

January 3, 2021

Test of a True Prophet

Deuteronomy 18

BIBLE IN A YEAR READING PLAN

Dec 27	Revelation 4-5	Dec 31	Revelation 20-22
Dec 28	Revelation 9-12	Jan 1	Genesis 1-3
Dec 29	Revelation 13-16	Jan 2	Genesis 4-7
Dec 30	Revelation 17-19	Jan 3	Genesis 8-11

Lesson Idea: We should care for God's ministers, but test their messages and be sure they speak the Lord's Word.

Background: In Deuteronomy 18, God commanded His people to take care of those who facilitated His worship. He also told them to test the prophets and listen only to those who spoke His message. In studying this passage, excerpts from the *Tyndale* and *New Bible Commentaries on Deuteronomy* have been included to help aid our understanding of some of the backgrounds of the passage. New Testament cross references have been included at the end of each section to help apply the principles to a Christian setting.

SECTION 1

Deut. 18:1-8 Provision for the Levites

"The Levitical priests, the whole tribe of Levi, shall not have a portion or inheritance with Israel; they shall eat the LORD'S offerings by fire and His property. 2 They shall not have an inheritance among their countrymen; the LORD is their inheritance, as He promised them.

3 "Now this shall be the priests' portion from the people, from those who offer a sacrifice, either an ox or a sheep: they shall give the priest the shoulder, the two cheeks, and the stomach. 4 You shall give him the first fruits of your grain, your new wine, and your oil, and the first fleece of your sheep. 5 For the LORD your God has chosen him and his sons from all your tribes, to stand to serve in the name of the LORD always.

6 "Now if a Levite comes from any of your towns throughout Israel where he resides, and he comes whenever he desires to the place which the LORD chooses, 7 then he shall serve in the name of the LORD his God, like all his fellow Levites who stand there before the LORD. 8 They shall eat equal portions, except for what they receive from the sale of their fathers' estates.

NOTES

Verses 1-8 give instructions to God's people on how to care for the Levites. They were called out of Israel to minister in the Tabernacle to facilitate the worship of God. As they presented the offerings at the altar, God commanded that they should receive a portion of the food offered as an allotment to meet their daily needs for sustenance.

J.G. McConville *New Bible Commentary on Deuteronomy*

18:1-8 Rights of priests and Levites. The priestly classes are not much in evidence in Deuteronomy, which typically thinks of the people in its wholeness, not according to its inner divisions. However, the present passage safeguards an important principle: those who serve at the place of worship are entitled to their living from the wealth of the land.

Within the tribe of Levi, the priesthood proper was restricted to Aaron and his descendants (Ex. 28:1). The remainder of the tribe—the 'Levites'—were set aside for supporting duties in the tabernacle and temple (Nu. 3:5-10). Deuteronomy is not concerned with the differences between the kinds of 'clergy', but treats the whole levitical tribe as one. It is together, as a tribe, that they are treated differently from the rest of Israel, in that they do not have an inheritance (2)—i.e. a tribal territory.

However, they are by no means to be deprived of their right to a living, because they belong to the 'brotherhood' of Israel (2) just as much as any others. As brothers they 'inherit'. Their living comes in practice, however, from their share of the offerings made at the place of worship by their fellow-Israelites. This is what is really meant by the LORD is their inheritance (2; see also 10:8-9). Their good, therefore, depends on Israel being faithful in their worship of God. (See also Nu. 18, which sets out the dues that fall to priests and Levites more comprehensively.) The principle here applied to the Levites may have a general application to those who are employed by the churches or Christian organizations for various ministries. It implies a commitment on the part of the church membership to provide properly for such people. The only measure of what is 'proper' is the wealth of the church itself, and the principle of 'brotherhood' within it.

J.A. Thompson, *Tyndale Commentary on Deuteronomy*

5. The reason for this special treatment of the priest is now given. He is chosen by Yahweh to minister in Yahweh's name to Israel (cf. 10:8; 21:5). The singular pronoun *him* refers back to the tribe of Levi.

