

CHOOSING THE ONES WHOM THE LORD HAS CHOSEN

Some Biblico-Theological Reflections on the 2019 Elections

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“Be sure that the man you choose to be king is the one whom the LORD has chosen” - Deuteronomy 17:15

2019 Elections

The election for our local and national leadership is just around the corner. And so, it is but proper and fitting to reflect and to remind ourselves once again of some Biblical principles which may guide us in choosing leaders in the forthcoming elections. The Book of Deuteronomy gives us some important reminders on how to choose our leaders.

The Book of Deuteronomy is considered to be a product of serious reflections about leadership, especially on what leaders could do to make or unmake a nation. Although the Book talks about the events during Moses' time, it was actually written, according to Biblical scholars, during the latter years of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, shortly before it was captured by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and the people with their leaders were carried away to Babylon as captives.

The people of Judah at that time had already seen how the united kingdom of Israel was divided after a civil war (cf. I Kings 12), and then how the Northern Kingdom of Israel had come to an end in 721 BCE - all because of leaders who were corrupt, abusive, and unfaithful to their covenant relationship with Yahweh their God and with the people whom they are supposed to serve. Hence, the Book was meant to warn the people at that time, especially the leaders, and to help prevent a similar destruction for the Southern Kingdom of Judah.

Our Biblical text (Dt. 17:14-20) for this reflection provides us some useful guidelines in choosing our leaders especially for these critical times. It says that we should choose “the one whom the LORD has chosen” (v.15). We do believe that power and authority ultimately come from God. And therefore, we should choose the ones whom God has chosen, for we are bestowing upon these leaders the power and authority which ultimately come from God. There is a popular dictum saying, “The voice of the people is the voice of God.”

Now, what kind of leaders is the “one whom the LORD has chosen?” We could glean from our Biblical text several characteristics or indicators of a God-chosen leader. Let's take them one by one.

One of Our Own People

Firstly, the leader whom the LORD has chosen should be one of our own people, not a foreigner. Part of Verse 15 says, “He must be one of your own people; do not make a foreigner your king.” To be one with our own people is not only a question of blood or race, or law, but rather it is a question of solidarity. You can be a natural-born Filipino citizen, and yet your interests are not for the Filipinos but

for the foreigners. And in that case, you are not one with your own people; you are not really a Filipino, you are a “foreigner!” in the real sense of the word.

A leader who is one with his own people carries with him the genuine interests, hopes and aspirations of his own people. Although the Israelites came from different tribes, they became one people, because they were one in sufferings and hopes. They were one in their covenant relationship with their God who brought them to a Promised Land with a new future and destiny.

To be one with our own people would also mean the offering of oneself in the service of our people. It is possible that leaders pretend to be pro-people, but in reality they are just using the people for their own vested interests. They might project their interests as the peoples’ interests, but in reality they are simply following their own selfish desires. Such leaders are also Such leaders are also considered “foreigners.” Contrary to their own claims, they are not really one of their own people. And therefore, they are not the “ones whom the LORD has chosen”.

Not a Warlord or Oppressor

Secondly, the leader whom the LORD has chosen should not be a warlord or an oppressor. Verse 16 says, “The king is not to have a large number of horses for his army, and he is not to send people to Egypt to buy horses, because the LORD has said that his people are never to return there.” Building up a large army at the expense of peoples’ basic needs speaks of a leader who is warlord and warlike. It is a leader who thinks that the best way to resolve conflicts among people is to kill each other.

Chariots were the most advance armaments in ancient times. And King Solomon during his time had to buy horses in Egypt and make chariots for his own army and for sale to the armies of other friendly kingdoms (cf. I Kings 10:14-29). All these were done at the expense of the peoples’ basic needs. King Solomon was rich, but the people were poor. He had to build an enormous army in order to protect his enormous wealth.

