

Parashah One Hundred Forty

Deuteronomy 18:1–20:9; Jeremiah 29:8–14; Acts 3:22–26; Hebrews 12:25–29

notes by Tim Hegg

Instructions for Living in the Land

As the children of Israel prepare to enter the Land and to possess it, God through Moses gives the people instructions regarding the function of leaders (Priests and Prophets) as well as a plan to deal with civil issues within the settled community.

It is tempting, whenever we read something about priests (Cohenim) in the Torah, to make a spiritual application to all believers since we have been taught the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers.” I want to examine this doctrine briefly.

First, the teaching that all believers in Yeshua are now constituted as priests in the absence of the Temple and Levitical priesthood is based primarily on 1Pet 2:9 where Peter, addressing the believers in the diaspora, quotes Exodus 19:5-6. In this Torah text, the promise is given to Israel that if she would obey HaShem, she would be a “kingdom of priests” (also cf. Is 61:6; 66:21).

But there is more behind the doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers” than just the quote from Exodus 19 in 1Pet 2. It is significant that the framers of this doctrine held tenaciously to the abolishment of the Torah and the bringing in of a new era in which the “physical” gives way to the “spiritual.” Thus, according to this theology, since Yeshua abolished the Torah, and with it the priesthood, it stands to reason that believers in Yeshua are the replacement for the Levitical priests. Moreover, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was, in great measure, also a reaction against the Roman Catholic Church and her doctrine that a professional priesthood stood between the common believer and God. In contrast, the framers of the priesthood-of-all-believers doctrine believed (as we do) that there is only one Man between God and mankind, the Man Yeshua. In this way the idea of the priesthood of all believers focused on the privilege of every true believer to approach God directly through Yeshua.

So what is the problem with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers?

First of all, we know that Yeshua did not come to abolish the Torah and that the Levitical priesthood will be re-established during the millennial Temple (Ezek 45:5; 48:11-13). Therefore He could not have abolished the Levitical priesthood via His death, for had He done so they could never be reinstated (unless something within the efficacious nature of His death was overturned).

Secondly, and most importantly, Peter quotes Ex 19:5–6 because those believers to whom he was writing had demonstrated a living and abiding faith in Messiah by living out their faith in obedience to God’s word. As such, they were fulfilling the role of being a light to the nations, teaching through a life of obedience the ways of God. And this teaching function was one of the primary aspects of the priesthood. The priests in ancient Israel were to be those who instructed the people in the ways of God. This teaching function of the priests is surely what is intended by the label “a kingdom of priests.” That is, Israel would be a nation functioning as she was intended to function, as a light (teacher) to the nations. But even when obedient Israel would take her God-given role as a teacher to the nations, God never intended that every individual should function as a Cohen in the Tabernacle or Temple. There were still unique duties as well as responsibilities for the Levitical priests.

Thirdly, the abuse of the priesthood concept by the Roman Catholic church offers no true foil from which one ought to develop a biblical doctrine. In fact, in the face of Catholicism’s abuse, the

answer should have been to see the Melchizedek priesthood in Yeshua as the fulfillment to which the Levitical priesthood has always pointed, and to revel in the fact that He is functioning as our High Priest, interceding for us before the Father.

Fourthly, the priesthood of all believers doctrine, so prevalent in our times, was fueled by the upsurge of dispensational doctrines being taught around the beginning of the 20th Century. Dispensationalism taught that in the “Old Testament,” one could only access God through the appointed priest. Since the coming of Yeshua, however, and the abolishment of the Torah (so dispensationalism taught), the priesthood has been done away with in favor of the greater high priest, Yeshua. And thus all believers, functioning as priests, have direct access to God.

Some might point to verses in Revelation to support the priesthood of all believers (Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). The first two references, however, are most likely dependent upon Ex 19:6, and carry the same message, namely, that those who remain steadfast in their faith represent the nation (Israel) that is to be defined by the service of the priests in their duties before the Lord. As to Rev 20:6, this is speaking specifically of those martyred for their faith during the time of the great tribulation. In some fashion, these resurrected martyrs take on priestly function during the millennial period. But this is hardly representative of all believers in all eras.

