

Deuteronomy

Lesson #10

The Deuteronomomic Code, Part 2

(14: 1 – 18: 22)

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Review

As we moved into Lesson #9, we encountered the main body of Moses' 2nd Discourse, 12: 1 – 26: 15, a collection of laws, statutes and ordinances that comprise the essentials of Israel's communal lifestyle: its collective worship, its governing structures, its judicial principles, and its liturgical forms.

Importantly, the *motive* for obeying these laws, statutes and ordinances is *love*, not the hope for reward or the fear of punishment. Deuteronomy's legal corpus enunciates the "rules of the house" for God's family, much as the "Manual of Discipline" offered a coherent structure for the Essene community at Qumran or St. Benedict's "Rule" offered a coherent structure for Benedictine monastic life.

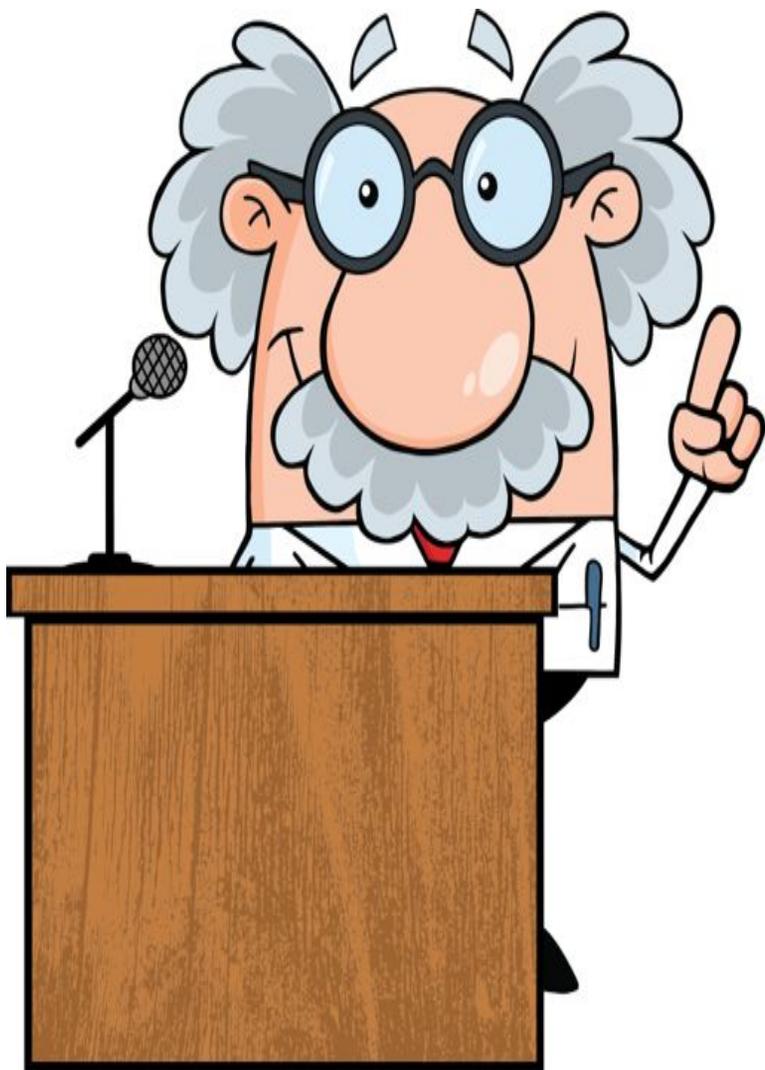
Preview

As we observed previously, the vast body of laws, statutes and ordinances contained in Deuteronomy 12-26 mirrors the sequence of the Ten Commandments. Chapters 12-13 reflected the first two commandments:

1. You shall have no other gods before me; and
2. You shall make no graven images of me.

As we move into Lesson #10 we cover Deuteronomy 14-18, which mirrors the third through the fifth commandments:

3. You shall not take the Lord's name in vain;
4. You shall remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy; and
5. You shall honor your father and your mother.



“You shall not take the Lord’s name in vain.”

(Deuteronomy 5: 11).

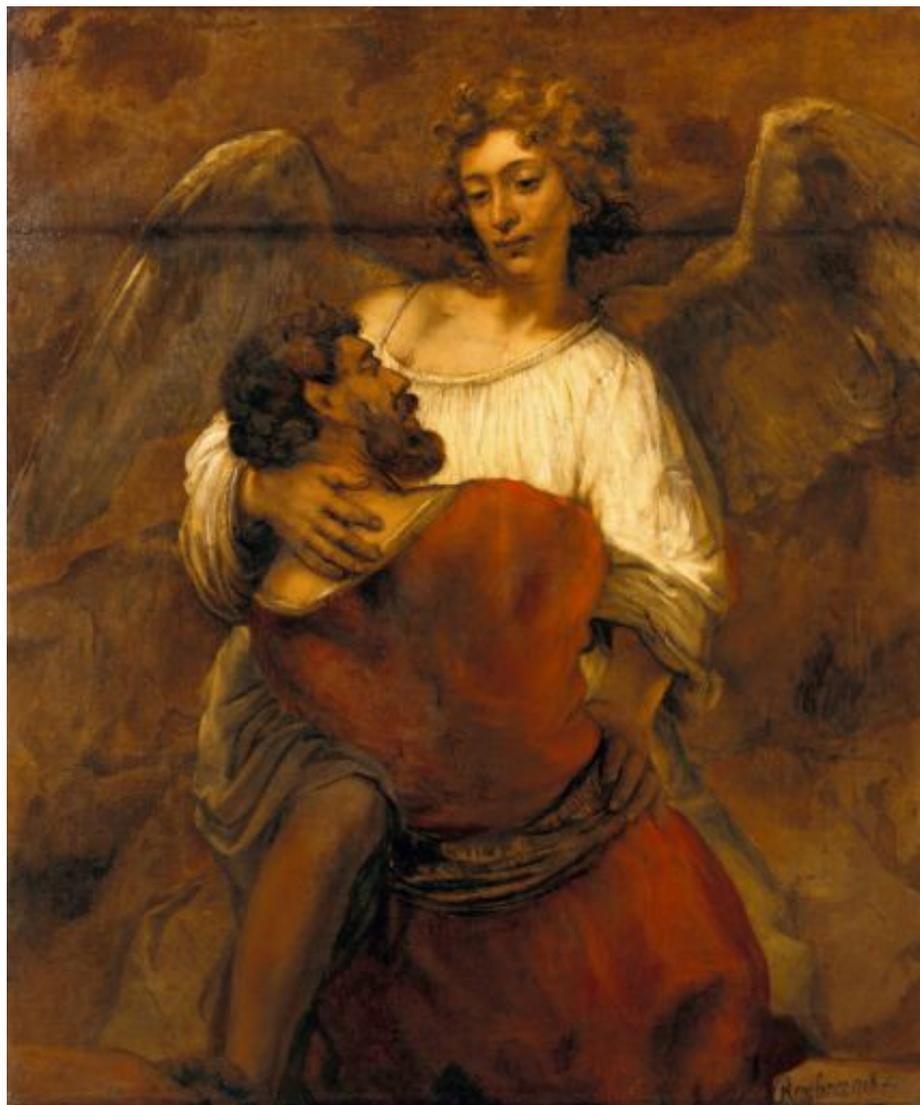
The Hebrew word translated “vain” is *shav*, and its meaning ranges from “falsely” or “deceitfully” to “empty” or “worthless.”

In the Hebrew Scriptures a person’s *name* [*shem*] embodies the very essence of who he or she is. Recall that God changes Abram’s name to “Abraham,” meaning “Father of many” (Genesis 17: 5), and he changes Sarai’s name to “Sarah,” meaning “Princess” (Genesis 17: 15).

Later God changes Jacob’s name (“supplanter” or “deceiver”) to “Israel,” meaning “he who struggles with God” (Genesis 32: 28).



**James Tissot. *Abram's Counsel to Sarai* (gouache on board), c. 1896-1902.
Jewish Museum, New York.**



**Rembrandt. *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (oil on canvas), c. 1659.
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.**



Abraham's and Sarah's new names reflect their new identities as the founders of many people. As God said to Abraham: *"Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can." 'Just so,' he added, 'will your descendants be'"* (Genesis 15: 5).

