

Deuteronomy 16:18

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates,
which the LORD thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes:
and they shall judge the people with just judgment.

Analysis

Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates—This verse transitions from worship (vv. 1-17) to justice (16:18-18:22), linking liturgy with law. The Hebrew shofetim veshotrim (שֹׁפְטִים וְשֹׁטְרִים, 'judges and officers') distinguishes judicial officials (who decide cases) from executive officers (who enforce decisions). 'In all thy gates' (בְּכָל-שַׁעַר יָדָא) means every town—justice must be locally accessible, not centralized bureaucracy.

Throughout thy tribes (לְשֵׁבֶט יִשְׂרָאֵל)—each of Israel's twelve tribes must establish justice systems, preventing judicial monopolies. The democratic note 'thou shalt make thee' (titten-lecha, תִּתֶּן-לְךָ) suggests community participation in selecting judges.

And they shall judge the people with just judgment—The emphatic phrase mishpat-tzedek (מִשְׁפָּט-צֶדֶק, 'righteous judgment') means justice according to God's law, not human opinion. The word tzedek (righteousness) appears throughout this section (vv. 19-20), emphasizing that justice reflects God's character. Paul later echoes this principle: magistrates are 'ministers of God' for good (Romans 13:4).

Historical Context

Moses established this justice system after Jethro's counsel (Exodus 18:13-26), creating tiered courts to handle disputes. This command assumes Israel's settled

life in Canaan with stable towns ('gates' = city courts, where elders judged). The system decentralized justice, preventing tyranny through local accountability. Ancient Near Eastern law codes (Hammurabi, etc.) were royal edicts; Israel's law was covenant revelation, with judges applying divine standards rather than kingly decrees. This distinction made Israel's justice system theocratic, not autocratic.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Study Questions

1. How does local, accessible justice ('in all thy gates') reflect God's concern that righteousness be practically available to all?
2. What does the link between worship (vv. 1-17) and justice (vv. 18ff) teach about the inseparability of liturgy and ethics?

Interlinear Text

וְשֹׁפֵט וְ	וְשֹׁטְרֵי יָם	נִתְּן	לְךָ	בְּכָל	שַׁעַר יְיָ	אֲשֶׁר
Judges	and officers	giveth	H0	H3605	thee in all thy gates	H834
H8199	H7860	H5414			H8179	
וְשֹׁפֵט וְ	אֱלֹהֵי יְיָ	נִתְּן	לְךָ	לְשַׁבֵּט יְיָ		
which the LORD	thy God	giveth	H0	thee throughout thy tribes		Judges
H3068	H430	H5414		H7626		H8199
אֶת	הָעָם	מִשְׁפָּט	צִדִּיק:			
H853	the people	judgment	with just			
	H5971	H4941	H6664			

Additional Cross-References

1 Chronicles 23:4 (Judgment): Of which, twenty and four thousand were to set forward the work of the house of the LORD; and six thousand were officers and judges:

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