

Deuteronomy

Lesson 12

G. Laws for the Administration of Justice

After the laws for the appointment of magistrates, we come to the laws for the administration of justice by those magistrates. The magistrates did not make the laws; they enforce the laws. As such, their job focuses on managing the lives of the people in the Promised Land by following the LORD's laws. Who will be the magistrates in the Promised Land? The elders, judges, priests, kings, and prophets will all protect the Nation of Israel in their new land.

1. The Administration of the People

a) Justice with the Sensual Tree

The people of the Nation of Israel belong to the LORD. He redeemed them from slavery in Egypt, separated them from the world, and gave them instructions to be a holy people, different from the rest of the world. However, keeping the people holy in their words and deeds will be difficult when they take the Promised Land. In Egypt, the people of Israel were under Egyptian magistrates. For forty years, in the wilderness, the people lived under the authority of Moses, Aaron, and seventy magistrates. Although Aaron and all the original magistrates are dead at this point in the storyline, and Moses will soon die, more magistrates will be needed to keep the people in line with the LORD when they cross the Jordan River. We would think the people, with all they have seen, would be steadfast in their lives with the LORD and would never stray from Him. But that will not be the case. As the people cross the River, they will find the land is filled with temptations in defiance of the LORD's will for His people. The LORD can see ahead, and He knows His people will be tempted and fall into the temptations. Therefore, the LORD, looking forward, and knowing what His people will want to do, gave specific instructions to address each problem. The administration of the people will be difficult and require constant oversight will be needed. The magistrates' first task will be pursuing justice with people who will seek to worship the sensual tree. Chapter 16, verse 21. *"You shall not plant for yourself an Asherah of any kind of tree beside the altar of the LORD your God, which you shall make for yourself."* (16:21). The Lexham Bible Dictionary says the following about the *Asherah*.

The name used for both a Canaanite fertility goddess and the wooden pole that symbolized her. Most occurrences of "asherah" in the Bible refer to a sacred pole or tree used in Canaanite and Israelite worship. ... *Asherah* poles were located at sacred sites. They are often mentioned in the context of Canaanite worship on "every high hill and under every luxuriant tree" (1 Kings 14:23; 2 Kings 21:7; Jeremiah 17:2). An *asherah* pole is sometimes explicitly related to an altar of Baal—a Canaanite fertility deity (Judges 6:25, 28, 30; 2 Kings 17:16; 21:3–4). They are mentioned alongside "altars, ... sacred pillars, and idols" (Deuteronomy 7:5; 12:3; 16:21; 2 Kings 23:15; 2 Chronicles 14:3; 17:6; 31:1).³

The *Asherah* poles looked much like the totem poles seen in American Indian areas, but the carving on these *Asherah* poles was detestable. People seeking the fertility goddess's blessing carved these poles to look like the parts of a man used in the reproduction process to attract the female

³ Tully, E. (2016). *Asherah*. In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

goddess's attention. The poles were perverse and showed the LORD that the people did not trust in Him solely for their blessings and provisions.

b) Justice with the Sacred Pillar

The magistrates will need to oversee justice when the people build a sacred pillar. Verse 22. “*You shall not set up for yourself a sacred pillar which the LORD your God hates.*” (16:22).

The LORD hates the sacred pillars. They are the same as stone *obelisks* or *monuments* built to honor or give praise to some being. The problem with sacred stones comes with the word “sacred,” which means *holy*. The LORD is holy, and He is the only Holy God. No other god exists, and no fake god is holy. The LORD hates the worship of counterfeit gods.

c) Justice with the Stained Offering

Then comes the problem of justice with the stained offering. Chapter 17, verse 1. “*You shall not sacrifice to the LORD your God an ox or a sheep which has a blemish or any defect, for that is a detestable thing to the LORD your God.*” (17:1).

