

Title: "Politics of the Plate"

I have to tell you that Deuteronomy is not a book with which I have spent a great deal of time. In moments of personal devotion, I am not often inclined to turn to Deuteronomy for a fresh word from the Lord. I tend to regard it as a rulebook or a legal code from another time and place with little bearing on my present situation. What a shame that this attitude has kept me for so long from uncovering the riches herein.

Deuteronomy, actually, has much to say in our world. The language and customs of Deuteronomy are unfamiliar, but the spirit of the book is very much alive in our times. This is a book about political power and exploitation, about priestly corruption, and about regular folks trying to get by. We need only uncover a little bit of history to know that Deuteronomy is a text that transcends time and circumstance.

Reading through Deuteronomy 14, one quickly observes that money is at the forefront of people's minds. There's talk about tithing and blessing, consumption and charity. I've often heard that if you want to get to the root of corruption, you simply need to follow the money trail, and I believe that's a helpful course of action for us today. But before we begin, let me offer a word of caution. This language of "following the money trail" is problematic for us because the money trail will lead us through unfamiliar Israelite countryside. I don't want our journey to get bogged down in racist stereotypes that might divert our attention from what we actually mean to see. We are not talking about the Jews of our own time when we read through the book of Deuteronomy. In fact, we speak of a time before the term "Jewish" applied to anyone at all. Furthermore, there is

no doubt that we are describing historical conditions that are no less formative in the backdrop of Christian beliefs and values than they are those of our Jewish brothers and sisters.

So what is going on with the money changing hands in Deuteronomy 14? It begins with the seed. The Deuteronomist offers this instruction: “Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field.” (*NRSV*) “Tithe” means ten percent when used in the Bible, and so the first instruction of this passage requires Israelites to separate themselves from a significant portion of their profit. What the text doesn’t tell us is that the Israelite farmer also had to set aside another ten percent of the yield to start the following year’s crop. So, immediately the Israelite is down 20 percent of the profit. Stockholders are getting nervous.

Once the seed was set apart to be tithed, where and to whom did it go? In this passage, the tithe goes to “the place [the LORD your God] will choose as a dwelling for his name.” Once it has been delivered to that place, v.23 says, “You shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.” Well, at least they get to enjoy the fruits of their labor!

But it didn’t always work that way. Until a few decades before this text was written, perhaps even a few years, the Israelite in our narrative took the tithe to the local Levite priest, who accepted the offering, then made the tithe personal property—becoming richer and richer, year after year. My first instinct is to liken the Levites to the televangelists of our own time: those prophets and prophetesses who represent the Lord with their grand displays of weeping and made-for-TV miracle working, all the while raking in cash from people without a dime to spare. However, we have to consider the fact that these were the priests of the national religion and trusted members of their communities. Instead of televangelists, these are like parish priests or

long-time pastors who abuse their position and misuse their authority to the detriment of faithful, hardworking, intelligent people.

So *why* did the Israelites continue to tithe? Why do any of us remain faithful when our trust has been abused? The answer is simple: The Israelites couldn't afford for the LORD's favor to turn. Many of these people had experienced war and famine that were believed to be the result of their unfaithfulness. To break the tithe might mean a ruined crop or another foreign invader. So they kept tithing, and sometimes the tithe was big. Imagine giving ten percent of your household's annual income to the church, if you don't already. Take a moment and do the math. For much of America, that would mean annual giving over \$5,000—more than that for many. Now imagine the church changing its policy on offerings; instead of turning your money over to the church only to watch the construction of another religious megaplex, you and your family are encouraged to take the money, go on vacation, have a fancy meal, buy some souvenirs and look forward to doing it again next year! If we're honest, that probably sounds like a better option to most of us.

That is exactly the kind of change underway in our text. A major effort was in progress to make the temple in Jerusalem the central location of Israelite religion, which meant that everyone who was able would travel with their tithe to Jerusalem each year at an appointed time for feasts and celebration. Those who could not transport the tithe of their crop because it was too big or they did not have a family large enough to move it could change the crop into money. Then, says vv.25-26, "With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the Lord your God will choose; spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you

desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God, you and your household rejoicing together.” (NRSV)

Again, that sounds *great* until we look at the political dynamics behind the text. As we said, there is a strong movement afoot to make Jerusalem the capitol of Israelite religion. In doing this, all of the tithe—agricultural and monetary—that used to be distributed each year among the Levite priests in the various regions of Israel made its way instead to the shops, moneychangers and temple in Jerusalem. In other words, what we have here is an economic stimulus package for Jerusalem. It takes a lot of capital to build an urban center and raise an army to fend off threatening conquerors; centralizing the once widely dispersed tithe is a perfect way to do just that!

