

# ***SYSTEMS AS GOD INTENDS AND HUMANITY CORRUPTS***

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## **The World As It Should Be**

Deuteronomy is one of the most strategic books of the Hebrew Bible. It is the clearest biblical statement of the world as God intended it to be, including the ways the political, economic and religious systems of Israel are meant to operate. I call that social design "the Shalom Community", because the Hebrew word "shalom" best describes the totality of both public and private life as a unity of contentment, prosperity, peace, welfare and wholeness – society as God intends it to be.

The public life of Israel, according to Deuteronomy, is to be built upon relationship with the Hebrew God, Yahweh. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You (nation) shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Deut. 6:4-5a; also see 10:12-21).

Deuteronomy was presenting as the foundation for Israel's public life what today would be called a *relational culture*. A relational culture is one in which power is shared through the people's participation both in the formation and the ongoing functioning of their society's political, economic and religious ("values-formation") systems. Relational (or people) power seeks to distribute power, with public life built around the relationships people have with one another – including those chosen to be in authority. Such a culture was very evident in the early years of Israel's history when the social structure was very "flat", with any Israelite having direct access to and the capacity for exercising influence over each leader. Such a relational culture was clearly assumed by the author of Deuteronomy as a precondition for the successful exercise of power in the "shalom community".

In Deuteronomy, that relational culture has its origins in both each individual's and all society's relationship with God. In essence, to the author of Deuteronomy, God is a Person – a "great, mighty and awesome" person – but a person nonetheless. And in the final analysis, Israel's capacity to be the kind of society God desires and calls it to be depends upon its capacity to respond to God's love with like love. "It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you – for you were the fewest of all peoples. It was because the Lord loved you . . . that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand . . . from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt." (Deut. 7:7-8)

Israel was selected by God to be God's chosen people, not because of any superior quality in them, but because they were "the fewest of all peoples". That phrase does not mean "the lowest population of all peoples" but "the least powerful of all peoples". Israel is the weakest and most oppressed people of the time of the Exodus, and therefore God chooses them. God is always on the side of the poor and powerless.

The premise of Deuteronomy is that if Israel is a nation in love with Yahweh, then it will inevitably be a nation that loves its people. So it is that Deuteronomy's intention to build its society on a love relationship with God and each other must inevitably move that society to shape its political system in conformity to those love relationships.

Such a relational culture is commanded by Deuteronomy to be extended to "strangers" and "aliens within your gates" (10:19), but not to "foreigners" or "other nations" (15:3-6). The differentiation is important. The "stranger" or "alien" was a person of another ethnic or racial group or of another nation who had surrendered belief in their god and embraced Yahweh (e.g.,

Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, who was a citizen of the nation and tribe of Moab, but who had immigrated to Israel and embraced its relational culture and God – see Ruth 1:16-17). The "foreigner" or people of "other nations" were those either inside or outside Israel who embraced the gods of unilateral aristocratic or military power (Amon-Re, Baal) or rapaciousness or concupiscence (Dagon, Ashteroth). Thus, Israel was enjoined by Deuteronomy to have nothing to do with nations or peoples who ran their societies through a conspiracy of king, economic elite, priest and the military for the purpose of dominating the people and using them as serfs. This injunction is not because of racial, ethnic or national discrimination; rather it is because Israel stands for a national justice and relational culture that is opposed to what the other nations stand for.

Deuteronomy names two systems to conduct the political life of the nation – the judicial system (16:18-20) and the system of governance (i.e., the king) (17:14-20). Deuteronomy teaches that the essential role of the political system is *to dispense justice*. "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you may live and occupy the land that the Lord your God is giving you." (Deut. 16:20)

For the judiciary, "dispensing justice" means remaining free of corrupting influences such as bribes. To guarantee that justice will occur, Deuteronomy creates an appellate court system that, through its capacity to overrule a judgment, holds each judge accountable. For the monarchy, justice is the inevitable outworking of a government that exists to serve the people; the nation, its resources and its people are not the king's personal property.