A stained offering, by way of a blemish, a defect, or a disease, is forbidden from being offered to the LORD in a required offering directed by the LORD in Leviticus chapters 1 – 7. The LORD will only accept a perfect offering.

d) Justice with the Sacrilege Person

(1) Consider the Idolater

Now comes to the work of the magistrates to administer justice with the sacrilege person. Verse 2. “*If there is found in your midst, in any of your towns, which the LORD your God is giving you, a man or a woman who does what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, by transgressing His covenant,³ and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the heavenly host, which I have not commanded,⁴ and if it is told you and you have heard of it, then you shall inquire thoroughly.*” (17:2-4a).

An idolater commits a sacrilege when he breaks the LORD laws and worships fake gods and heavenly objects. Sacrilege is a crime of stealing what is consecrated to God. The Nation of Israel must worship the LORD and keep His laws, which belong to Him. When a person abandons the LORD in law and worship, evil theft has occurred.

(2) Condemn the Idolater

The magistrates must condemn the idolater at the gates of the cities where they hold court. Verse 4b. “*Bebold, if it is true and the thing certain that this detestable thing has been done in Israel,⁵ then you shall bring out that man or that woman who has done this evil deed to your gates, that is, the man or the woman, and you shall stone them to death.*” (17:4b-5).

The penalty for transgressing the LORD as an idolater is stoning.

(3) Confirm the Idolater

Now the problem for the magistrates comes forth. How does a magistrate know that the idolater is guilty? Verse 6. “*On the evidence of two witnesses or three witnesses, he who is to die shall be put to death; he shall not be put to death on the evidence of one witness.*” (17:6).

The magistrates' verdict has to be confirmed by at least two eyewitnesses, but never only one.

(4) Casualty of the Idolater

With the testimony of two or more witnesses, the casualty of the idolater is death. Who casts the first stones? Verse 7. “*The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. So you shall purge the evil from your midst.*” (17:7).

The witnesses must know the seriousness of their testimony. If the person is convicted and sentenced to death because of their testimony, they will be charged to cast the first stones.

e) Justice with the Serious Cases

(1) Review

Rendering justice with serious cases will not always be easy for the magistrates. The LORD knows this and makes provisions for such cases. In the magistrate courts, the first step is to review each case's elements and the parties' disputes. Verse 8. *"If any case is too difficult for you to decide, between one kind of homicide or another, between one kind of lawsuit or another, and between one kind of assault or another, being cases of dispute in your courts, then you shall arise and go up to the place which the LORD your God chooses."* (17:8).

When it comes to homicide, lawsuit, or assault, each dispute's factual details can be endless. No two cases are the same. Therefore, the LORD allows the magistrates to take the case to a higher power.

(2) Refer

The magistrates controlled the courts at the gates of each town. Inside the towns, Levitical priests and judges held their official positions to deal with the more complicated issues. When the magistrate could not decide, he was to refer the case to the priests or the judges. Verse 9. *"So you shall come to the Levitical priest or the judge who is in office in those days, and you shall inquire of them and they will declare to you the verdict in the case."* (17:9).

We do not know how the priest and judges came to their determination about the case. We must assume the magistrates would present all the known facts, but we do not know that for sure. Yet, it is the duty of the priests and judges to render the verdict.

(3) Respect

Once the rendering of the verdict given by priests and judges occurs, the magistrates must respect that decision. Verse 10. *"You shall do according to the terms of the verdict which they declare to you from that place which the LORD chooses; and you shall be careful to observe according to all that they teach you."* (17:10).

New magistrates can never know by instinct how to render a proper decision on all the different kinds of cases brought before them. But the priests and judges must have had more experience with all the issues. They are to teach the magistrates how to render proper decisions. The magistrates are to respect the teaching they received and learn from it.

(4) Remove

The magistrates must be careful to follow the instructions of the priests and judges completely. If they do not, they could be removed and face the death penalty for ruling incorrectly, or unjustly. Verse 11. *"According to the terms of the law which they teach you, and according to the verdict which they tell you, you shall do; you shall not turn aside from the word which they declare to you, to the right or the left. ¹² The man who acts presumptuously by not listening to the priest who stands there to serve the LORD your God, nor to the judge, that man shall die; thus you shall purge the evil from Israel."* (17:11-12).