What are the ramifications if, as I have suggested, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is not, in fact, a biblical doctrine? First, we should affirm that at least part of the motivation for this doctrine was right on the mark, namely, that each believer in HaShem has direct access to the Father through the Messiah. But this has always been the case! Consider Hannah, David, Daniel, Joel, Habakkuk, and others mentioned in the Tanach—all people who, not being Levitical priests, had ready access to the Father through their prayers. What is more, for those who exercised saving faith in the promised Messiah, their faith is demonstrated when they brought their sacrifices to the priests (whether in the Tabernacle or Temple), for in the dramatization of the sacrifice they awaited and looked forward to the coming Lamb of God Who would take away the sins of the world.

Secondly, however, and perhaps most importantly, a realization that I am not, in fact, a priest (in the sense of having access to the Most Holy place for atonement) leaves me in dire need of a priest! This means that my only access to the Father is, in reality, through the High Priest Yeshua. Apart from Him, I have no entrance into the Most Holy Place. Thus, I am fully dependent upon Him for access to the Father, and therefore praying “in the Name of Yeshua” takes on extremely significant value, for each time I evoke the name of Messiah in my prayer I confess that apart from Him I have no way to HaShem (Jn 14:6; Heb 4:14–16).

Thirdly, a realization that the priesthood-of-all-believers doctrine is not biblically based does away with the “problem” of a reinstated Levitical priesthood in the millennium. Since the Levitical priesthood was always a visual aid or foreshadowing of the ultimate Melchizedekian priesthood in Yeshua, the return of the Levitical priest as a necessary part of Temple worship in no way contradicts the work of Yeshua as our High Priest in the heavenly Tabernacle. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in Ezekiel’s description of the millennial Temple (Ezek 40–48), he never speaks of the *cohen gadol* (high priest) but constantly refers to the “prince” (נָשִׂיא, *nasi*, “prince”) as the one who carries out the functions of the *cohen*.

We may conclude from this study that as we obey God, we function as a kingdom of priests, not in the sense of performing redemptive acts (sacrifice, atonement, etc.) but in the sense of teaching others Torah through word and deed. Likewise we learn that we are all in need of a priest in order to have access to the Father and so that full atonement can be made on our behalf. This priest is

none other than Yeshua Himself.

From our *parashah*, we may be able to make some applications from the enduring principles gleaned by noting the Torah requirements for the Levitical priests. First, the priests were not allowed to own land and could not therefore have an inheritance (18:1). What purpose might HaShem have had for this stipulation? Unfortunately, the desire for wealth often leads to a compromise of the truth. Since the priests were charged with the function of teaching the people (cf, Deut 24:8), God forbade them the ability to stockpile wealth through inheritance. Even if someone were to bequeath them inheritable land, some commentators (such as Rashi) interpret the laws of the priesthood to suggest that they were not allowed to take it. Since, however, the priests could not build an inheritance, they were to be cared for by the community, and the community was to be careful to support them as a matter of direct obedience to HaShem (18:4-5).

Secondly, while the priests could not acquire land and the wealth that went with it, they were likewise free from the toil and work which inevitably goes with the getting of wealth. They were to give themselves to the service of HaShem, i.e., the needs of the people in their worship and the need of the people to know and live out Torah. From this we may derive some general principles: (a) those charged with the teaching responsibility within the community should not have to spend their energies making a living through other means. While they forfeit the possibility of self-sufficiency (through acquired wealth), they nonetheless have the time for the study their role requires. (b) support of teachers should be as unto the Lord, not as a lever to pressure them to conform their teaching to the liking of those who support them. Since the Torah gives a set rule as to what part of the sacrifice the Levite could take (cf 1Sa 2:12ff where the sons of Eli abuse this Torah commandment), their support was a matter of God's doing, not a kind of benevolence by the community. Teachers who fear that their support will be gone if they teach their conscience are surely affected in their ability to speak the truth. Conversely, Teachers who use their position as a means of gaining great wealth will surely answer to HaShem (cf. Jms 3:1), for gaining material wealth has become their focus rather than the truth and God's glory.