Abraham and Sarah become the parents of Isaac; Isaac and Rebekah become the parents of Jacob and Esau; Jacob and his wives and their servant girls become the parents of twelve sons, who become the founders of the 12 tribes of Israel . . . and 500 years later they number nearly 2 million people at the time of the Exodus.

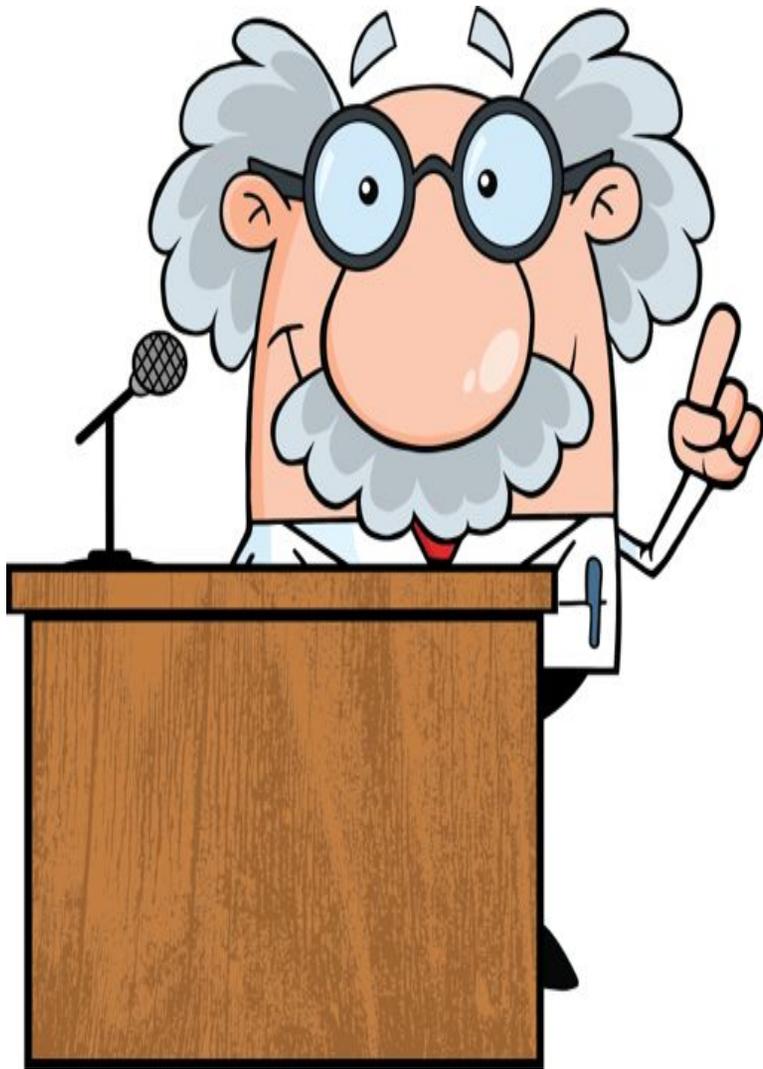
"Father of many" and "princess," indeed!



“Abraham and Sarah” [AKA, Ana and her friend at Haran, eastern Turkey].

Photography by Ana Maria Vargas

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The significance of a person's name is best illustrated, however, when Moses asks God's name:

“Moses said to God: “If I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘the God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what do I tell them?’ God replied to Moses: ‘**I am who I am.**’ Then he added: ‘This is what you will tell the Israelites: **I AM** has sent me to you.’”

“God spoke further to Moses: ‘This is what you will say to the Israelites: The Lord [**YHWH**], the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever; this is my title for all generations.’”

(Genesis 3: 13-15)



God's name is rather cryptic here, shimmering with mystery and "otherness." Although the wordplay of "*I am who I am*" resists unraveling, it is etymologically related to the verb "to be"; that is, *pure being*, a statement of *life* in its purest, clearest most profound and eternal sense. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) renders the phrase $\epsilon\gamma\acute{\omega} \epsilon\acute{\iota}\mu\iota \acute{\omicron} \acute{\omega}\nu$, "*I am the One who is*," the $\acute{\omega}\nu$ being the participle of the verb "to be." The early Church Fathers understood this to be an assertion of God's eternal self-existence.

When God says "*say to the Israelites: The Lord . . . has sent me to you*" (3: 15), he uses the tetragrammaton, YHWH, a name that we learned in our study of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6: 4-9) is so infinitely holy and sacred that it is not to be voiced, saying instead "Adonai," "the Lord."



I have a feeling, though, that this is not enough for Moses. As Moses grows closer to God, more intimate with him, a philosophical and grammatical understanding of his “name” is far too abstract. Moses wants to see God, to stand in his presence and speak to him “face-to-face.”

I'd sure like to see God face-to-face! I'd wag my tail so hard it would probably fall off!

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“Then Moses said [to God], ‘Please let me see your glory!’ The Lord answered: I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim my name, ‘Lord’ [YHWH], before you; I who show favor to whom I will, I who grant mercy to whom I will. But you cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live. Here, continued the Lord, is a place near me where you shall station yourself on the rock. When my glory passes I will set you in the cleft of the rock and will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand, so that you may see my back; but my face may not be seen.”

(Exodus 33: 18-23)

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The shimmering mystery and “otherness” of God’s name hinted at in Exodus 3 throbs with a visceral expectation here as Moses awaits the numinous presence of YHWH, while tucked in the cleft of a rock.

But the experience is fleeting, like a shadow passing in the night, the whisper of a dream upon awakening, or a gossamer veil brushing one’s face in a dark room.

And yet, when Moses came down from the mountain “*his face was radiant*” (Exodus 34: 35).



Elijah has a similar experience. Exhausted, spent from his ordeal with the prophets of Baal at Mt. Carmel, Elijah flees to Horeb, to Mount Sinai and the very place where Moses encountered God:

“The word of the Lord came him: ‘Why are you’re here, Elijah?’ He answered: ‘I have been most zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, but the Israelites have forsaken your covenant. They have destroyed your altars and murdered your prophets by the sword. I alone remain and they seek to take my life.’ Then the Lord said: ‘Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord; the Lord will pass by. There was a strong and violent wind rending the mountains and crushing rocks before the Lord—but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake—but the Lord was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake, fire—but the Lord was not in the fire; after the fire, a light silent sound.”

(12: 4-7)