A nation and culture built on relationship with God and each other will inevitably result in a government that will seek justice in all it does. But a commitment to justice for both rich and poor alike will inevitably mean dealing with the way the wealth of that nation is generated and distributed. So Deuteronomy presents the economic profile of a nation under God. It declares, "When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you – a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant – and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." (Deut. 6:10-12)

Deuteronomy is reminding Israel that all that it possesses is a gift from God. Therefore, do not insult God by saying, "My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth" (8:17). Because this wealth is a gift from God, Deuteronomy teaches that it is *not a private wealth to be owned but a common wealth that God has invested in the Israelites so that they can be good trustees or stewards of that wealth*.

Since wealth is to be only temporarily invested in the people, for what purpose are they to manage it? It is at this point that Deuteronomy presents its most radical insight – as radical for its time as it is for our own. Wealth is to be used for one purpose alone – *"There will, however, be no poor among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession to occupy, if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment."* (Deut. 15:4-51) Wealth is to be used to rid the nation of poverty (which was considered a national disgrace)! If wealth is accumulated, this should be as savings for investment that will create more abundance to be shared with all – not for conspicuous consumption (certainly chief executive officer salary/benefit packages that reach into the millions would not be tolerated).

Deuteronomy is replete with instructions as to how the nation can guarantee that the economy is managed in such a way that poverty will be eliminated from the nation. No interest is to be charged on loans. Wealth cannot be passed from one generation to another. All debts are to be forgiven every seven years and wealth is to be evenly redistributed. All wealth is to be tithed for the purpose of eliminating poverty in the community in which the tithe-giver lives. Even the institution of slavery was profoundly different than that of the slavery practiced by Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Rome – or the United States. The Israelite slave was more of an "indentured servant" than "chattel", who agreed temporarily to service of a "master" as a way of paying off debts or other obligations. Therefore, Deuteronomy commands that all slaves are to be set free every seven years and fairly compensated for their period of enslavement. The "bottom line" of each of these regulations is simply to use Israel's wealth to eradicate poverty from the nation. But how will Israel insure its political, economic and religious systems will remain faithful to the Deuteronomic vision? Deuteronomy creates the office of the prophet to hold the systems accountable for following a relational religion, a politics of justice and an economics of equitable distribution. It also assigns to the people the responsibility to live out in their own homes, families and businesses God's intentions for the larger society, to join with the prophets in holding the three systems accountable (Dt. 7:9-11), and to pass on to the next generation this understanding of society (6:5-9).

This is the magnificent vision of "the world as it should be", as presented by Deuteronomy and moving throughout the entirety of the Hebrew and Christian scripture – literally, from its first page to its last. It is a vision of an upward spiral of society – a vision of a society moving closer and closer to what God intends. Out of their relationship with God and one another, the people work toward the practice of a politics of justice and an economics of equitable distribution of wealth, which would then, in turn, lead to only a deeper love for God and one another as poverty is eliminated and greater justice realized.

But, of course, this vision wasn't always embraced and followed either by Israel or by the Church. So we must ask, "Does the Bible teach us what went wrong, and what keeps going wrong, that keeps this vision from being realized in the real world?" What we discover is that the Bible gives the most profound analysis of how evil can corrupt even the best intentions of humanity. Because humans have a proclivity to sin, individual greed or lust for power can corrupt the systems. But the Bible does not limit its analysis to individual sin. In fact, it specifically addresses what might be called "systemic sin" or "sinful structures".

### **The World As It Is**

The scripture is full of a surprisingly consistent social analysis of how and why its political, economic and religious (values-sustaining) systems have become so corrupted. But perhaps one of the clearest analyses is found in Ezekiel 22.

The corruption of Israel is due to the redirection of each of its three primary systems. Ezekiel begins his analysis with the corruption of the political system.

The task of the political system, according to Deuteronomy, is to work for justice. But what have the "princes" (i.e., the political leaders) done with this responsibility, according to Ezekiel? They have used their positions of power to become oppressors of the most vulnerable people and groups of that society – the widows and the powerless – becoming to them and the nation "like a roaring lion tearing its prey" (22:25). And this they have done because they are in alliance with an exploiting economic system from which both benefit in accrued wealth and power.