The previous context to our *parashah* has discussed the judge and the king, and now the role of the priest has been outlined. Next Moses will delineate the role of the prophet, but before he does, he addresses a common tendency in human nature, i.e., the desire to know the future, and the pagan methods thought to meet this need, i.e., divination and the occult. In 18:9-14 HaShem outlines for us all what His thoughts are regarding these things: "any who does these things is an abomination of HaShem" (18:12 בְּיַתְוָעֲבַת יְהוָה כָּל-עֵשָׂה אֲלֵהָ). God simply will not tolerate attempts to mix the occult into the lives of His redeemed people. This, by the way, is one of the grave dangers of the Kabbalistic literature, for in the *Hekhalot* (Chariot texts), biblical texts are intertwined with passages which deal with palmistry and reading the lines of the face, all taught to give power over other people and to be able (supposedly) to ascertain their fate. These texts have found their way, in part, into even more common texts such as the *Zohar*. [Cf. Joseph Dan, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (MOD books, Tel Aviv, 1993), p. 20.]

How far should we take this? I would suggest that we should stay far away from anything that is even remotely connected with divination. Do you read your horoscope in the daily paper? Do you read the little message in the fortune cookie? Do you buy the little scrolls at the grocery checkout stand which claim to divine the future of a person based upon astrological signs? Do you allow superstition to affect your daily decisions? These are things with which the people of God should have no part. They seek to diminish the very glory of God because they are an open invitation to

participate in the realm of Satan.

Surely God does, at times, send His word to His people to warn them and even to disclose to them something yet future. His prophets, while primarily the covenant ambassadors from the Great King (HaShem) to His vassal (Israel), did, at times, disclose future events and call Israel to live in the belief that the foretold events would, in fact, come to pass. 18:15ff give specific details regarding the role of the prophet and the requirement of the people to hearken to his words.

The passage found in 18:15ff has regularly been viewed by Christian authors as messianic, and as speaking of the coming of Yeshua. This interpretation is based upon Stephen's use of this text (Acts 7:37) in his sermon, as well as its direct application to Yeshua by Peter in his Shavuot sermon (Acts 3:22-23). This is, of course, true, but I would emphasize that Yeshua is the ultimate fulfillment of this text, with all of Israel's prophets being a progressive "filling up" of the prophecy. That is to say, the promise God gives through Moses, that He would raise up a prophet like him, applies to each true prophet that would follow Moses. In this way, the words of the subsequent prophets have divine authority even as Moses' words do. Thus, to disregard the prophet whom God has sent is to disregard God Himself.

However, the false prophet could speak on his own initiative, seeking to deceive the people by claiming to have received a revelation from God or even to have received revelation from other gods. In this case not only was the prophet's message to be disregarded, but the prophet himself was to be put to death.

How were the people to know whether or not a prophet was speaking the word of HaShem? 18:22 gives one test (13:1 adds another): if the thing which the prophet declared in the name of HaShem did not come true, that prophet was no longer to be feared, i.e., one was not to regard his words as given by God. 13:1 adds the caveat that even if the event prophesied came true, if the prophet promoted worship of other gods, he was a false prophet as well.

The question of whether or not HaShem is still sending prophets in our day is an interesting one. We know that in the 1st Century congregations of The Way, there were those who held the position of "prophet" (1Cor 11:5; 14:29ff; Eph 4:11). The interpretation that these were those who simply taught the Scriptures but did not disclose revelations of the future simply cannot be sustained. All uses of the term "prophet" involve, in one measure or another, the prediction of the future based upon revelation. Though the prophet was known for simply declaring the truth about God, he or she was also involved in disclosing the future based upon the received revelation. While some have wanted to distinguish between the prophets in the Tanach and those we read about in the Apostolic Scriptures, it seems that such a distinction is somewhat arbitrary. For instance, Dr. Wayne Grudem (*The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* [Crossway Books, 1988]) suggests that the two (prophets in ancient Israel compared to prophets in the early messianic congregations) must be different based upon the fact that in 1Cor 14 Paul lays down not only the directive to test the prophets, but also (apparently) to disregard what they say if they fail the test (based upon the Greek word for "judge", κρίνω, *krinō*, which can mean to "sift wheat" and thus to extract what is good and discard what is not). Grudem would ask, "when was such a thing done with one of the prophets in ancient Israel?" He goes on to suggest that the shift of meaning occurred when "apostles," not prophets, became the authors of the Apostolic Scriptures. For all of the Tanach is written by prophets. But since the term "prophet" in the Greek culture had gained negative connotations in the mystery cults, the term was avoided at first and "apostle" used instead. Once, however, the authoritative position of the Tanach prophet had been replaced by the "apostle," the term

prophet was available to be used for non-authoritative teaching—teaching which could be sifted and the good retained, while the “chaff” discarded.