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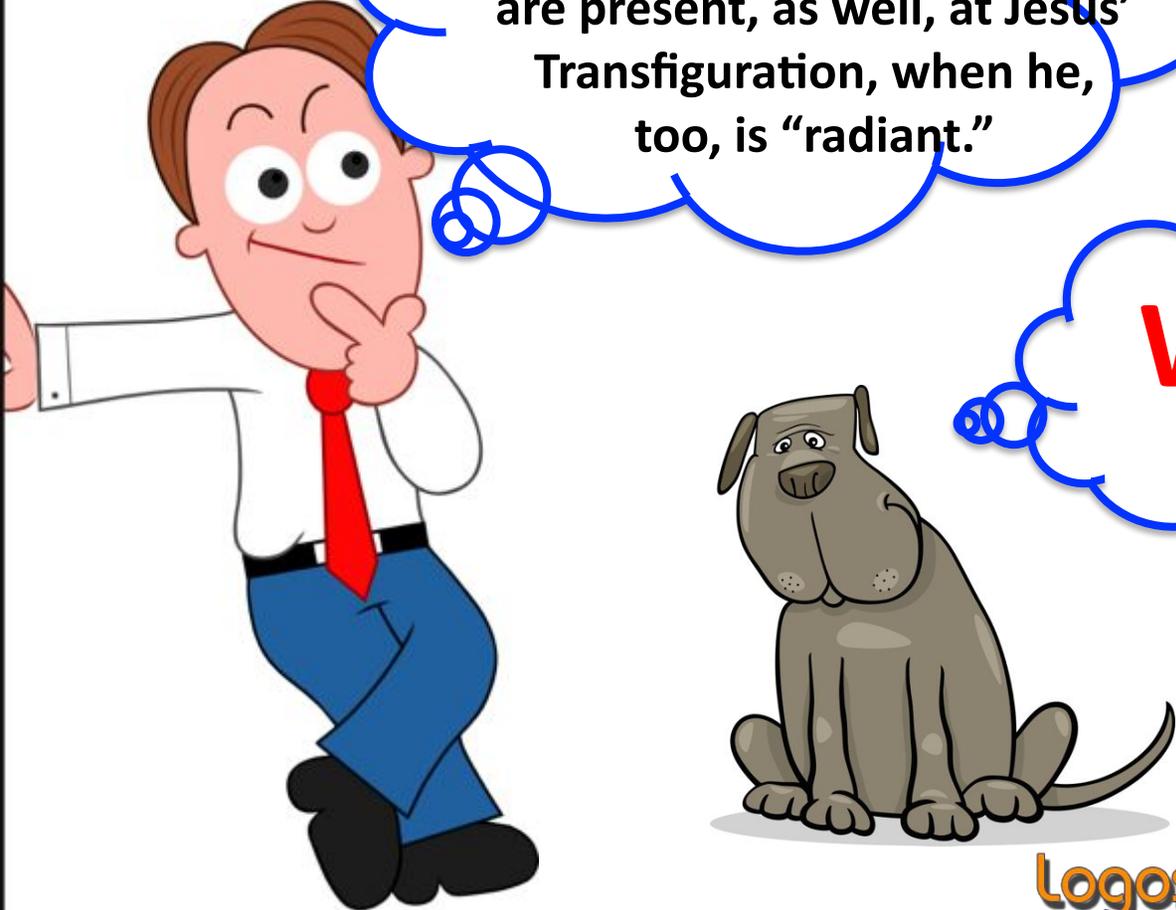


**Guercino. *Elijah Fed by Ravens* (oil on canvas), c. 1620.
National Gallery, London.**



Various phenomena at Mount Sinai—earthquakes, wind, fire, thunder and lightning—accompany God’s presence, but they do not constitute God’s presence in and of themselves. Like Elijah’s “light silent sound” (or the “still, small voice,” as its traditionally rendered), God’s numinous, shimmering and mysterious presence is ultimately beyond our reach.

When God tells the Israelites to “*seek out the place which the Lord, your God, chooses out of all your tribes and designates as his dwelling to put his name there*” (12: 5), he will not be physically present in that place; rather, his name will be present, like Elijah’s “still, small voice,” or like a gossamer veil brushing Moses’ face.



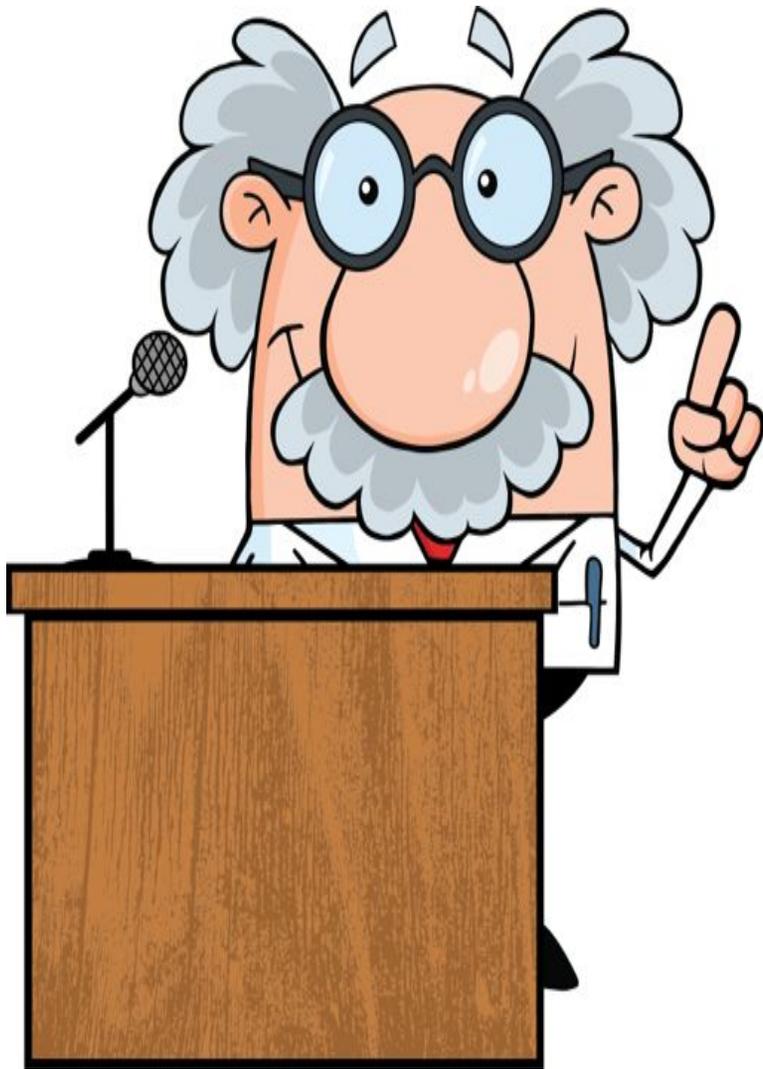
Both Moses and Elijah stand in the presence of God's name. And recall, Moses and Elijah are present, as well, at Jesus' Transfiguration, when he, too, is "radiant."

Wow!

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**Carl Heinrich Bloch. *Transfiguration of Jesus* (oil on copper), 1872.
Frederiksborg Castle, Museum of National History, Denmark.**



Understanding God's name as a mode of his presence, not as a manifestation of God himself, is key to understanding the practices prescribed in Deuteronomy 14, for they are at first elusive.

The Israelites stand within the one place on earth where God has chosen for his name to dwell, and the Israelites are not to take that name in vain.

The opening verses of Deuteronomy 14 are instructive:

“You are children of the Lord, your God. You shall not gash yourselves nor shave the hair above your foreheads for the dead. For you are a people holy to the Lord, your God; the Lord, your God, has chosen you from all the peoples on the face of the earth to be a people specially his own.”

(14: 1-2)



Two things are important here: the Israelites are *“children of the Lord . . . chosen . . . from all the peoples on the face of the earth to be a people specially his own,”* a people who live in the presence of God’s name. Consequently, they are not to take that name in vain, as something empty, or even worse, false or deceitful. With great privilege comes great responsibility.



Second, YHWH is a God of life, and anything smacking of death is antithetical to his very being. Thus, God's people are not to gash themselves or shave the hair above their foreheads in the presence of death, as acts of mourning. These are pagan practices, those of the people who preceded the Israelites in the land. Bearing God's name requires celebrating life, not mourning death through permanent or temporary disfigurement.



In the Elijah story, didn't the prophets of Baal slash themselves as they did a "hopping dance" around the altar, calling upon their god?



Yes, but it was part of their ritual, not a mourning rite. In grief, the people of Moab, though, wailed, shaved their heads and sheared off their beards (Isaiah 15: 2).

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“Elijah then said to the prophets of Baal, ‘Choose one young bull and prepare it first, for there are more of you. Call upon your gods, but do not start the fire.’ Taking the young bull that was turned over to them, they prepared it and called upon Baal from morning to noon, saying, ‘Baal, answer us!’ But there was no sound, and no one answering. And they hopped around the altar they had prepared. When it was noon, Elijah taunted them: ‘Call louder, for he is a god; he may be away doing his business, or may be on a journey. Perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.’ They called out louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears according to their ritual until blood gushed over them . . .”