6-8. An important principle is here stated. The rights of all Levites are guaranteed against any possible restrictions imposed by vested interests at the central sanctuary. Such a principle was no doubt as old as the tabernacle. Not only was all Israel required to show generosity towards the Levites, but the priests also were to treat them generously.

These verses do not refer to the Levitical priests (verse 1), but merely to the non-priestly Levite. ...Deuteronomy insists on two things, the centralization of worship as an ideal, and the rights of all the Levites to serve at the central sanctuary if they really desired to do so. In practice such an action would be exceptional. Normally the Levites, along with resident aliens and poor people, were dependent on the charity of their compatriots (12:12, 19;

14:27; 16:11). It was intended that the law . . . should express a principle and an ideal rather than that it should be carried out in detail.

The terminology used to describe the Levitical service, *stand before Yahweh*, occurs also in 10:8; Numbers 16:9; 2 Chronicles 29:11 and Ezekiel 44:11b. The first half of verse 8 reads, *'They shall eat portion for portion'*, i.e. a similar portion.

New Testament Cross References

The New Testament has several passages that emphasize caring for those who minister in the congregation.

1 Corinthians 9:8-14 *8 I am not just asserting these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does the Law not say these things as well? 9 For it is written in the Law of Moses: "You shall not muzzle the ox while it is threshing." God is not concerned about oxen, is He? 10 Or is He speaking entirely for our sake? Yes, it was written for our sake, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing in the crops. 11 If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? 12 If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. 13 Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar? 14 So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.*

Galatians 6:4-6 *4 Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else, 5 for each one should carry their own load. 6 Nevertheless, the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor.*

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 *12 Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. 13 Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.*

Hebrews 13:17 *17 Obey your leaders and submit to them—for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account—so that they may do this with joy, not groaning; for this would be unhelpful for you.*

SECTION 2

Deuteronomy 18:9-14 Don't Do as the Other Nations Do

9 "When you enter the land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. 10 There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, a soothsayer, one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, 11 or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who consults the dead. 12 For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God is going to drive them out before you. 13 You are to be blameless before the LORD your God. 14 For these nations, which you are going to dispossess,

listen to soothsayers and diviners, but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do so.

NOTES

In verses 9-14 Moses warns the people again about compromising their beliefs with those of the idolaters around them. He tells them that the LORD found their practices *detestable*. God was driving the other nations out of the land because of these abominations. God does not allow His people to *listen to soothsayers and diviners* (v 14). Why would we seek anyone else, when we have the Spirit of the Living God within us, and we *have the mind of Christ* (1 Corinthians 2:16).

J.G. McConville New Bible Commentary on Deuteronomy

18:9-22 Knowing God's will. The need to know the will of God on specific occasions (e.g. in time of war) was keenly felt in ancient times, and the nations around Israel had devised various magical procedures for finding it out. These included examining the entrails of birds and animals for omens, consulting the dead (11) and apparently even the sacrifice of children (10). Magic could be used to try to affect the course of events as well as simply to gain information.

All such practices are condemned in our passage. They are regarded as detestable along with Canaanite religious practices in general (7:25-26; 12:31). The use of magic emphasizes the skill of the 'knower', tampers with areas which God has ruled out of bounds, and lays the person open to influence from destructive powers. Among the people of God, in contrast, it is sufficient to know what God clearly speaks. This he has done through his word, and will go on doing, on special occasions, through his prophets. (For the stress on knowledge of God by his word, see 4:6-8, 9-14.)

J.A. Thompson, Tyndale Commentary on Deuteronomy

The prophets (18:9-22). The polytheistic nations that surrounded Israel were given to all kinds of magical and superstitious practices designed to discover the will of the gods, or even to compel the gods to action in certain ways. All such practices were forbidden in Israel as being an abomination to Yahweh. However, Yahweh would make his will known through his prophets, whose words would be clearly understandable to the people in contrast with the ambiguous and mysterious 'revelations' of those who worked with magic and divination. The comprehensive law about the prophets is presented in a simple literary arrangement. First of all the forbidden practices are enumerated (9-14). Then the office of a prophet is explained (15-18), and finally reference is made to those who reject the prophetic word or who corrupt the prophetic office (19-22).