The LORD requires the magistrates to render justly and follow the instruction of the priest and judges. But the people who take cases to the magistrates must be willing to accept the verdict. If they do not accept the judgment, they are acting presumptuously. What does that mean? It means to take a case to the magistrates at the gate impulsively or rebelliously without reasonable cause. Without a good reason means the person brings the case with evil intent. Evil must be purged, and the evil man must die.

(5) Result

Why would the LORD bring such a rigorous instruction? Because of the result among the people. Verse 13. *"Then all the people will hear and be afraid, and will not act presumptuously again."* (17:13). Accusations of homicides, lawsuits, and assaults are severe and should never be brought lightly to the courts. The penalty for bringing such cases among the people of the Nation of Israel is to face the most severe penalty – the loss of life.

f) Justice with the Selected Ruler

(1) The Want of the King

Looking into the future, the LORD comes to the topic of justice with the selected ruler by addressing the time when Israel wants a king. Verse 14. *“When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, ‘I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,’” you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman.”* (17:14-15).

It will be four hundred and thirty-six years before the nation's people asks their prophet, Samuel, for a king (1 Samuel 8). The LORD knew this would occur, and He prepared for the request. The LORD will select a man from the tribe of Benjamin. His name will be Saul. The LORD will be ready.

(2) The Way of the King

From the want of a king, the LORD directs the way of a king. The first instruction concerns the king's horses. Verse 16. *“Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, ‘You shall never again return that way.’”* (17:16).

Why is the LORD concerned with the future king of Israel “multiplying horse for himself?” No commentator to date can justify the reason the LORD forbids the king from multiplying the horses. We do not have enough information anywhere in the Scripture to give an educated word of explanation with this instruction. However, we do understand the second phrase, *“nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses.”* The LORD led Israel out of Egypt; then He kept Israel in the wilderness for forty years until almost every Israelite who lived in Egypt had died to curb the desire to return. The LORD broke all relationships between Egypt and Israel, and He wanted it to stay that way. The LORD promised to provide Israel with all it ever needed, and there would never be a reason to trade in commerce with Egypt. The LORD means it when He says, *“You shall never again return that way.”* When Solomon becomes the third king of Israel, he will break both of these instructions. 2 Chronicles records Solomon's transgression.

Solomon's horses were imported from Egypt and from Kue; the king's traders procured them from Kue for a price. (2 Chronicles 1:16)

Now Solomon had 4,000 stalls for horses and chariots and 12,000 horsemen, and he stationed them in the chariot cities and with the king in Jerusalem. (2 Chronicles 9:25).

(3) The Wives of the Kings

After the way of the king, the LORD instructs concerning the wives of the king. Verse 17. *“He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself.”* (17:17).

Saul, the first king of Israel, had one wife, Ahinoam, and one concubine, Rizpah. (2 Samuel 21:8). Saul developed mental problems during his reign as king, but his wives were not the cause.

David, the second King of Israel, had eight wives and ten concubines. However, David's wives did not turn his heart from the LORD. Nevertheless, he broke this law.

Solomon, the third King of Israel, had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines. Solomon's wives did turn his heart from the LORD. Much of Solomon's great sin during his reign was a secondary result of the marriage to all these foreign wives. The LORD addresses this in 1st Kings.

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites.² They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love.³ He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.⁴ As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. (1 Kings 11:1–4).

Solomon also broke the second part of this law because he significantly increased his “*... silver and gold for himself.*” His yearly income was six-hundred and sixty-six talents of gold.

Now the weight of gold which came in to Solomon in one year was 666 talents of gold besides that from the traders and the wares of the merchants and all the kings of the Arabs and the governors of the country. (1 Kings 11:14-15).