(1 Kings 18: 25-28)

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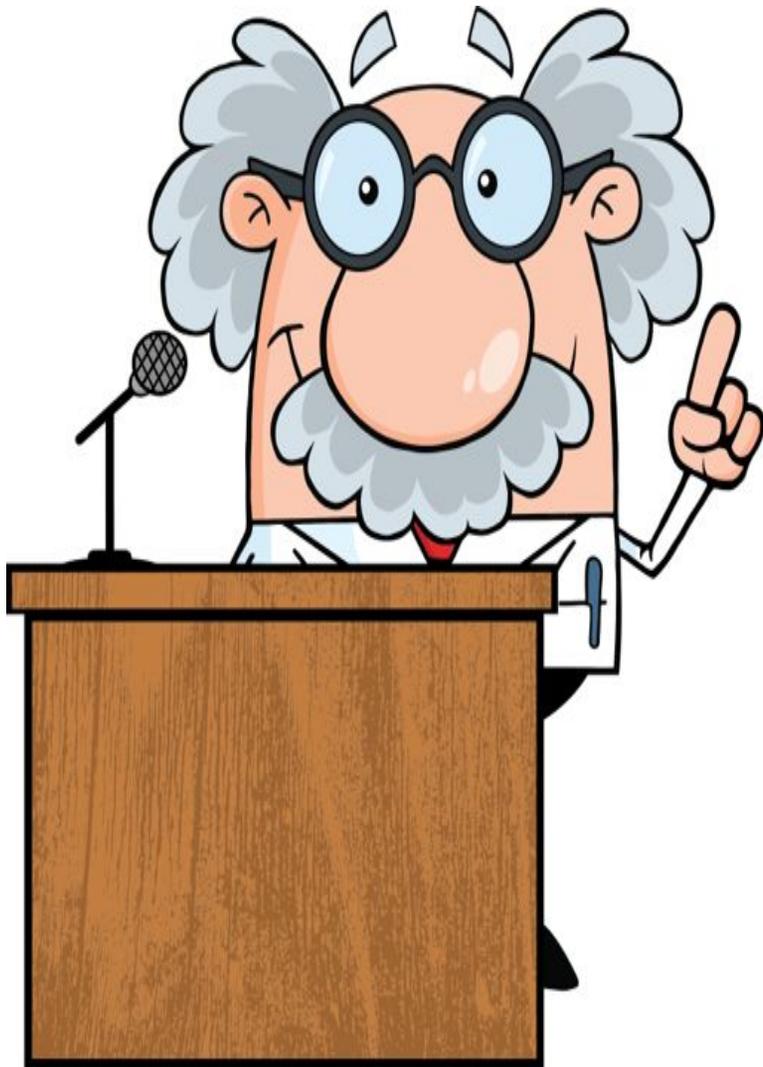
Zach Franzen. *Elijah and the Prophets of Baal* (ink on paper), 2010.
Used by permission of Zach Franzen. You can view Zach's excellent work at zachfranzen.com.



When a person died, it was common for the Israelites to express their grief by rending their garments, disheveling their hair and tossing dust on their heads, temporary outward signs of mourning that recognized the loss of a loved one.

But the Israelites were not to shave their heads or permanently disfigure themselves, lasting signs of death.

As Jesus said, God is *“not the God of the dead but of the living”* (Matthew 22: 32). Although it is right and proper to recognize the reality of death, one must then move on to celebrate life and to live it fully and joyfully.



The same principle holds true in the food God's people may and may not eat.

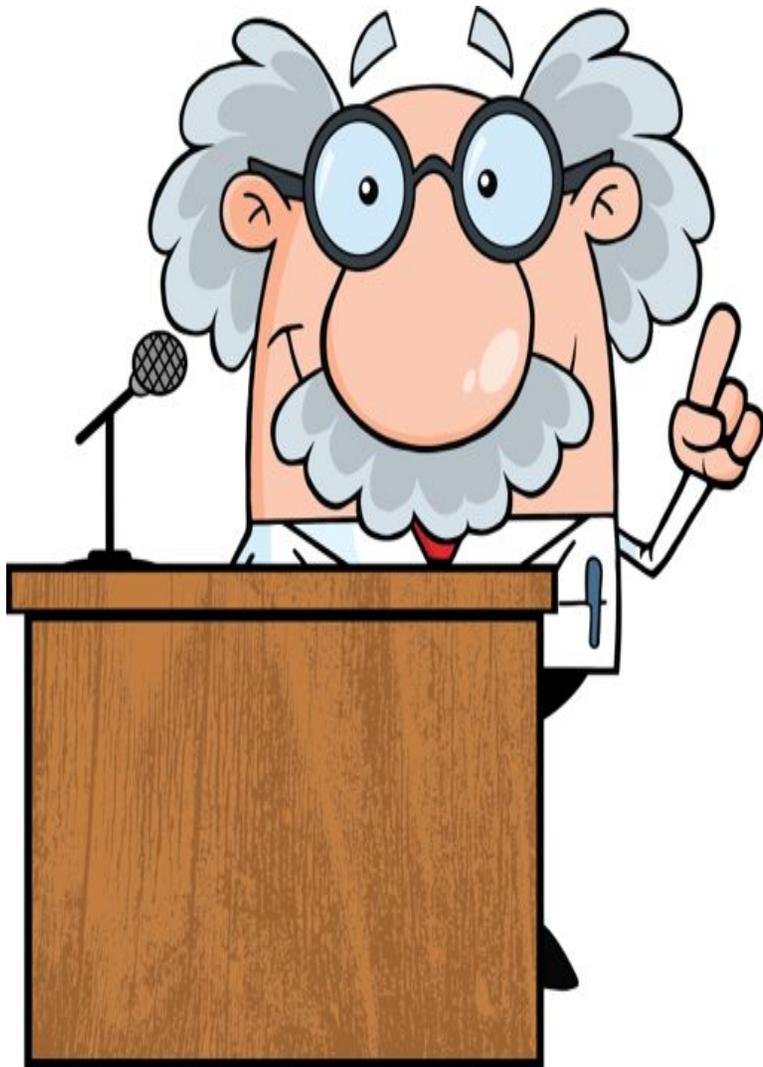
Famously, *“you shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk”* (14: 21b). A mother giving birth and feeding her young with her own milk is a vivid symbol of life; conversely, boiling a young goat in its mother's milk, is a grotesque, searing symbol of death.

In the most elemental sense, the dietary restrictions we read in Deuteronomy 14 reflect God's profound love of life, and they provide day-by-day training for the Israelites —God's “children”—to do the same.

In the end, all of the dietary restrictions we find in Deuteronomy keep life and death from mixing, keep a young goat out of its mother's milk.



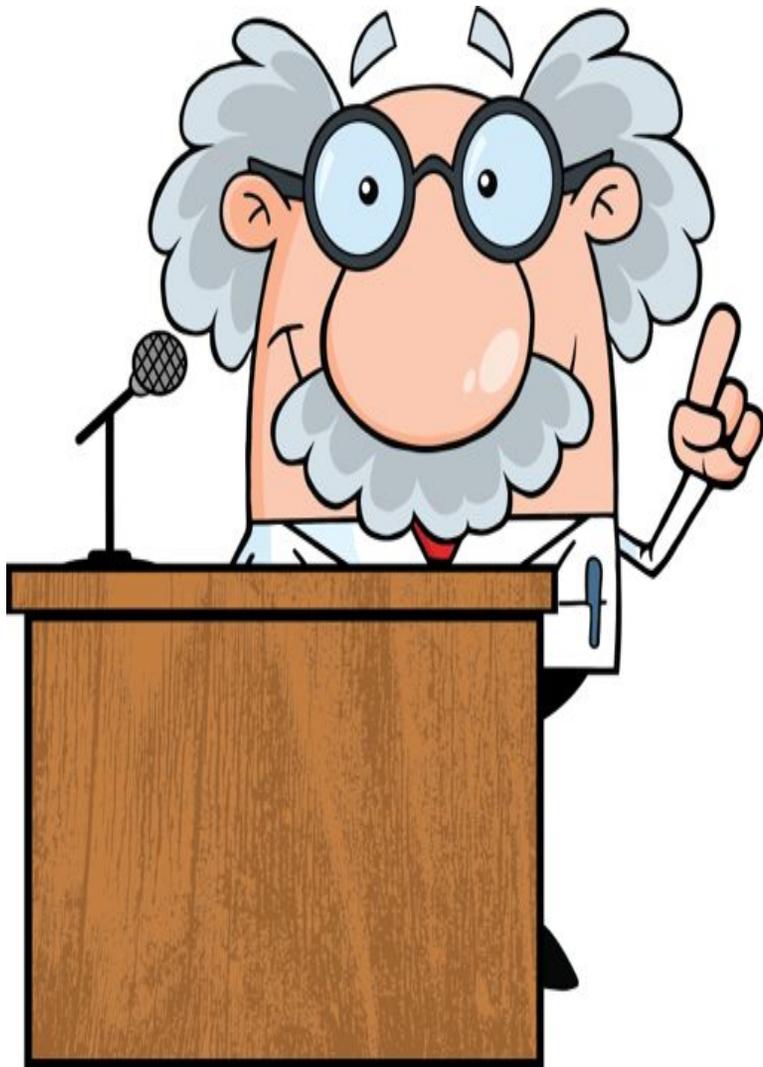
And that's why cheeseburgers are not kosher. You never know if the cheese on that burger came from the milk of the cow who bore the calf that you are eating. Better to be safe than sorry!



