

COMMITMENT IN WORSHIP
Teaching-Learning Resources
BAPTIST LEADER

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Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 12:1–14:29

Key Passage: Deuteronomy 12:5–12; 14:27–291

[Page 59]

A glimpse at the outline in the “Teaching-Learning Resources” of June 7 will help to put this lesson in context. The last six lessons covered only the first seven chapters of Deuteronomy, but today’s lesson alone spans the next eight chapters of the book. We continue with a study of Moses’ second discourse (4:44–26:19), moving to conclude the study of his exposition and exhortations based on the Decalogue and the Shema (the greatest commandment). We begin to examine some of the material from the corpus of fifty major legislative units in 12:1–26:19. Working with the theme “Commitment in Worship,” we focus on the first four units of this legal corpus, i.e., those units that deal with worship. Since this corpus of fifty “laws” begins and ends with instructions concerning worship, the last two units in 26:1–15 will also be incorporated into this lesson.

A complete study of the rules and prohibitions related to worship which are packed into Moses’ second discourse would require an examination of the following ten passages:

1. 12:1–14:29. General rules for worship, including:
 - a) Where to worship and what to offer, 12:1–14
 - b) Animal sacrifice and meat at meals, 12:15–28
 - c) False worship and its penalties, 12:29–14:1
 - d) Kosher diet for a holy people, 14:2–21
 - e) Collection and use of the tithe, 14:22–29

COMMITMENT IN WORSHIP

2. 15:19–23. Offering of the firstborn
3. 16:1–17. Three annual feasts: Feast of the Passover, Feast of Weeks, and Feast of Booths
4. 16:21–17:7. Cultic prohibitions against Asherah and sacrificing blemished animals and the death penalty for idolatry
5. 18:9–14. Prohibition against the occult arts
6. 18:15–22. The test for true or false prophets
7. 23:17–18. Prohibition against cult prostitutes
8. 23:21–23. Voluntary vows become obligatory
9. 26:1–11. Offering of the firstfruits
10. 26:12–15. Distribution of the tithe

By way of historical introduction, attention is drawn to the archaeological excavations at Tel Arad during the last decade, which have clarified many of the issues and uncertainties about the nature of Israelite worship before and during the period of the monarchy. Tel Arad is situated in the Negev of Judah, about twenty miles northeast of Beersheba. The upper mound of this ancient site contained the remains of an Israelite settlement that existed from the twelfth century to the sixth century B.C. Over a period of three hundred fifty years, from the time of Solomon until the exile of Judah, there is evidence of six different levels of Israelite occupation, indicating that Arad had been destroyed and rebuilt six different times. The traces of intense heat and the pottery strewn over the floors at various levels indicate that the citadel, which functioned as a frontier fortress and administrative center, was attacked suddenly and frequently. Attached to the citadel, which measured 50 x 55 meters and remained basically unchanged over the centuries, was a royal sanctuary where

COMMITMENT IN WORSHIP

Yahweh was worshiped. This was not a sanctuary or “high place” of Canaanite origin or religion, but a genuine Israelite place of worship. Its structure was modeled along the lines of the tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple. Its general appearance was that of a subdivided broad room, with its entrance from the east. The room was divided into three major units: (1) a small holy of holies that pointed directly west, as did a similar area in the tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple. Access to the holy of holies was by three steps, upon one of which stood two altars of incense. In the holy of holies was a raised platform and a red painted stone stela about one meter in height; (2) an inner court that may have functioned like “the vestibule [or porch] of the house of [Yahweh]” mentioned in 2 Chronicles 15:8 and elsewhere, which was to the east of the holy of holies; and (3) the large outer courtyard, east of the “porch,” which contained an altar of rubble and burnt brick, capped by a flint top-slab with two plastered gutters (for sacrificial blood), and two bases for stone pillars at the entrance to the “porch.” Although the wall was of dressed stone, the altar was of unhewn stone, as stipulated in Exodus 20:25. The altar was five cubits square (about 2.5 meters square), as stipulated for the tabernacle in Exodus 27:1 (compare 2 Chronicles 6:13). The two stone pillar-bases recall the twin pillars, Jachin and Boaz, of Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 7:15–22).

Fragments of letters sent between Jerusalem and Arad, written on pieces of pottery, have survived. One of them reads in part, “To my lord Eliashib: May Yahweh seek your welfare. . . . Regarding the matter which you commanded me,

COMMITMENT IN WORSHIP

Shalom. In the house of Yahweh he is dwelling.”¹ The “house of Yahweh” refers undoubtedly to the temple in Jerusalem, and the name Yahweh is [page 60] written with the four letters, YHWH, which make up the holy name of God. Other writings from Arad contain Israelite names that used the name of Yahweh as part of the personal name.