The average Israelite in our story appears to have traded a local regime for a national one. Those who are familiar with the impact of replacing locally owned businesses with national and international corporations have some insight into the dynamics of this situation. Under the auspices of the former system, the tithe might have come back to the local Israelite by way of business with the Levite. Under this new system, the tithe money enters Jerusalem and never leaves. The farther you live from Jerusalem, the farther you are from the benefits of the urban center and military protection paid for with your tithe.

It seems like the only ones who really benefit from the tithe are the political elite in Jerusalem. The Levites who collected the local tithe under the former system are displaced by the economic stimulus package. Now unemployed, the Levites rank among the immigrants, the orphans and the widows in this stratified society; they live off of the charity of the Israelite who is undoubtedly bitter about the years of being taken advantage of by the local priests. The Israelite

gets to enjoy the tithe with a weekend of vacation and debauchery, but only in a way that allows the Jerusalem elite to become fat off the spoils of the national religion.

The final verses of Deuteronomy 14 give the following instruction: “Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.” There are a number of lessons we might take from this conclusion. It might remind us to care for those in our communities who are without the means to support themselves and their families with the basic necessities of life. That is certainly an important lesson gleaned from many places in scripture. We might also be reminded of our responsibility as faithful people to remember mercy when dealing with those who have abused and taken advantage of us in the past. That is also a lesson well worth remembering.

However, let me suggest a somewhat more skeptical lesson for us today. Perhaps what scripture wants to reveal to us is that things are not always as they appear. The offer of a free vacation at Disney World for you and your family hardly ever comes without hours and hours of a guilt-inducing sales pitch for summer homes in Orlando. The low interest rate mortgage on a no-down-payment home rarely lasts forever. The superstore under construction in a small town near you may sell cheaper socks, but the actual costs of depriving employees of benefits and a living wage, as well as producing those socks in sweatshops where children slave over a sewing machine 70 hours per week, are far too high. With a little information about the history of ancient Israel in hand, Deuteronomy invites us to realize that its injunction to care for the poor,

oppressed and marginalized within the gates of our cities is only necessary because those with the means and authority have failed to do so.

The situation in Deuteronomy reminds me of the recent food riots in Haiti and other parts of the world. Many of us have noticed the rise in prices at the grocery stores, but the soaring cost of staple foods like corn, rice, beans and soy is most keenly felt in nations like Haiti, where 80% of the people live on less than \$2 per day. The cost of wheat is up 130% from last year because of rising demand for wheat-fed meat and shrinking space to grow new crops.<sup>1</sup> The US is the largest exporter of wheat in the world, and actively resists programs that would allow wheat and other staple foods to be grown locally by farmers in poor nations. As a nation, we stand at the center of the world's food crisis; the farther one moves away from our own over-sized, over-stocked grocery stores, the hungrier people get.

What would be the economic and spiritual consequences if Americans decided to tithe our excess back to the hungry world? Unlike the Levites in Deuteronomy who seem to be hungry because they lost the struggle for power with the Jerusalem elite, children in Haiti, Yemen, and Indonesia are literally starving because of years of colonization, racism and economic oppression. Deuteronomy invites us to discern another moment in history when the rich and powerful are failing those in need. Compared to our global neighbors, Americans are outrageously wealthy and we regularly speak of our nation as the center of the global village. If we want to handle our wealth and centrality responsibly, each person has to take measures to ensure that the rest of the world has the food and resources necessary to feed their families.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7331921.stm>. Saturday, April 26, 2008 at 12:30pm.

Practically speaking, spend time speaking with friends and family about to reduce your fuel consumption. Corn grown for ethanol severely limits the space available to grow crops of staple foods, which contributes to their rising prices. Consider tithing one day of fuel each week by working from home, walking, or carpooling. In addition, commit to give up meat one meal per week. Ten times more water is needed to produce one pound of beef than one pound of wheat.<sup>2</sup> Eliminating beef for even one meal significantly increases the availability of one of the most increasingly limited resources in the world: clean drinking water. The fact is Deuteronomy beckons each of us to gather up the tithe from our increase, to fling open the gates of our global village and to feed those in need within our own cities and across the world.

Nothing in history or scripture is ever simple, and we know that within one congregation, we have some who are hungry and others who need to loosen their belts. Deuteronomy 14 has a number of lessons for us all, and we might find ourselves fitting the shoes of more than one character. Whether we stand in the shoes of the Israelite, the Levite or the elite government official in Jerusalem, Deuteronomy issues to each an instruction and a warning. To the Israelite: Give faithfully to the LORD, care for the poor and live with a discerning spirit. To the Levite: Beware how you tend the flock and the altar of the LORD lest you find yourself at the mercy of both. And to the wealthy, powerful elite living at the urban centers of the world: You too will know the judgment of the LORD.

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<sup>2</sup> BBC News. "Q&A: Rising World Food Prices." <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/7340214.stm> (accessed April 29, 2008).

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