Tithes may seem to have little in common with dietary restrictions, but they come next in Deuteronomy 14:

“Each year you shall tithe all the produce of your seed that grows in the field; then in the place which the Lord, your God, chooses as the dwelling place of his name you shall eat in his presence the tithe of your grain, wine and oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, that you may learn always to fear the Lord, your God.”

(14: 22-25)



Tithes of the first fruits and firstborn link the fertile land beneath your feet to the magnanimous God in heaven above, an unbroken continuum in which the Israelites participate.

The annual tithes mark a festival, a great celebration, in which the Israelites banquet together in the presence of the name.

What's more . . .

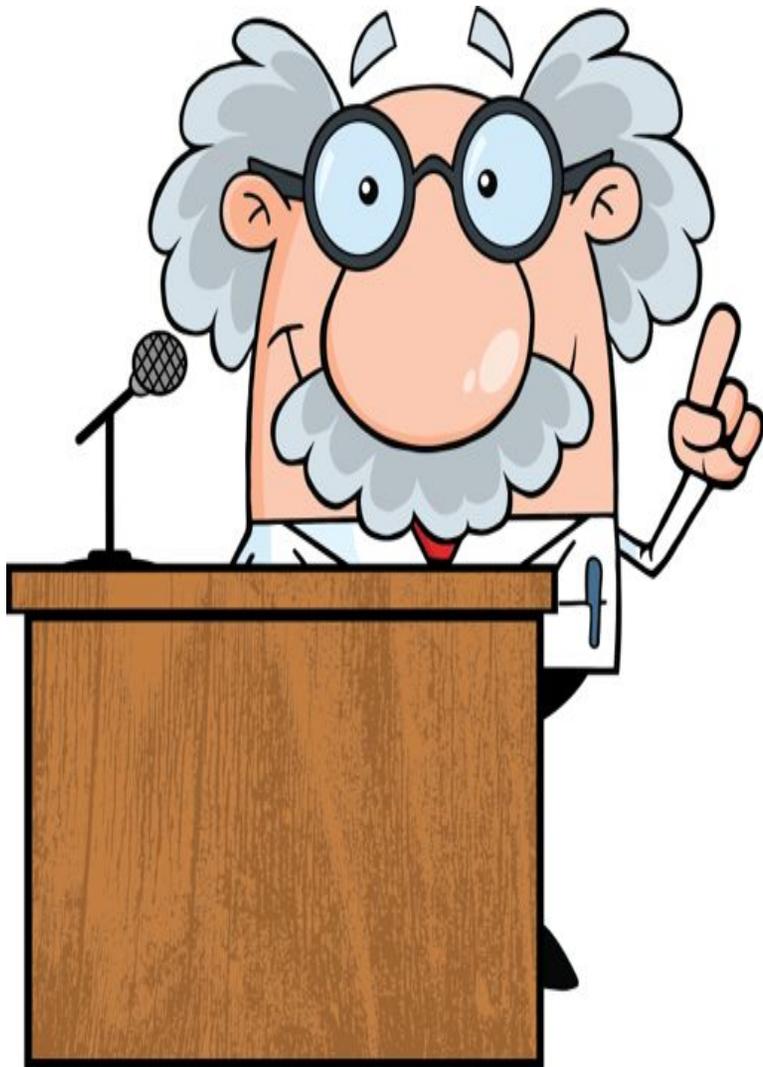
“At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithes of your produce for that year and deposit them within your own communities, that the Levite who has no hereditary portion with you, and also the resident alien, the orphan and the widow within your gates, may come and eat and be satisfied; so that the Lord, your God, may bless you in all that you undertake.”

(14: 28-29)



God calls Israel to be *holy*, a land and a people inextricably linked to God through the presence of his name, and to one another.

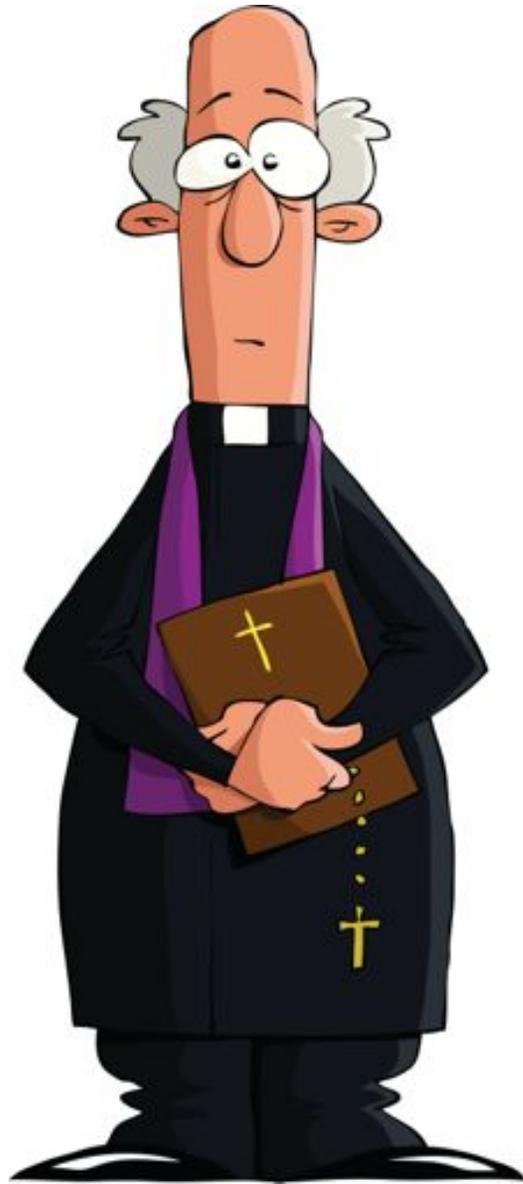
The implications are profound. Israel is to be a *just* society, an agricultural economy in which every member participates and benefits, even those without access to land, such as the Levites, resident aliens, orphans and widows. They are to be cared for and blessed, as are all the “children” of God’s family.



And that leads us to Deuteronomy 15 and the fourth commandment:

“You shall remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.”

The Sabbath is a day of “rest,” in the fullest sense of that word. It is not simply the absence of work; rather, it provides sacred “breathing room” during which one draws closer to God, a time in which one becomes fully human, experiencing the dignity and delight of living in community in God’s family as brothers and sisters.