As Isaiah (738–701 B.C.) envisioned the day when there would be an altar of sacrifice in the capital of Egypt, as well as a shrine (literally, “pillar” or “stela”) of Yahweh at the border of Egypt (Isaiah 19:19), it appears that ancient Israel had both the temple at Jerusalem and sanctuaries on its borders for the worship of Yahweh.² The prophetic statement of Isaiah 19:19 probably predated the religious reforms of Hezekiah (715–687 B.C.) mentioned in 2 Kings 18, which required all sacrifices to Yahweh to be offered exclusively at the Jerusalem temple. Subsequent to this, Josiah (640–609 B.C.) carried the reform movement even further and centralized in Jerusalem all worship of Yahweh (2 Kings 22–23). These “reforms” are confirmed by the modifications in the sanctuary at Arad. The citadel and sanctuary in operation during the reign of Hezekiah functioned without an altar. It had been removed. During the reign of Hezekiah, the holy of holies was removed and a wall for new fortifications was constructed right through the center of the former sanctuary. What happened at Arad probably happened at all other sites

1 . See Yohanan Aharoni, “The Israelite Sanctuary at Arad,” in *New Directions in Biblical Archaeology*, ed. David Noel Freedman and Jonas C. Greenfield (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1971), p. 33.

2 . *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

COMMITMENT IN WORSHIP

where Yahweh had been worshiped. Just before the collapse of Judah in 586 B.C., it became orthodox practice to worship Yahweh at Jerusalem exclusively.

The worship of Yahweh at many different places throughout most of the preexilic period has its roots in traditions that go back to the patriarchs. These traditions seemed to be compatible with the revelation of God given at Sinai. In Deuteronomy 12:11, 14, 18, 21, 26; 14:23–25; and 15:20, mention is variably made of “the place which [Yahweh] will choose to make his name dwell there.” It is repeatedly given in the singular form, “the place,” suggesting “the one and only place.” However, in Exodus 20:24–25, which is the initial account of the revelation at Sinai—not the recollection of it years later—the statement is made, “An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings . . . in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. And if you make for me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones. . . .” The phrase “in every place” suggests more than one place where Yahweh would cause the name to be remembered.

The remembrance of the name of Yahweh was associated with a wide variety of places, especially those places where the patriarchs had had an encounter with God. Subsequently they became centers of Israelite worship. From Abraham’s time the sacred oaks of Mamre (Genesis 14:13) became a focal point of worship. Likewise, Mount Moriah, where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac, became a center of worship, which eventually became the site of the Solomonic temple in Jerusalem (Genesis 22:2; 2 Chronicles 3:1). The city of Luz became a sanctuary after Jacob had his vision there and renamed the place Bethel (Genesis 28:18–19). Jeroboam I (922–901 B.C.) made Bethel the major sanctuary

COMMITMENT IN WORSHIP

of the Northern Kingdom (1 Kings 12:26–33). From the time Jacob erected the altar at Shechem, named El-Elohe-Israel (Genesis 33:18–20), Shechem became an important shrine. Joshua assembled the Israelites at Shechem and Joseph's bones were buried there (Joshua 24:1, 32). The two mountains near Shechem, Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, were the "sacred" mountains where the Israelites were commanded by Moses to perform the liturgy of blessings and curses to ratify their covenant with Yahweh when they crossed over the Jordan (Deuteronomy 11:26–29; 27:11–16). (The Samaritan sect made Gerizim the one and only holy mountain and erected their temple there.) According to Deuteronomy 27:5, the Israelites were to build an altar on Mount Ebal once they crossed the Jordan under Joshua. Joshua also assembled the Israelites at Shiloh, which became a worship center (Joshua 18:1; 19:51). It was at the house of Yahweh in Shiloh that Hannah presented Samuel for his life in the priesthood (1 Samuel 1:3–24). Moses' grandson, Jonathan, established a shrine at Dan (Judges 18:30). The memorial stones erected at Gilgal, where the Israelites crossed the Jordan, became a sacrificial center (1 Samuel 10:8) and the place where Saul was anointed (and later rejected) as king over Israel.

Worship at these sacred centers flourished in the context of Exodus 20:24, which stated quite simply, "An altar of earth you shall make for me . . . in every place where I cause my name to be remembered." But however legitimate, orthodox, and traditional such worship may have been at one time, over the years the worship degenerated amid the political rivalries of the Southern Kingdom and the Northern Kingdom when religion was used as a political weapon (1 Kings 12:26–29). Canaanite religious practices were adopted by the Israelites, and the moral and ethical requirements of the Law were

COMMITMENT IN WORSHIP

neglected to such an extent that the prophet Amos denounced all worship at these sanctuaries:

Come to Bethel, and transgress;
to Gilgal, and multiply transgression. .
For thus says [Yahweh] to the house of Israel:
Seek me and live;
but do not seek Bethel,
and do not enter into Gilgal
or cross over to Beersheba;
for Gilgal shall surely go into exile,
and Bethel shall come to nought.

—Amos 4:4; 5:4

Similar ideas are expressed about Shiloh (Psalm 78:60; Jeremiah 7:12), and even Jerusalem stood condemned for her unpardonable corruption of religion, morals, and ethics (Jeremiah 5:1, 10–13; 7:8–8:4).