The political system, instead of guaranteeing justice, has been practicing a *politics of oppression*. And this is precisely the great temptation of every political system since time immemorial – to serve its own ends and join with economic and religious systems to accrue power at the expense of the people, even if that means the oppression of the people.

The responsibility of the economic system, according to Deuteronomy, was to be faithful stewards of the nation's wealth so that there could be an equitable distribution of that wealth in order to eliminate poverty. But what have Israel's economic leaders done with that responsibility? (By Ezekiel's time, Israel (the northern kingdom) had been destroyed. His comments are directed to Judah – the southern kingdom. Since Judah was now all that remained of larger Israel, we will refer to it as "Israel".)

The business leaders of Israel had moved from seeing the purpose of business to provide a service or of quality goods, to embracing its purpose as making the biggest profit possible (22:27). They took bribes. They charged interest in their loans (explicitly disobeying Israel's Law). They extorted (22:12). And such action in regards to their money had resulted in a significant shift of economic leaders from perceiving themselves as *stewards* of a "common wealth" to *owners* of a private wealth. The result of that perspective was a profound change in the way Israel's economic leaders used the nation's wealth – for they used it for their own purposes and profit, intentionally exploiting the poor, marginalized and powerless of that society to increase their wealth. They were practicing an *economics of exploitation*.

The purpose of the religious system, according to Deuteronomy, is to enable the nation to embrace a relational culture – to be in active personal relationship with God and each other. But by Ezekiel's time, what has the religious system done to that commission?

What Ezekiel tells us (22:26) is that the religious leaders are withholding from the people what they need to know in order to follow the Law and therefore be right with God. But one must ask, "Why would religious leaders refuse to give to the people the information they need in order to be in a right relationship with God?" The answer is obvious. It gives them control over the people. And they can use that control to rationalize what is being done by the other two systems and thus to "bless" the oppression and exploitation of the people.

This, of course, is the essential weakness of any system that helps to set and maintain the values and beliefs of a society. That system can use its authority to create and maintain those values that are most self-serving, as well as those that serve the political and economic powers of the society. This is what the professional religionists of Ezekiel's world were doing – they were creating a *religion of control*!

What Ezekiel is describing here are the forces that bring about the collapse of a society. Describing it as a *descending spiral*, Ezekiel perceives that the decay of a society begins with its economic system, and the perspective of its managers that their primary task is to make as great a profit for themselves and their business entity, no matter how much that leads to the exploitation of the people. The more the economic system exploits the people, the more it will need to call upon the political system to use its power in order to oppress by its capacity to create and interpret laws that favor the economic system. Thus, the collusion of a political system with the economic system allows for and permits greater exploitation.

But a political system can oppress only so far before it loses its credibility with the people. Thus, it must depend upon those structures in society which create, teach and maintain that society's values to "bless" the political and economic systems (in our society, those structures include public and private education at all levels, marketing, entertainment, news

media, and even professional sports). Thus, the "religious" system uses its influence over the people to maintain the people's obedience and support of these systems. And that, in turn, gives permission to the economic system to undertake even greater exploitation – which it will inevitably do. And thus the society spirals downward toward its own self-destruction.

Who can stop that descending spiral? There are potentially three reformist forces in society, Ezekiel teaches – the prophet, the people and God. And God help your nation if it has to be God! The first reformist force is the prophet. Deuteronomy calls the prophet to hold the systems accountable. But Ezekiel tells us "the prophets have smeared whitewash on (the systems') behalf" (22:28). They are "covering up" the actual practices of the systems so that the people won't discern how they are being betrayed. The prophets have been seduced! And those who haven't been seduced are slandered, shunned, persecuted or killed!

The second reformist force is the people. Deuteronomy calls them to practice in their private lives and business associations the justice, stewardship and relationality to which the systems are to be committed, to hold systems accountable, and to pass on this way of life to future generations. But what have the people done with this heritage, according to Ezekiel?

Ezekiel writes, "The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress" (22:29). Ezekiel presents one of the saddest results of corrupt systems. It is that the people are infected with the systems' greed. Seeing the systems "grabbing for all they can get," the people follow suit and embrace those values for their own. Toward each other and especially toward those who are more vulnerable or marginalized than they are, the people become dominating, oppressive and exploitive. So they become complicit in the systemic evil around them.