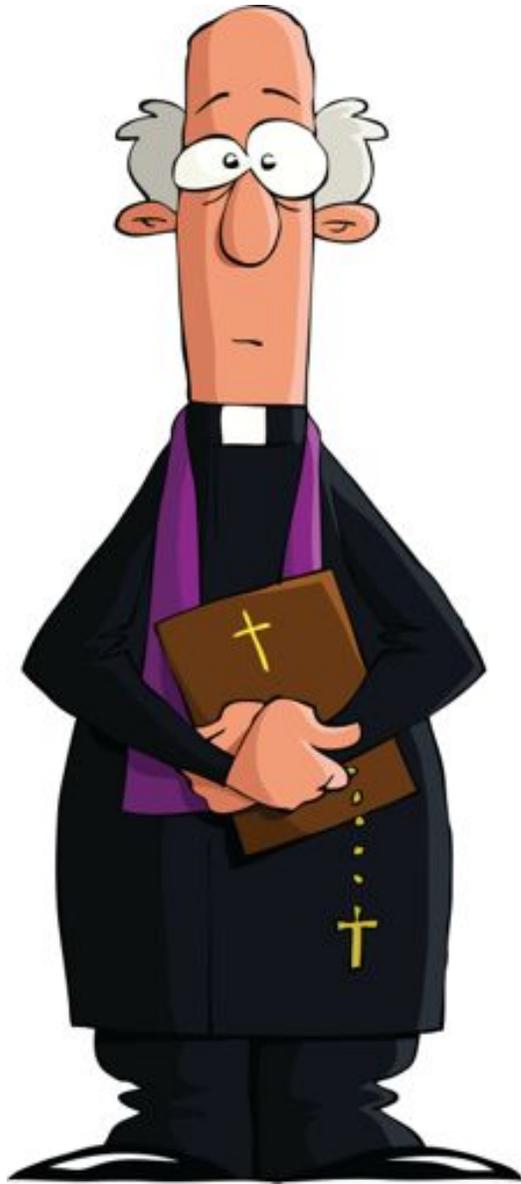
When God led Israel out of Egyptian slavery and into the Promised Land, he led them to a freedom that is not bound by self-concern and ambition, not shackled by swollen egos and a lust for power; but rather, a freedom that delights in love and mercy, a freedom that abhors oppression in any form.

As every seventh day is a Sabbath day, so every seventh year is a Sabbath year, in which all personal debts are remitted, canceled:

“At the end of every seven-year period you shall have a remission of debts, and this is the manner of the remission. Creditors shall remit all claims on loans made to a neighbor, not pressing the neighbor, one who is kin, because the Lord’s remission has been proclaimed. You may press a foreigner, but you shall remit the claim on what your kin owes to you If one of your kindred is in need in any community in the land which the Lord, your God, is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor close your hand against your kin who is in need. Instead, you shall freely open your hand and generously lend what suffices to meet that need. Be careful not to entertain the mean thought, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ so that you would begrudge your kin who is in need and give nothing”

(15: 1-9)

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Canceling all personal debts every seven years may seem extreme and impractical, but as Steven L. Cook so eloquently puts it:

“For God to oppose Egyptian slavery is for God to side with life and dignity. Taking this stand, God puts the brakes of Sabbath on crushing debt (15: 1-11), on servitude (15: 12-18), on possessiveness (15: 19-23), and even on any extended time away from togetherness in worship (16: 1-17). Together, these ‘speed limits’ constitute a powerfully concrete system of supporting all Israelite brothers’ and sisters’ dignity and membership in community. They sound a collective ‘no’ to the slave-spirit of Egypt.”¹

¹ *Reading Deuteronomy, a Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys Publishers, Inc., 2015), p. 129.



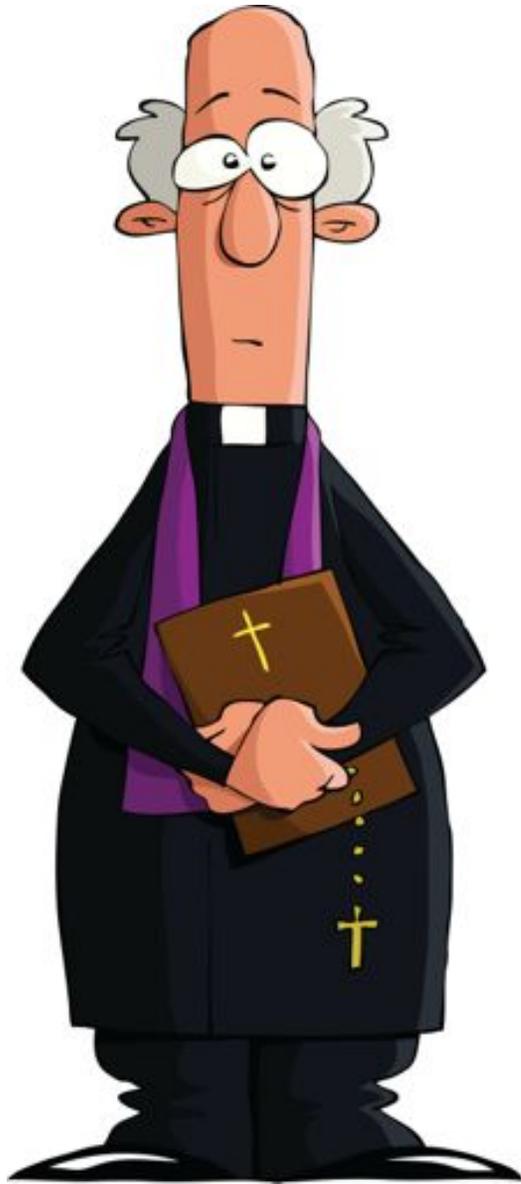
Life lived as a people of God, “children” in God’s family, transcends the values of the mundane world—both in Moses’ day and in ours.

Life in God’s family has more lofty dreams than mere free enterprise, the accumulation of wealth, the possession of material goods, and the false sense of security offered by full silos, bigger barns and cash generated by shrewd loans made to people in great need.

As Jesus said in the parable of the rich fool:

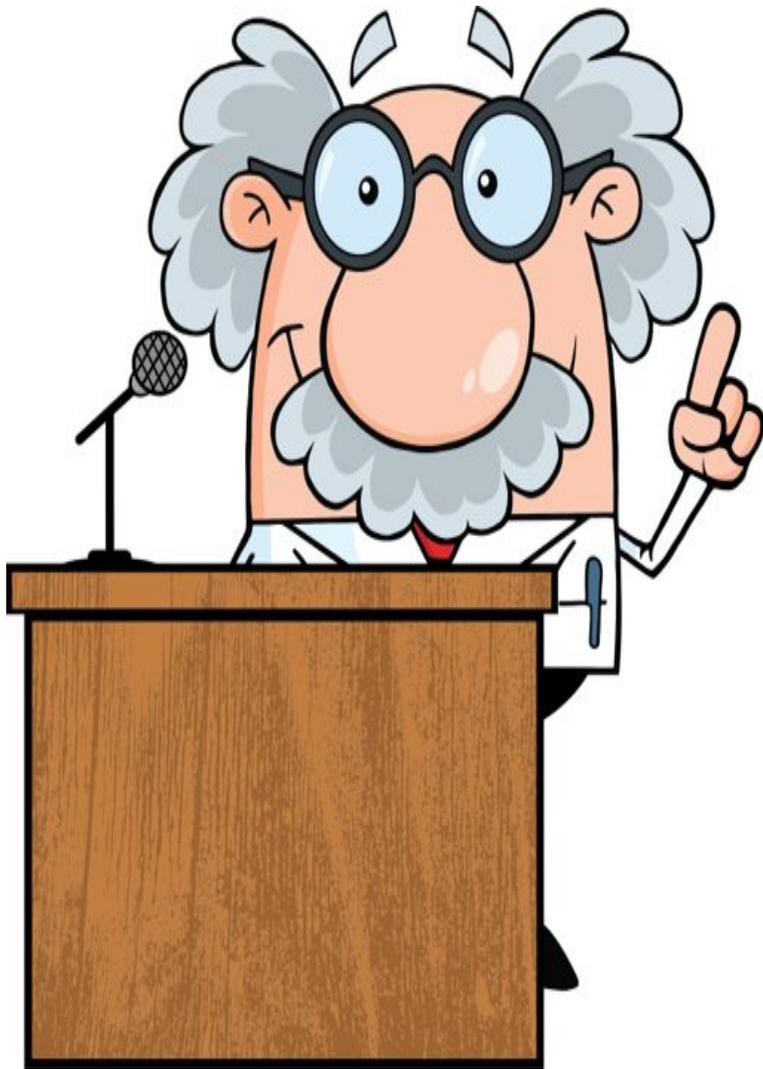
“There was a rich man whose land produced a bountiful harvest. He asked himself, ‘What shall I do, for I do not have space to store my harvest?’ And he said, ‘This is what I shall do: I shall tear down my barns and build bigger ones. There I shall store all my grain and other goods and I shall say to myself, ‘Now as for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!’ But God said to him, ‘You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?’ Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God.”

