

Designated Readers: Deuteronomy's Portrait of the Ideal King – or Is It Preacher?

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If you know anything about preaching, you'll know that a number of famous preachers and teachers of preaching have encouraged us to preach like Scripture itself. Put slightly differently, this means that our practices of teaching and preaching should be formed and informed by Scripture itself.¹ I agree wholeheartedly, and, in a related vein, have often encouraged students to develop their theologies of Scripture on the basis of specific texts from Scripture. Wanting to set a good example, I've tried to do this myself. I have five texts on my "for sure" list. They include the following:

John 6:68: Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." (NRSV)

Eccl 5:2: Never be rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be quick to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few. (NRSV)

Job 2:10: [Job] replied... "Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (NIV)

Genesis 32:31: The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel ["the face of God," in Hebrew], limping because of his hip.

The fifth, very important text is Deuteronomy 17:14-20, Deuteronomy's law of the king: When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me," you may indeed set over you a king whom the LORD your God will choose. One of your own community you may set as king over you; you are not permitted to put a foreigner over you, who is not of your own community. Even so, he must not acquire many horses for himself, or return the people to Egypt in order to acquire more horses, since the LORD has said to you, "You must never return that way again." And he must not acquire many wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; also silver and gold he must not acquire in great quantity for himself. When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law [Hebrew: torah] written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law [Hebrew: torah] and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel. (NRSV)

Deuteronomy 17 and Old Testament Kingship

It is a striking and rather under-known fact that in all of the Pentateuch, with its dizzying and seemingly countless laws, only one concerns the king. Several monarchs are mentioned in the Torah, of course, but there are no laws about the native Israelite king apart from this one single passage in Deuteronomy 17.

Now, despite the venerable status of Deuteronomy 17 as Holy Writ or the long tradition of the three-fold office of Christ and his ministers as prophets, priests, and kings, I know that royal imagery is often in bad company these days. It's too autocratic, too hierarchical, too dictatorial, hegemonic, you name it. I mean, it's just plain anti-democratic. Nevertheless, despite the many real problems we may have with royal imagery, I have become convinced that this text holds great promise for us as preachers and servants of the Gospel (or is it servants of Torah?). Let me make a few comments.

As you'll recall from your seminary days, most biblical scholars agree that the foibles of the Israelite monarchy, and especially the mistakes of Solomon, are on the brain of the author of Deuteronomy 17. In the canonical flow, of course, Deuteronomy 17 long precedes Israel's demand for a king in I Samuel 8, let alone Solomon's rule as described in I Kings 1-11. But the links, both lexical and thematic, are strong, so strong that when readers get to those later passages, they already know something about them and how they are at odds with Deuteronomy's law of the king. They hear the echoes and catch the allusions. Of course, that is probably exactly what Scripture, or at least those authors responsible for Samuel and Kings called the Deuteronomists, who apparently crafted their work with Deuteronomy on their brains, wants us to catch and to hear. So it is not impossible, and, in fact, according to many, quite likely, that Deuteronomy 17 was written after firsthand exposure to the exploits and exploitations of the monarchy. The deuteronomic law of the king that is, is to no small degree against kingship. Rejoice all who dislike tyrants!

The "Designated Reader" Back Then

Now the "against-ness" of kingship in Deuteronomy 17 is rather obvious and stark when set against Solomonic excess in I Kings, but it is apparent already in the words of the text itself. Note the severe restrictions placed on the executive branch:

First, required membership in the community (17:15; cf. 17:20a): the king must be an Israelite. A foreigner may not be king "over you"; at least, a foreign-born king may not be selected by Israel itself. The language used here is quite familial: literally, "one of your brothers" you may set over you as king, but not a stranger, not someone Israel doesn't know. This keeps leadership all in the family, so to speak, and already hints at some of the restrictions that will follow.

Second, limitations on economic excess (17:16; cf. 17:17b): the acquisition of horses is connected in real ways to exploitation: returning the people to Egypt in order to multiply horses. The king can't do that.