9. All occult, superstitions, divination, sorcery, spiritualism, etc., were abominations (9, 12) to Yahweh and invited his judgment (cf. 7:1ff.). The practice of consulting unseen powers by these devices was tantamount to acknowledging a power other than Yahweh, and this was rebellion.

10, 11. The first prohibited practice was that of making children walk through the fire. The exact nature of this practice is not known. It may have been merely a kind of trial by ordeal, or a magical test. While this was of no value for divination, its magical value might explain its presence in the list (cf. Lev. 18:21; 20:2–5). In some other passages in the Old Testament also the practice is connected with the god Molech (2 Kgs 23:10; Jer. 32:35 and perhaps 7:31). . . . Next in this list are three terms which describe various practitioners of the art of divination.

Two terms follow which seem to denote different forms of magic. The first, RSV *sorcerer*, derived from the root ‘to cut up’, may denote one who cuts up herbs and brews them for magical purposes (cf. LXX [Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament] *pharmaka*, drug). The term is used in Micah 5:12 for some such material as drugs or herbs used superstitiously to produce magical effects. The noun, therefore, means *enchanter or sorcerer* (cf. Exod. 7:11; 22:18; 2 Chr. 33:6; Dan. 2:2; Mal. 3:5). The second term means literally ‘one who ties knots’, i.e. one who binds another by magic knots or magic spells, hence a charmer.

The last three terms relate to various forms of consulting the spirit world. The first two refer to those who consult or inquire of the spirits . . . The third term denotes ‘one who enquires of the dead’. In Isaiah 8:19 the term seems to be synonymous with the first two terms in the present passage, so that it may be a typical summing up phrase so characteristic of Deuteronomy. Otherwise it seems to denote a necromancer.

12–14. Not only are these practices an abomination to Yahweh, but anyone who practices them is likewise an abomination. Because of such practices Yahweh would dispossess the people of Canaan. Israel, however, must be blameless in regard to every form of divination, magic or spiritism.

It may be pertinent to comment that in our own day, when spiritualism, astrology, teacup reading and the like are widely practiced, these injunctions given to ancient Israel have a particular relevance. Not only is it impossible to discover the future by such practices, but the practices themselves are forbidden by God to men who count themselves members of the covenant family. God has other ways of making his will known to his people, in which he retains the initiative and is able to speak his word. The classical prophets were men who received a direct message (word) from God – a very different procedure from the reading of the signs of the times in the entrails of beasts, the flight of birds, the falling of leaves, etc. God

gave his direct personal word to the prophet without ambiguity (18). Hence he disapproved of all the procedures listed in verses 10 and 11 which are described as abominable practices.⁹⁷

New Testament Cross References

Romans 16:17-18 *I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.*

2 Corinthians 11:12-15 *And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.*

2 Timothy 4:3-4 *For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.*

2 Peter 2:1-3 *But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.*

SECTION 3

Deuteronomy 18:15-22 Listen to the Right Voices

15 *“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen; to him you shall listen.* **16** *This is in accordance with everything that you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Do not let me hear the voice of the LORD my God again, and do not let me see this great fire anymore, or I will die!’* **17** *And the LORD said to me, ‘They have spoken well.* **18** *I will raise up for them a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them everything that I command him.* **19** *And it shall come about that whoever does not listen to My words which he speaks in My name, I Myself will require it of him.* **20** *But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name, a word which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.’* **21** *And if you say in your heart, ‘How will we recognize the word which the LORD has not spoken?’* **22** *When the prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, and the thing does not happen or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you are not to be afraid of him.*

NOTES

God never leaves His people without the ability to hear His Word. He is a God who reveals Himself. In the Old Testament He spoke through prophets. Moses instructed the people of God to listen only to true prophets. Eventually, God revealed Himself fully through His Son, Jesus Christ (see Hebrews 1:1-2). He reveals Himself now through His Word and the indwelling Holy Spirit (see John 14:26).