Based on archeology findings, most commentators say that 3000 shekels equal one talent of gold. Solomon's 666 talents would be equal to 1,998,000 shekels.

A gold shekel weighs four-tenths of an ounce. In 2021, with the price of gold, four-tenths of an ounce is worth \$680. Therefore, Solomon's yearly salary in today's gold prices would have been \$1,358,640,000. No doubt Solomon broke the LORD's law.

(4) The Words of the King

(a) Record the Law

From the wives of the king, we come to the words of the king. Looking forward, the LORD required the coming kings to know His law. How would they know the law? They are to record the law themselves. Verse 18. “*Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests.*” (17:18).

Each new king of Israel is to make his personal copy of the book of Deuteronomy with the priests watching over him.

(b) Read the Law

Once the new king has the copy of the law written, he reads his copy regularly all his life. Verse 19. “*It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes...*” (17:19).

(c) Respect the Law

Each new king is required to respect the law. Verse 20. “*...that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel.*” (17:20).

King Saul did not respect the Deuteronomic law; he and his sons would not survive long amid Israel.

David did respect the Deuteronomic law; he and his sons did survive until the birth of Jesus.

Solomon did not respect the Deuteronomic law; he had only one child, a son, who only lived past Solomon's days by seventeen years. However, Solomon repented in the last years of his life as recorded in his book of regrets called Ecclesiastes. The LORD allowed Solomon's sons to sit on Israel's throne for another three-hundred and sixty-three years.

2. The Administration of the Priests

a) The Priestly Position

Continuing with the laws of the administration of justice, we come to the administration of the priests. We begin with the priestly position. Chapter 18, verse 1. “*The Levitical priests, the whole tribe of*

Levi, shall have no portion or inheritance with Israel; they shall eat the LORD's offerings by fire and His portion.² They shall have no inheritance among their countrymen; the LORD is their inheritance, as He promised them.” (18:1-2).

The tribe of Levi will not be given a specific territory in the Promised Land to own. The families of Levi will live among the other tribes as their priests. The required offerings will provide their families with their food needs.

b) The Priestly Provision

Specifically, the LORD details the priestly provisions that will belong to the Levites. Verse 3.

“Now this shall be the priests' due from the people, from those who offer a sacrifice, either an ox or a sheep, of which they shall give to the priest the shoulder and 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 shearing of your sheep. ⁵ For the LORD your God has chosen him and his sons from all your tribes, to stand and serve in the name of the LORD forever.” (18:3-5).

Where are the Levites today? We cannot identify them anywhere. But the LORD makes a promise in this verse. They are “*to stand and serve in the name of the LORD forever.*” And forever, they will stand before the LORD even though no Levite can be identified today with certainty. But the LORD knows the bloodline and will bring them back into public view in the last days. But, once the nation crosses the Jordan River, the Levites will stand and serve the LORD until the destruction of the Temple by Rome in 70 AD – 1494 years later.

c) The Priestly Portion

From the Priestly position to the priestly provision, we now address the priestly portion. Verse 6. *“Now if a Levite comes from any of your towns throughout Israel where he resides, and 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 what they receive from the sale of their fathers' estates.” (18:6-8).*

Throughout the Promised Land, and in each tribal area, the LORD will set aside areas for the offerings to be brought to Him in addition to the place of the Tabernacle's location. Throughout the tribal areas, the Levites are to be treated fairly. Each Levite will receive an equal portion of what all Levites receive throughout the nation – share and share alike. However, verse 8 says, “*They shall eat equal portions, except what they receive from the sale of their fathers' estates.*” What does that mean?

The Levites could not own land in a tribal area, but according to Leviticus 25:33, a Levite could own a house and its contents on borrowed land until the year of Jubilee.

What, therefore, belongs to the Levites may be redeemed and a house sale in the city of this possession reverts in the jubilee, for the houses of the cities of the Levites are their possession among the sons of Israel.
(Leviticus 25:33).

