message of the book closes. The Lord is incomparable among the gods.

He will bless his people. He will secure their future for them. He will give them rest in the land.

A question to consider. What are some of the changes that you can see between the blessings of Jacob and the blessings of Moses? What might be the reason for some of these? Deuteronomy chapter 34 is the end of the book of Deuteronomy, but also the end of the Pentateuch. It tells of the end of Moses' life and his death and burial.

Moses is brought up onto the mountain where he can see the land before him. He is shown the land like Abraham is shown the land in Genesis chapter 13 verses 14-15. The Lord said to Abraham, after Lot had separated from him, Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward.

For all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. Moses is described as the servant of the Lord. He is the great servant of the Lord, faithful in all the Lord's house.

He doesn't enter the land though in part because he is just a servant with a particular task, one who proved unfaithful at a key moment. He is not ultimately the hero, the one who accomplishes the extas. Rather the Lord is the one who does this.

The great servant dies before the great work is completed, because it doesn't ultimately depend upon him and his strength, leadership and charisma. It is the work of the Lord. His eyes are undimmed and his vigour unabated.

He retains his vision and he retains his energy. And the two things go together. Moses' energy arises in no small measure from his sense of calling.

Not just physical vision but the spiritual vision of what God has put before Israel and the

need to reach out and grasp it. After Moses dies the people mourn for him for 30 days much as they did for Aaron in Numbers 20. Joshua takes over at this point.

He has the spirit of wisdom as Moses laid his hands on him. Joshua was like a son in relation to Moses. He had been Moses' close personal assistant for almost 40 years from his own youth.

When Moses and the Israelites were at Sinai, Joshua accompanied him up the mountain as his assistant. He is described as his assistant from his youth in Numbers 11. Numbers 13.16 tells us that Joshua's original name was Hoshea and that Moses had renamed him Joshua.

Moses then plays a role relative to Joshua that is similar to that of a father to a son. In Numbers 27.18-23 Joshua had been invested with some of Moses' own authority. Moses previously begged the Lord to let him enter into the land in chapter 3 verses 23-29 and he was told that he would not enter but rather that he would view the land from Pisgah as an alternative to entering.

And I pleaded with the Lord at that time saying, O Lord God, you have only begun to show your servants your greatness and your mighty hand, for what God is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as yourself? Please let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan, that good hill country in Lebanon. But the Lord was angry with me because of you and would not listen to me. And the Lord said to me, Enough from you, do not speak to me of this matter again.

Go up to the top of Pisgah and lift up your eyes westward and northward and southward and eastward, and look at it with your eyes, for you shall not go over this Jordan. But charge Joshua and encourage and strengthen him, for he shall go over at the head of this people, and he shall put them in possession of the land that you shall see. So we remained in the valley opposite Beth Peor.

Why did Moses plead at this particular time? Had something happened that prompted him to do so? Well, earlier this chapter, Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh had just entered into possession of their territory in the trans-Jordan. The character of these tribes is interesting. They seem to be seen as both within and without the land.

The promised land is presented as located on the far side of the Jordan, whereas much of Israel, these two and a half tribes, lived in the trans-Jordan. In Numbers chapter 32, Moses was initially angry with the tribes of Reuben and Gad, because rather than join the other tribes in going over and taking possession of land on the far side of the Jordan, their request for land in the trans-Jordan suggests that they're shrinking back from entering into the promise and discouraging their brothers from doing so. However, that is not their purpose, as it transpires, and they are prepared to fight with their brothers to win the promised land and then to return to their own territory later.

Ammi Silver suggests that there is a connection between the request of the Reubenites and the Gadites and Moses' request to be allowed to enter the land. The Reubenites and the Gadites were part of the nation, but not within the land proper. If it is possible for tribes to remain outside of the land and yet still be part of the nation, why can't Moses, the great leader of the people, himself enter in? However, the destiny of Reuben and Gad being part of the nation, yet settled just outside of the land, is in some way a blessing that the Lord gives to Moses too.

He ends up buried in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth Peel, the same valley that's mentioned in Deuteronomy 3, verse 29. He is buried outside the land, but within a territory of his people. Let's take a small step back at this point.

Why end the book of Deuteronomy with the story of the death of Moses and focusing upon his uniqueness? He doesn't even enter into the land. Why have the final verse about Moses, rather than about Joshua, who's just been commissioned and will lead them into the land? Moses' death is foretold in chapter 32, verses 48-52. These verses introducing the coming death of Moses hang over everything that follows.