Third, limitations on personal excess including both sexual and economic excess (17:17; cf. 17:20a): Even what might be called "interpersonal excess" is forbidden: the king shall not exalt himself (literally, "his heart") over the other members of the community (literally, again, "his brothers"). In the old days, this

was called “pride”; the king can’t have any.

These significant restrictions are answered by a series of positive injunctions, which can be boiled down to two (and ultimately, probably, just one):

First, he must write a copy of this Torah in a book. Against the NRSV, the verb for writing used here is singular and active and implies, I think, the king’s own copying of the document. This king is, in short, a Torah scribe. In contrast to general ancient Near Eastern practice, the deuteronomic king is not a promulgator of the law so much as its servant and faithful transmitter.

Second, this Torah must be with him and he must read in it all the days of his life. This personally-written copy of the Torah “shall remain with him” (NRSV), and it will get a lot of use: he must read in it constantly. Note the length and specificity of the injunction: “all the days.” That means every day “of his life,” that means all of it. This king is, in short, a Torah reader. A devoted and expert one at that.

There’s more to the passage, but the heat and light are at the collision of the negative prohibitions and the positive injunctions. By any standards, let alone ancient Near Eastern ones, what Deuteronomy is describing here is by no stretch of the imagination a king. I mean, sure, no problem with the king being indigenous or monogamous. We’re probably okay with that (even if our politicians often aren’t!). But what kind of king, of any substance at least, doesn’t have lots of stuff? What king is not proud, exalted over his people? Those are hallmarks of monarchy. “Monarchy,” by definition, means “rule” (Greek: *archē*) of “one” (Greek: *monos*) over all others. By definition, even if those are, in fact, the negative hallmarks of monarchy. But the Israelite monarch imagined by Deuteronomy has none of those negative hallmarks. In their place, Deuteronomy envisions not a king, but a designated reader: someone (you can’t even call him a king; if you do, make sure you put it in quotation marks) who copies the Torah, who has it at his elbow at all times, and who reads in it incessantly with the result being that this person serves the Lord, keeps the Torah and the statutes, remains humble, is faithful, and thus ensures a long rule for himself and his descendants. And who wouldn’t want a king or a dynasty like that?

The “Designated Reader” Now

This notion of the designated reader has stuck with me ever since I first happened upon it. No external and certainly no exploitive accoutrements of power here. Instead, service by means of reading. I often tell students, especially those preparing for ministry, but also other folks (pastors, even liturgists in training), that Deuteronomy 17 is not a bad model for them. They are, or will be soon enough, designated readers, designated to read things that those whom they serve have neither time, desire, nor, let’s face it, interest in reading. Things like Scripture!

The designated reader is a good model for all kinds of people, but I think it is an especially pregnant image for those of us who preach and teach the Bible, the good news of the Gospel of God. Imagine having (imagine being!) a preacher or teacher who wears no external and exploitive accoutrements of power, whether those are manifested in heavy-handedness in a board meeting, intellectual posturing by means of the well-placed but perhaps mispronounced Greek, Hebrew, or Latin term in the midst of the sermon, or the ever-expanding and thoroughly

careerist resume, but instead who is a member of the community, kin with students and parishioners, and, among other things--no scratch that--not among other things, but as the only thing – is their designated reader. Talk about a subject-centered classroom! Talk about a Scripture-centered community! Talk about a Bible-oriented church!

This is a counterintuitive, counter-cultural model of leadership, but an empowering one for those whom we serve, the community of God's people. It is an image of a queen robbed of queenship as humanly constructed, void of all the marks of success as commonly understood: money, sex, power, that unholy trinity that rules our churches as much as it does our economy. Instead, in their place, we have a ruler envisioned as God desires: a designated reader. And a designated reader of Torah. For we must not forget that it is not just any book or every book that this ruler reads and writes. It is Deuteronomy itself. It is Torah. It is Scripture.