(Luke 12: 16-21)



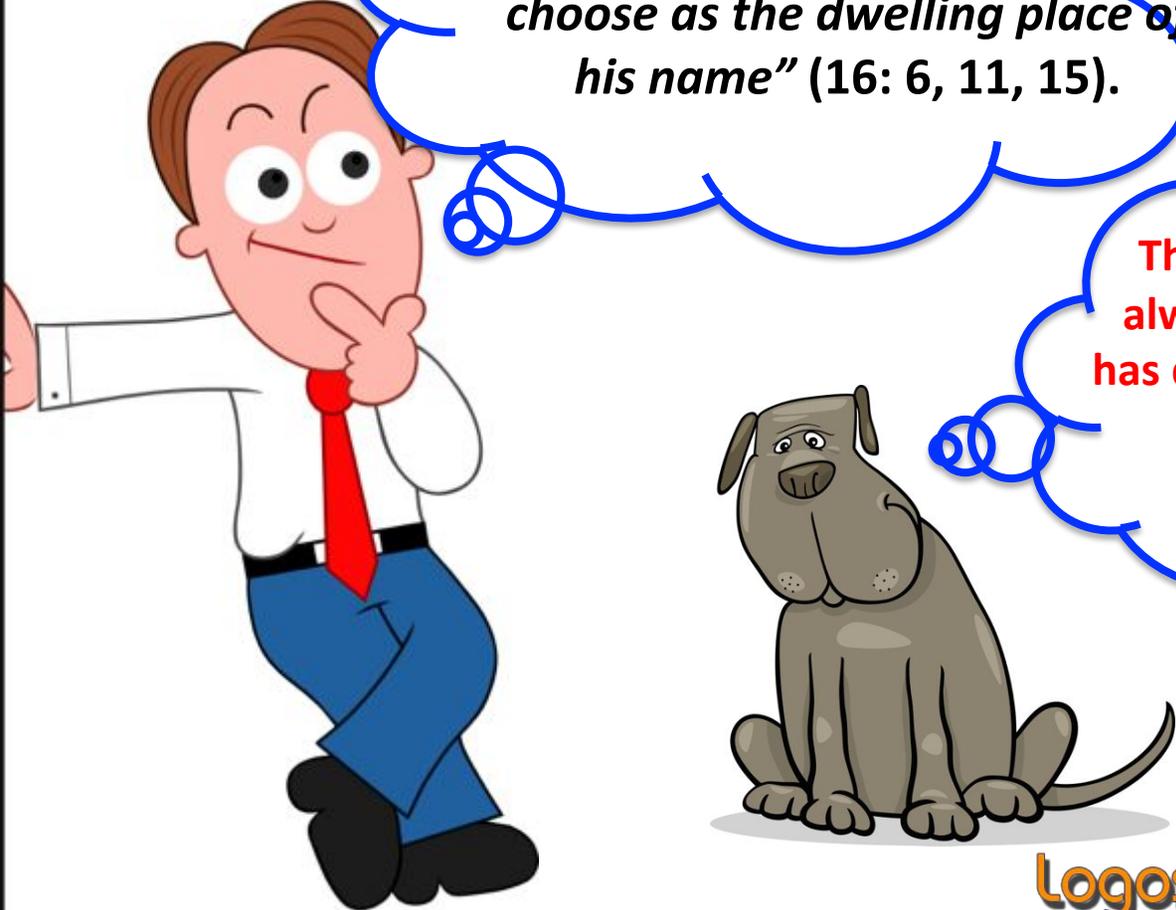
The remission of debt every seven years was meant to strengthen clans and families by assuring them permanent tenure on inherited farmland.

Leviticus even went so far as to institute a Jubilee Year, in which all land reverted back to its original tenants, those clans and families to whom the land was allocated after the conquest, an economic “reset” that would ensure individuals or groups could not accumulate massive amounts of wealth to the detriment of the community.



As Sabbath rest is observed every seventh day and every seventh year, so does Sabbath rest punctuate each year with three sacred moments, times that remember God's love for Israel:

- **Passover** (or Pesach) remembers the Exodus from Egypt, God's great act of redemption (16: 1-8);
- **Pentecost** (or the Feast of Weeks), seven weeks after Passover, remembers the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (16: 9-12);
- **Tabernacles** (or the Feast of Booths) remembers the Israelites' 40-years in the wilderness (16: 13-17).



And each one of the festivals must be celebrated *“only at the place which the Lord, your God, will choose as the dwelling place of his name”* (16: 6, 11, 15).

That way the Israelites will always remember what God has done for them . . . and they will do it together, as a community. Nice!

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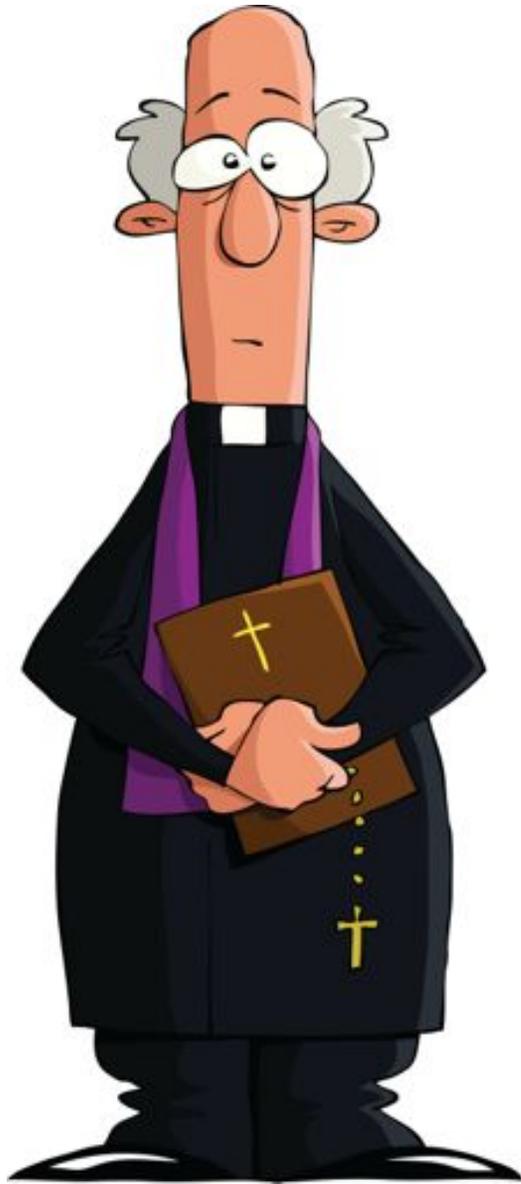


As we move into Deuteronomy 16: 18 - 18: 22 we mirror the fifth commandment:

“You shall honor your father and mother.”

Interestingly, this set of laws, statutes and ordinances expands the fifth commandment beyond father and mother to other authority figures: judges (16: 18 – 17: 13); kings (17: 14-20); altar ministers (18: 1-8) and prophets (18: 9-22).

In these laws, statutes and ordinances, Deuteronomy tempers authority and the use of power by all those who wield it, recognizing that the foundation of Israelite society is built on the family, clan and tribe, not on the centralized authority of a king or an ordained priesthood.



Deuteronomy (like Leviticus) presents a vision of an ideal agrarian society, God’s “children,” living in peace and harmony on a land of milk and honey, embraced by the numinous presence of the Lord himself.

It is a utopian dream.

It took 400 years to fully settle the land, and by 1050 B.C. the twelve tribes were nothing more than a loose confederation of tribal warlords, vying for power, awash in economic, political and religious chaos. So, the people demanded a king “to rule over us,” a king “like all the nations” have (1 Samuel 8: 1-22).

God recognized the utter folly of their request, warning the Israelites of the consequences that would follow:

“The governance of the king who will rule over you will be as follows: He will take your sons and assign them to his chariots and horses, and they will run before his chariot. He will appoint from among them his commanders of thousands and of hundreds. He will make them do his plowing and harvesting and produce his weapons of war and chariotry. He will use your daughters as perfumers, cooks, and bakers. He will take your best fields, vineyards, and olive groves, and give them to his servants. He will tithe your crops and grape harvests to give to his officials and his servants. He will take your male and female slaves, as well as your best oxen and donkeys, and use them to do his work. He will tithe your flocks. As for you, you will become his slaves. On that day you will cry out because of the king whom you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you on that day.”