It's in this context that Moses delivers his blessing of the people of Israel, of each of the tribes. And then in the final chapter we see coming to pass what is foretold in those verses. Immanuel Shalev observes the expression that very day in verse 48 of chapter 32, which begins the statement about Moses' forthcoming death.

It is not the most common expression, but almost every single time it occurs, it occurs at a critical juncture. When Noah enters into the ark, when Abraham gets circumcised, when Israel leaves Egypt, when Israel eats the fruit of the land for the first time on the day after the Passover in the book of Joshua. Each of these occasions represent a transition from one form of life to another.

It's stepping over a threshold into something new. Something similar seems to be taking place here. Moses' death is a transition from one state to another, not just for Moses himself, but for the entire people of Israel.

In Numbers chapter 19 and 20, the deaths of Miriam and Aaron are presented in terms of the red heifer, a ritual that allows for those who have been held outside of the camp to enter in. And for Israel, that has been held outside of the promised land, to finally find admission. Moses' death, along with Aaron and Miriam's, is also a death that is required before Israel can enter into the land.

Moses was the great intermediary. His death represents the end of the period of Israel's infancy. He brought the law to the people.

Israel does not need a hero to ascend to heaven to bring God's word down to them. It does not need some great adventurer to cross fathomless oceans. With the gift of the

law, the word is now on their mouths and in their hearts.

And at this point, Moses is at risk of being in the way. There are points when an intermediary can bring two people together by standing between them. But there are other points when an intermediary stands in the way, obstructing the way between two parties.

Israel had formerly been tempted to treat Moses as if a god, a lesser god under the greater god of the Lord. The removal of Moses as the intermediary at this point enables Israel to rise into a more mature adult relationship with the Lord as they enter into the promised land. Our passage declares that no other prophet like Moses has arisen in the land.

This is in part in praise of his uniqueness. But it's also a declaration that Moses' purpose has been fulfilled. It does not need to be repeated in the same way.

To have another intermediary like Moses would be a step backwards. Moses is as a shoe that Israel has outgrown. A shoe that once enabled us to run can, after our feet have grown, leave us hobbling rather than sprinting.

The time for Moses and his sort of leadership is passing. And in his place, Joshua must bring something rather different. The site of Moses' final resting place is also unknown.

As a servant, he had served his purpose. However, if his resting place were known, it could become a site of pilgrimage. A sort of cult of Moses could arise.

The removal of Moses at this point, then, and in the way that he is removed, prevents the servant from obstructing his master. The book ends without the entry. Moses is on the tantalising brink of the promised land.

His nose is, as it were, pressed up against the glass looking in. And the reader is left at this point too. The land is right before us.

But it appears not as a secure possession, but as a promise, a calling, and a challenge. At the end of Genesis, which is very similar to this, ending with blessings by Jacob and then the death of Jacob and Joseph, the land is seen as a promise there too. It's presented in terms of promise in the deposit of Jacob's body in the land, as an anticipation of Israel being brought back to the land.

And in Joseph's statement concerning his bones being taken up with Israel and brought into the land. The book ends looking towards the horizon, the horizon of the future. A horizon in which a cloud of divine promise can be seen in the very far distance.

The book of Deuteronomy also ends with looking at a horizon. The horizon here is more immediate. Moses is physically seeing the land.

But even this visible horizon is one that's only truly seen with the eyes of faith. Though right before us, the land appears not as a secured possession, but as a promise, a calling, and a challenge. The way it's been presented throughout the book of Deuteronomy.

Even when in the land, Israel would have to recognise that they still must stand, as if with Moses, just outside of the land looking in. Their possession of the land is always a promise. It's always an unfinished and yet to be realised reality.

Depending upon their fellowship with and faithfulness to the Lord. And on historical occasions such as the ministry of John the Baptist, Israel is called to go outside of the land. To stand on the far side of the Jordan once again.

To recognise that even when they are in the land, in the promised territory, they have not yet fully entered into possession of it. A question to consider. In Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 15 to 19, Moses declares... Earlier on in the book of Deuteronomy then, we're told that the Lord would raise up a prophet like Moses.

At the very end of the book, we read that no prophet like Moses had arisen. We also discussed the way that a prophet like Moses could, rather than standing between the Lord and his people in a way that brought the two closer together, could actually serve to obstruct the maturer relationship that Israel was supposed to enter into. How then could a prophet like Moses arise without causing this problem?