Thus, Ezekiel declares, God seeks for any person "who would . . . stand in the breach before me on behalf of the (people), so that I would not destroy (the nation) – *but I found no one!*" (22:30b) So it is that God remains the only reformist force in such a decayed society. So what will God do? Ezekiel writes, "I have poured out my indignation upon them; *I have returned their conduct upon their heads*, says the Lord God." (22:31)

How will the end come to such a society? God will simply let it experience the consequences of its own action. God will simply allow the systems -- out of their greed and commitment to domination -- to destroy themselves, the people and that society. Their own lust for domination, power and wealth will annihilate them!

### **Action In the World As It Is in the Light of What It Should Be**

These are samples of the profound social analysis that occurs throughout the scriptures. But the question must now be asked, "What are the people to do about it?" As a reformist force in society, what are we called to do? Obviously, the Bible doesn't talk about community organizing, labor unions or democratic participation in civic life. These are social inventions of more recent times.

But its core message and narratives tell stories of people gathering themselves together out of their relationships with each other in order to fight for justice. Thus it was that Moses organized Pharaoh's bricklayers to fight against their exploitation – with God on their side! Biblical leaders like Joshua, David, Jeremiah, Esther, Daniel, Peter, Mary Magdalene, John the Baptist and even the Pharaoh-defying midwives Shiphrah and Puah (Exod. 1:15-20) used tactics of confrontation, nonviolent civil disobedience, agitation, negotiation and holding systems accountable to bring about change. Nehemiah organized the people of Jerusalem to rebuild their city, successfully

confronting the unjust systems of their country, and rebuilding their public life in the image of Deuteronomy.

Jesus challenged the Roman and Jewish systems and people of power and was an "in-your-face" agitator on the side of the poor and powerless, calling for a return to the Deuteronomic vision of love, justice and equitable distribution of resources. Defying the traditions of his culture, he gave important leadership roles to women and he spent significant time with lepers, tax collectors and others who were marginalized and excluded. He called those most despised and ostracized by their society (such as Matthew the tax-collector and Mary Magdalene, a reputed prostitute) to become leaders of his movement, declaring to the religious leaders of Israel, "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom" (Matt. 21:43).

Because of the impact the early Christians were having upon the political, economic and religious systems of the Greek and Roman worlds, they were called by their detractors, those "who are turning the world upside-down"! (Acts 17:6) In the light of Roman persecution, Paul called upon the church to engage in public life to work for Rome's transformation into the kingdom of God – and followed up his talk with powerful actions that held both the Jewish and Roman systems accountable.

The story of the Bible is a single 2000 year long narrative of a people who "administered justice, obtained promises (from the elite), shut the mouths of lions, escaped the edge of the sword, suffered mocking and flogging, were stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword, destitute, persecuted, tormented – of whom the world was not worthy. All of these died in faith without realizing the promise (of the Shalom Community)." (selected from Hebrews 11:33-39) The biblical witness is one of society as God intended it to be – a culture in relationship with God and each other, of justice, the equitable distribution of wealth and the engagement of its entire people in the shaping of its public life. The biblical witness is one of society gone awry – of political, economic, social and religious systems in collusion with each other to solidify the power, wealth and authority of those at the top, reducing the people to obedient servants of the powerful or as castaway detritus. The biblical witness is one of the continuing engagement of God's people in public life, driven by their faith in a just and loving God, their love for each other and their commitment to the building of a shalom community (or "kingdom of God") in the face of a world of both greedy and self-serving people and collusive, dominating systems.

Whether we are Christians, Jews, other peoples of faith, or those who love democracy and justice, the biblical witness can help us articulate a vision of public life lived at its highest, an analysis which enables us to understand evil as public and systemic as well as private and individual, and the commitment to work together in our public life toward a society which is truly relational and just, seeking a shared stewardship of the earth's resources "so that there will be no poor among you." (Deut. 15:4) This is the vision that will enable us to turn our society's public life "upside-down"!

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