(1 Samuel 8: 11-18)

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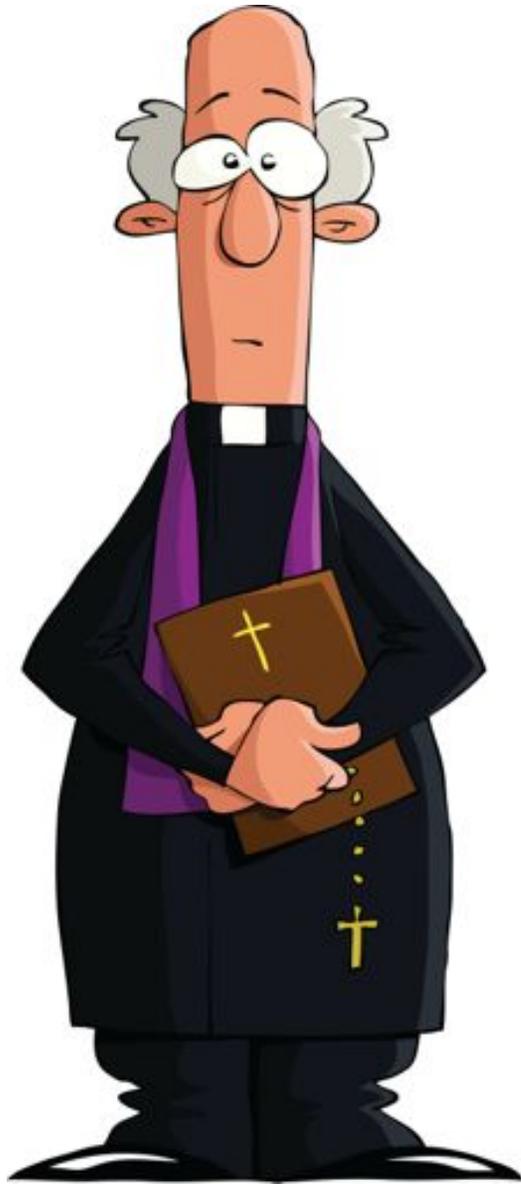
Nevertheless, God relents, and he gives the people a king, the king of their choice, Saul of the tribe of Benjamin.

Earlier in Deuteronomy God knew this would happen, and he warned the Israelites then, saying:

“When you have come into the land which the Lord, your God, is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, should you then decide, ‘I will set a king over me, like all the surrounding nations’ . . . he shall not have a great number of horses; nor shall he make his people go back again to Egypt to acquire many horses, for the Lord said to you, Do not go back that way again. Neither shall he have a great number of wives, lest his heart turn away, nor shall he accumulate a vast amount of silver and gold. When he is sitting upon his royal throne, he shall write a copy of this law upon a scroll . . . it shall remain with him and he shall read it as long as he lives . . . so that he does not exalt himself over his kindred or turn aside from this commandment . . .”

(17: 14-20)

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Of course, the Israelites did not listen. After only three kings—Saul (1050-1010 B.C.); David (1010-970 BC.) and Solomon (970-930 B.C.)—what God foresaw happening, did.

King Solomon had, among other things:



- **A great number of horses and chariots**

“Solomon amassed chariots and horses; he had one thousand four hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses . . . Solomon’s horses were imported from Egypt” (1 Kings 10: 26, 28).

- **A great number of wives**

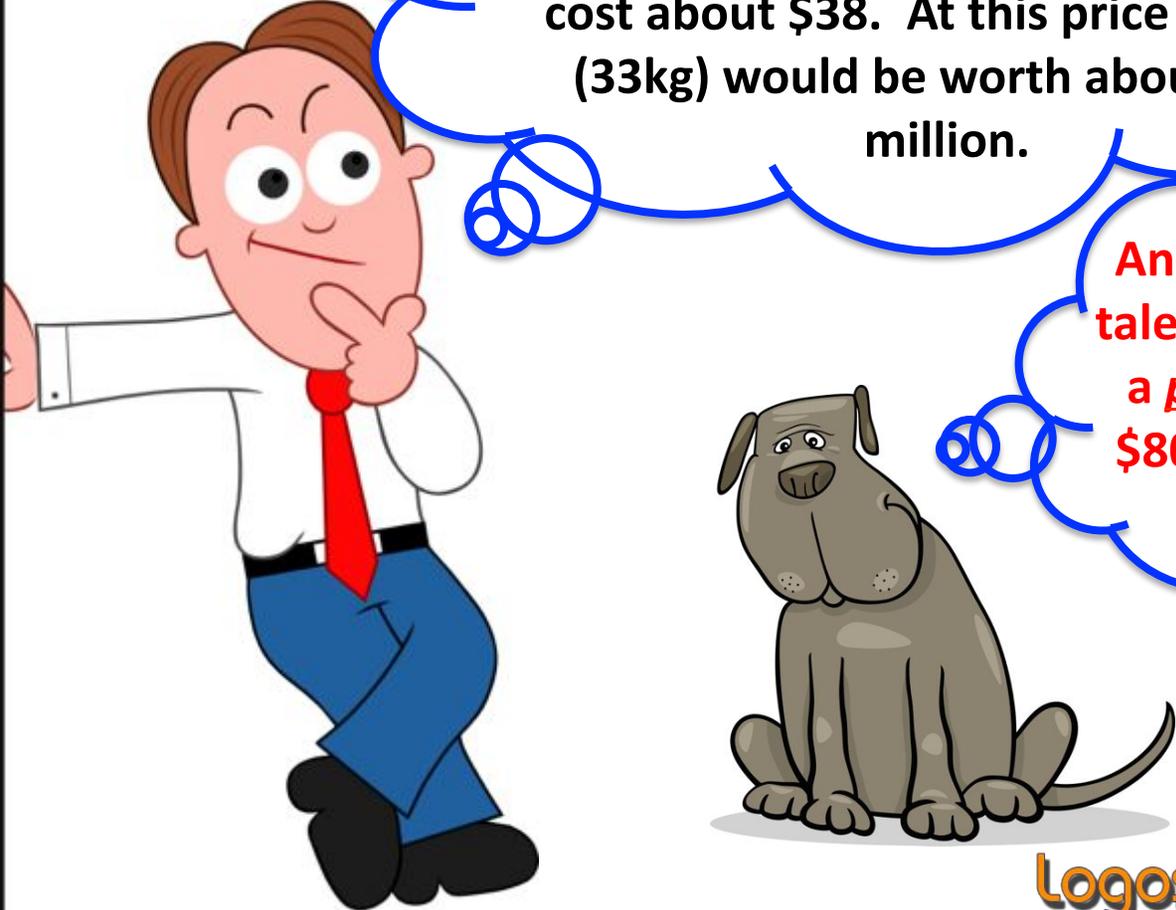
“[Solomon] had as wives seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines” (1 Kings 11: 3).

- **A vast amount of silver and gold**

“The gold that came to Solomon in one year weighed six hundred and sixty-six gold talents, in addition to what came from the tolls on travelers, from the traffic of merchants, and from all the kings of Arabia and the governors of the country” (1 Kings 10: 14-15).

- **And Solomon turned completely away from God.**

“Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and he did not follow the Lord unreservedly as David his father had done” (1 Kings 11: 6).



To put Solomon's wealth in context, a gold talent weighed about 33kg (roughly 75 pounds). Recently, the price of gold was \$1,190/oz, so 1 gram cost about \$38. At this price a talent (33kg) would be worth about \$1.2 million.

And Solomon had 666 talents per year. That's a personal income of \$800 million per year!

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Questions for discussion and thought

1. Why would God forbid the Israelites from gashing themselves or shaving their heads as signs of mourning?
2. What is the primary purpose of the dietary restrictions in Deuteronomy?
3. What does the remission of debt every seven years accomplish?
4. What is the purpose of Sabbath times: days, months and years?
5. If much of Deuteronomy emerges at the time of King Josiah, why does Deuteronomy emphasize local authority at the family, clan and tribal levels over the authority of the king and priesthood?

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