J.G. McConville New Bible Commentary on Deuteronomy

The first and foremost prophet of Israel was Moses himself. He it was who spoke God's word when the covenant was being made at first on Mt Horeb. The people themselves, in their fear, had demanded such a mediator (16; cf. 5:23-27). The question now arises, however, how will the ministry of Moses be continued in Israel? The assurance comes that, though Moses himself must die in due course, he will have successors (18).

That the passage has a number of future prophets in mind (rather than one only) is clear from vs 20-22 where the issue is how false prophets may be distinguished from true ones. However, the 'Messianic' interpretation of 18:18, according to which Jesus is the promised prophet, is justified, because he spoke God's word in a wholly new and authoritative way (see Acts 3:22-23).

The final verses (20-22) ask how a true prophet may be known from a false one. The answer in v 22 is that a false prophet's words will not come true. This answer posed its own difficulties. Jeremiah faced the problem of recognition acutely, and his words did not come true until many years after he had begun to preach. However, in practice, a prophet's genuineness would in many cases be recognizable over a period of ministry. (Notice the test-case in Je. 28.) There is an important sense in which the message of God makes itself known to those who are willing to hear.

J.A. Thompson, Tyndale Commentary on Deuteronomy

15-22. . . The sense of the passage is that a succession of prophets would arise to continue the work of Moses who surpassed them all (34:10). In later times, particularly after the cessation of prophecy, an individual interpretation was given to this passage and '*the prophet who should come*' became a figure associated with the Messianic age and sometimes identified with the Messiah himself (cf. John 1:21, 45; 6:14; 7:40; Acts 3:20-22; 7:37, etc.). This passage is of particular interest as being the only one in the Torah which establishes prophecy as an institution of Yahweh in Israel.

15. The prophet would be *an Israelite from among you* and not a foreigner (Num. 22:5f.; Isa. 2:6). He would be like Moses in the sense that he was Yahweh's spokesman, but not in any sense of equality.

16, 17. The place of the prophet in Israel could be understood in terms of the incident at Horeb (Sinai), when the people pleaded with Moses to meet God on their behalf and to bring the word of God to them from the mountain burning with fire (5:22-31; Exod. 20:18-21).

18. God's method with his prophets was *I will put my words in his mouth* (Jer. 1:9; 5:14; 20:8, 9, etc.). It is Yahweh who commissions and sends forth the prophet (Isa. 6:8). For that reason the prophet could say '*Thus saith the Lord*'.

19. An obligation rested on Israel to be obedient to the words of the prophet, for these were Yahweh's words.

20-22. Compare 13:1-5. A true prophet always urged loyalty to the covenant as well as giving reliable predictions. Adherence to what God had revealed was expected of a true prophet. There was no magic in the prophet's words and actions.

But one of the problems associated with the whole prophetic movement was the false prophet, for although the true prophet had a deep sense of divine commission, not all who claimed this were genuine prophets of Yahweh. It was easier for a man to make the claim than to authenticate it. Two answers are provided here. First, the words of the true prophet come to pass (cf. 1 Kgs 22:26-28; Jer. 28). But this evidence could sometimes be matched by the false prophet. The difference was that, whereas the true prophet spoke for God, the false prophet spoke presumptuously, i.e. he blurted out personal opinions for which there was no backing from Yahweh. Often the desire to please men lay behind such utterances (Isa. 30:10, 11; Jer. 14:14, 15; 23:16, 21-27, 30-33; 27:9, 10, 14-16; Mic. 2:11; 3:11, etc.). A second proof of genuineness was that, whereas the true prophet spoke in the name of Yahweh, the false prophet spoke in the name of other gods, enticing people to idolatry (cf. 13:1-5).

For other answers to the problem see Jeremiah 23:9-32; Ezekiel 13. The case of the non-fulfilment of the words of a true prophet was particularly difficult (Exod. 32:14; Jer. 18:7-10; 26:19; Joel 2:13f.; Amos 5:15; 7:3, 6; Jon. 3:9f.).

New Testament Cross References

Matthew 7:15 *Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 ¹⁹ *Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not treat prophecies with contempt²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil.*

Hebrews 1:1-2 ¹ *God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, ² in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom He also made the world.*

1 John 4:1 *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.*