While this explanation could solve the issue of how prophets were to be “judged” (1Cor 14), it seems to me to make too great a distinction and leave the so-called “new testament prophet” without any guidelines nor the congregation any recourse when the false prophet is clearly identified. What is more, the fact that the Lxx used the same Greek term (*προφήτης*, *prophētēs*, “prophet”) for the ancient prophet in Israel as the Apostolic Scriptures used for the prophet in the congregation, would lead one to believe that in their minds they considered the position to have had continuity with the ancient prophets.

How then should we apply our Torah text to the current day? It seems very straightforward: if someone claims to speak in the name of HaShem, and proclaims that such-and-such will happen in the future, when the time-frame expires which the “prophet” delineated and the prophesied event has not occurred, that prophet is to be labeled a false prophet and is no longer to be revered (feared) with regard to his teaching. It seems that a great many false prophets are still actively teaching via radio, TV, and internet, who, for all practical purposes, should be entirely disregarded. Of course, in the diaspora, and apart from the rule of Messiah in the Land, the application of the death penalty is an impossibility.

It may also be the case that the gift of prophecy (Rom 12:6; 1Cor 12:10) was given to some within the early communities of The Way in order that those given the gift of prophecy would communicate God’s directions for the followers of Yeshua until such time as the inspired Apostolic Scriptures would be written. This may be how we are to understand Paul’s teaching in 1Cor 13:8–10.

Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part; but when the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. (1Cor 13:8–10)

By speaking of “the perfect” (*τὸ τέλειον*) which is to come, here Paul may be referring to the completion of the Apostolic Scriptures and thus the biblical canon. In the following verses (1Cor 13:11–13), even the written canon of Scripture is made complete by the return of Yeshua, Who is “The Word” (John 1:1, 14) and therefore the One by Whom all things are brought to their final completion, as Paul writes in Ephesians: “the summing up of all things in Messiah, things in the heavens and things on the earth” (Eph 1:10).

Having discussed the responsibilities of the Priest and Prophet, Moses goes on to recap the laws of the Cities of Refuge (cf. Num 35:9ff) and to add some new information. Since the administration of the manslayer within the cities of refuge would be the responsibility of the priest, it is fitting that this should be linked to the former context.

The Land was initially to be divided into three parts, so that the cities of refuge were not determined with reference to population centers, but in relationship to borders and to the proximity of one to the other. In other words, they were to be sufficiently distributed throughout the Land so as to make access to them more or less equal for all regardless of where they lived in Israel.

The one eligible to flee to the City of Refuge is clearly the one who has committed manslaughter, i.e., a murder which was accidental and not premeditated. Anger against a fellowman could

always be construed as motive for murder (note Yeshua's words in Matt 5) and would thus make suspect the one who claimed manslaughter. Furthermore, one would have to presume that the axe head which slipped (or the chunk of wood which slipped from the axe head, so one interpretation, cf. b.*Makkot* 7b) was loose not be negligence but by some other means.

The adding of three more cities is so that innocent blood not be shed in the Land (19:9-10). In fact, the Cities of Refuge are a beautiful illustration of the balance God has between desiring holiness for His people (thus allowing the avenger of blood to put a guilty murderer to death) and preserving innocent life in the midst of a fallen world where accidental injury and death will most assuredly occur. But He remembers the recipe from which we were made (dust) and He knows that until sin is entirely removed from our existence, we will deal with the sorrows and woes of life which are inevitable. Yet in spite of these inevitabilities, HaShem demands that righteousness prevail, and that the innocent have their lives preserved. This also is an enduring principle that should characterize our corporate and individual lives.