Now I know that last bit is easy for me to say, being a biblical scholar, Old Testament at that, who's worked a bit in Deuteronomy with more of that ahead of me. Not everyone is so lucky, I'm afraid! But whatever our interests and expertise, mine included, we know we have to read a lot of books, not just Deuteronomy, not just Torah, and not just Scripture. (Alas!) But even then we can still be designated readers for our people. Indeed, Deuteronomy's model of a humble ruler (better: reader) might be even more important vis-à-vis these other "books" (or subjects or areas) since they are often arcane, esoteric, in other tongues like seminary-speak, and so completely inaccessible to our people. How easy to lord it over them! To impress them with our learning and insight! But the designated reader does not exalt her heart over her brothers and sisters.

Whatever books we must read in as part of our disciplines and as part of our callings, if we wish to learn from Deuteronomy 17, then we must not neglect its emphasis on Torah. I think that means that our pursuit, our designated reading, whatever the subject, must come back to and be rooted in our life with God and our pursuit of God; that it must be rooted in God's instruction, in God's designs and purposes. All these things and more are evoked by the Hebrew word *torah*, which means "law" or "instruction," on the one hand, and on the other, can be used to designate the five books of Moses or even all of Scripture itself. Deuteronomy's emphasis on reading the Torah, not something else, at all times means that ours is a properly theological task. There is more to that task than Scripture, though Scripture plays a preeminent role (in my humble Old Testament opinion!). But, regardless, our task involves, everywhere and always, God. That discipline must be with us always, and we must read in it all the days of our life. And we must write it, write in it, ourselves, not remaining content merely with someone else's copy.²

What Good Is Designated Reading?

Now I think all this business about reading makes a lot of sense, but reading may seem like a highly unimportant luxury in the face of the real difficulties plaguing our world. What use is reading, in the face of war, I.E.D.s, famine, suffering, political races, murdered student body presidents, and all the rest? Huge social ills and large matters of public policy will not be fixed easily by simply reading a scroll.³ But then again, this scroll, this Torah we are talking about, is not just any book; it isn't like any other book. The book that we've been called to read, cho-

sen by the Lord to serve as designated reader of, presents an alternative vision of how the world can be, a transforming vision of God, of society, of humanity, and all points in between and even beyond. It is a book, a vision, a place where the lowly are exalted and the powerful and wicked brought low (Luke 1:51-53); where widows and orphans count as much as the married and the parented; where the weapons of war are melted down and made into John Deere tractors just in time for harvest; where nations not only sign non-proliferation treaties, but they decide to disband their armies altogether and do away with intelligence agencies (Isa 2:4); and where the monarch herself reads the Lord's words "all the days of her life."

And if this reading is going to matter, we mustn't miss the fact that it is done on behalf of others, on behalf of future generations, so that not only the rulers themselves can live long in the land of God's promise, but also their children after them, ensuring that this benevolent, Torah-obsessed, God-preoccupied designated reading on behalf of others never ends.⁴ The fact that our world leaders, all of them it seems, evidently do not care much for such rule or such reading only underscores the urgency of it. Far from being irrelevant or unimportant, then, the image of the designated reader is desperately needed, even if, for the moment, reading seems like the last thing one should be doing.⁵

The Results of Designated Reading

And what's the result of all this reading? Perhaps it is too optimistic, but for Deuteronomy, the result is as automatic as it is axiomatic: right worship of the Lord, obedience, humility, fidelity, and a long rule, if in fact "rule" is the best word. A long "reading and preaching" might be more appropriate. Now let me ask you: who would not want to have a pastor or a preacher like that? And who wouldn't want to be a preacher or pastor like that?

Notes

1. See especially the works of Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989); and *The Witness of Preaching* (2d ed.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), esp. 117-71; and Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), esp. 170-93. See also Mike Graves, *The Sermon as Symphony: Preaching the Literary Forms of the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1997).
2. Note Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Torah Commentary: Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 168, who points out that "writing makes a more lasting impression than does merely reading."
3. See Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 186-7.
4. Compare Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, 188: The Torah keeps the managers of power fixed on the social fabric and the neighbor who has no horses, no silver, no gold, and perhaps only one wife or one husband who is underfunded."

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