After the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C. efforts were made by Hezekiah and Josiah to reform the religious tradition in Judah along the lines of Deuteronomy 12, which spoke only of one place where Yahweh would cause God's name to dwell, namely, Jerusalem. Recognition of Jerusalem as the one and only place of legitimate worship is reflected throughout Scripture. But the emphasis of the reform movement upon the place of worship was a misplaced emphasis. Likewise, the emphasis upon sacrifice as the favorite form of worship was a misplaced emphasis. Place and form had preempted the priority of content in religious worship. When Jesus stated, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer'; but you make it a den of robbers" (Matthew 21:13), he was quoting the great prophets of Israel (Jeremiah 7:11; Isaiah 56:7) who recognized that the content of worship was more important than anything else (see Isaiah 1:10–17;

COMMITMENT IN WORSHIP

Jeremiah 7:21–26; Hosea 6:6–9; Amos 5:21–25; Micah 6:6–8).

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

Deuteronomy 12:13—“**Do not offer your burnt offerings at every place that you see.**”

“Burnt offerings” is a term for a particular type of sacrifice; it is not a synonym for sacrifices in general. The “(whole) burnt offering” was the offering which was totally consumed (except for the skin) by fire on the altar. In Hebrew the word signifies that which “goes up” to God in fire and smoke. The Greek translation of the term was “holocaust,” meaning “wholly burnt.” (The ritual for this offering is spelled out in Leviticus 1 and 22:17–25.) The restriction here in Deuteronomy 12:13, when interpreted in the light of Exodus 20:24 and Israelite history, limits this one type of offering.

Deuteronomy 12:12—“**And you shall rejoice before Yahweh your God, you and your sons and your daughters. . .**”

This verse is a repetition of 12:7, which specified that the rejoicing was of the entire household at the sacrificial meal. The meal was as much a part of the worship experience as was the sacrifice itself, and eating was a part of the worship experience in the following well-known stories: (1) Laban and Jacob (Genesis 31:46, 54); (2) Jethro and Moses (Exodus 18:12); (3) Moses and his seventy-three colleagues on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:11); and (3) Samuel, Saul, and the thirty guests (1 Samuel 9:13, 22–24). Eating and worship are also mentioned in Psalm 22:25–26, 29. (The King James and American Standard Versions follow the Hebrew text; the Revised Standard Version and The New English Bible do not.)

COMMITMENT IN WORSHIP

Deuteronomy 12:12—“. . . the Levite that is within your towns, since he has no portion or inheritance with you.”

The status of the Levites is spelled out in Deuteronomy 10:9 and 18:1–8, their duties are specified in Numbers 4:4–15; 6:22–27; and 18:1–32. According to Exodus 32:25–29, the Levites also functioned as the “grand executioners” of the idolaters after Aaron sinned by making the gold calf at the behest of the Israelites.

Deuteronomy 14:28—“At the end of every three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in the same year”

In Deuteronomy 15:19–23, provision is made for the dedication of the firstborn male of the flock, which was to be eaten by those who gave it at a yearly feast. In Deuteronomy 26:1–11, provision was made for the consecration of the firstfruits of the field, which was likewise to be eaten at a special feast at the sanctuary. Although the verb “eat” is not found in this verse, or in 12:12, the word does occur in 12:7, which provides the commentary for this passage. In addition to these, a tithe was levied on the produce (Deuteronomy 26:12–15), which was used to provide for the priesthood (Numbers 18:25–32) and the poor (Deuteronomy 14:22–29). In addition to receiving a portion of the regular tithe, which was disbursed at the major sanctuary, the Levites, the widow, the orphan, and the alien were given the tithe of every third year. It was collected and distributed in the local communities. This was done that “there will be no poor among [them]!” (Deuteronomy 15:4).

Applying the Lesson to Life

The writer of Psalm 50 has provided guidelines for all generations of religious people who become preoccupied with

COMMITMENT IN WORSHIP

place and form, making religion a matter of architecture and ritual. He was very much committed to Jerusalem and called Jerusalem (Zion) “the perfection of beauty” (v. 2). But like the great prophets, he knew the essence of the Law as well as the letter of the laws. He declared to Israel Yahweh’s admonition:

I do *indeed*³ reprove you for your sacrifices;
your burnt offerings are continually before me.
I will accept no bull from your house,
nor he-goat from your folds.
For every beast of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.

—Psalm 50:8–10

But he also shared Yahweh’s instruction:

Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving. . . .
He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me;
to him who orders his way aright
I will show the salvation of God!

—Psalm 50:14, 23

This applicable theme is reiterated in Ephesians: “Look carefully then how you walk, . . . be filled with the Spirit, . . . always and for everything give thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father” (Ephesians 5:15–20).

3. This writer reads *lu*’, “Indeed!” for the Hebrew *lo*’ “not,” making both verses 8 and 9 read as negatives.