In the year of Jubilee, the Levites had to return the houses they owned in the tribal areas to the families of each tribe who donated the property to them. The Levites did not receive a share and share alike portion of the house sale in the return. Any trading or selling of houses within the tribes could happen understood this. Still, every fifty years, no matter what the house was sold for, it was returned to the original family granted on the division of the Promised Land. The transaction on the Jubilee year was not a titheable occurrence and did not require an offering. Therefore, the Levites did not receive a share of the trade.

d) The Priestly Prohibition

We come to the priestly prohibition. Verse 9. *“When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives 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, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, ¹¹ or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the*

dead.¹² For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you.¹³ You shall be blameless before the LORD your God.¹⁴ For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do so.” (18:9-14).

Within the list found in this passage, the LORD makes us aware of all the pretenders of knowledge - diviners, interpreters, sorcerers, spiritists, and those who call up the dead. All are detestable to the LORD. More than that, the Canaanites sought them all out for their make-believe knowledge. The proof of their attempts to exert their fake knowledge will be known because their prophecies will not come to pass. The priests were never to imitate the practices of the witches and diviners in the new land.

3. The Administration of the Prophets

a) The Establishment of the Prophets

First, we have the administration of the people, then the administration of the priest. Now we come to the administration of the prophets. In reality, this announcement is the establishment of the prophets in every generation. Verse 15. “*The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.*”¹⁶ *This is according to all that you asked of the LORD your God in Horeb on the day of the assembly, saying, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, or I will die.’*¹⁷ The LORD said to me, “*They have spoken well.*”¹⁸ *I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.*” (18:15-18).

Abraham and Joseph were prophets in the story found in Genesis. Moses was a prophet (Deuteronomy 34:10). During the Genesis story, many false prophets of the false gods flourished in every place in the world. These false prophets were in part responsible for all the ancient mythical gods. Speaking through Moses, the LORD announces for the first time that the LORD “*will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him.*” The LORD will raise prophets among the nation in every generation until the last prophet – John, the Revelation writer. Since John's death, no other prophets have lived who can tell the future; however, in between the crossing of the Jordan River to take the Promised Land until John's death, many prophets of the LORD will live and direct Israel. During that extended time, many false prophets will also try to speak for God and the fake gods.

b) The Ensuing of the Prophets

With the establishment of the prophets, we come to the ensuing of the prophets. Verse 19. “*It shall come about that whoever will not listen to My words which he shall speak in My name, I Myself will require it of him.*” (18:19).

With the LORD raising prophets among the people, consequences will come upon those who do not listen to the words they speak. When the LORD says, “*I Myself will require it of him,*” He is saying He expects everyone to listen to His true prophets.

c) The Execution of the Prophets

Not everyone who announced himself as a prophet of the LORD is the LORD's prophet. For that, there is a deadly penalty. Moses speaks of the execution of these prophets. Verse 19. “*But the prophet who speaks a word presumptuously in My name which I have not commanded him to speak, or which he speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.*” (18:19).

We crossed the word *presumptuously* in the last chapter (17:11-12). There, we defined it in context as doing something impulsively or rebelliously with evil intent. The definition applies here in this passage as well. The LORD never speaks through His prophet with evil intent. The real problem in this passage stems from a pretend prophet of the LORD, who says things in the name of the LORD that the LORD has not spoken. The penalty for that is death. Also, the death penalty is the cost of being a prophet of a false god.

d) The Examination of the Prophets

How can the people of Israel know the true prophets? By the examination of the prophets. Verse 15. *“You may say in your heart, ‘How will we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?’²² When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.”* (18:15-22).

When a prophet of the LORD speaks, his words will come true. When a prophet speaks, and his words are not fulfilled, he is a false prophet. As Moses says, no one should fear a false prophet. The LORD will take care of all false prophets in his time.

In the following chapters, we will look at the administration of the protectors, the battles, the slain, the families, the property, and Israel's morality. We will start that journey in the next lesson.