In Israel’s history, Egypt was a symbol of oppression. For about four hundred years, the Israelites suffered so much under the Egyptian Empire (cf. Exodus 1). Hence, to return to Egypt would mean to return to the ways of Egypt - the ways of oppression. But the LORD is the God of freedom. The LORD liberated the Israelites from their Egyptian oppressors and brought them to a “land flowing with milk and honey”. Hence, a leader whom the LORD has chosen must be one who shuns away from every form of oppression. A God-chosen leader is a liberator of the oppressed.

Our country has its own share of oppression - from the time of our Spanish colonizers to the present. In many ways than one, we have kept on returning to Egypt - to the ways of oppression. The two People Power Revolutions that happened in our recent history could be seen as our people’s responses to the ways of oppression and corruption. Thus, the warning not to return to Egypt could be a continuing warning even for us today.

Morally Upright

Thirdly, the leader whom the LORD has chosen should be morally upright. Verse 17 says, “The king is not to have many wives, because this would make him turn away from the LORD; and he is not to make himself rich with silver and gold.” The mother of King Lemuel in Proverbs 31:3 advised him, saying: “Don’t spend all your energy on sex and all your money on women; they have destroyed kings.”

Indeed, kings in Israel’s history had their own downfall because of the way they treated women in their own lives. For instance, King David had his own downfall as a king when he took for himself the beautiful wife of his own trusted soldier Uriah (cf. 2 Samuel 11). King Solomon had his own downfall when he accumulated for himself one thousand wives and concubines or mistresses (cf. I Kings 11). The Deuteronomic writer rightly observes that such way of treating women would make the leader turn

away from the LORD. Turning away from the LORD would also mean turning away from the people whom the leader should serve, and concentrating on gratifying his own selfish and evil desires.

Kings were destroyed not only because of the way they treated women, but also because of their greed for material wealth. King Ahab lost his own kingdom and his life as well when he and his wife Jezebel orchestrated Naboth's death and took away his land (cf. I Kings 21). King Solomon's kingdom was divided and lost half of it shortly after his death, because of enriching himself at the expense of his own people (cf. I Kings 11-12).

The events that led to People Power II and finally ousted President Joseph Estrada from his office had clearly shown to us that morality and politics must go together. A leader's moral life has serious implications in terms of his political life. There was a prevailing notion before President Estrada came to power that a person's morality has nothing to do with his own politics. However, People Power II showed to us that such notion is a serious mistake. The "one whom the LORD has chosen" must be morally upright.

Obedient to God's Laws and Teachings

And finally, the leader whom the LORD has chosen should be obedient to God's laws and teachings. Verses 18-20 emphasize obedience to God's laws and teachings as the ultimate indicator that a leader is God's chosen. Leaders should have a copy of the book of God's laws and teachings. And they have to read it throughout their life so that they would learn to honor the LORD and to obey the LORD's commands.

Honoring the LORD and obeying the LORD's commands would mean humility in terms of our relationship with other people. To be chosen as a leader is to have a covenant with God and with the people. Faithfulness to the people would mean faithfulness to God. Betraying the people would mean betraying God Himself.

The number one sin of leaders is the sin of pride. Leaders have the tendency to think that the power and authority that God bestowed upon them through the people are their own and therefore they could use them in any way they want. They do not realize that such power and authority are only entrusted to them in the context of a covenant relationship and in the spirit of stewardship. The covenant relationship is simple. On one hand, the leaders should serve God and the people. And on the other hand, the people should honor the leaders, and God would bless them. As good and responsible stewards of power and authority, the leaders should make use of these gifts to serve God and the people who bestowed these gifts to them. They should not abuse them nor use them for selfish ends. The only antidote to the sin of pride, according to the Deuteronomic writer, is to read and obey God's laws and teachings.

The leaders who get elected because of vote buying, ballot snatching, voters threatening, and election padding do not really believe that power and authority are gifts from God for the benefits of the people. Rather, they would look at them as their own personal investments. And therefore, they would make use of them to enrich themselves and to have more power and authority. However, the Deuteronomic writer warns us that such kind of leaders will not last long. As history tells us, they would meet in due time their own historical retribution.

Thus, in choosing our leaders in the 2019 elections, we must listen to the friendly advice of the Deuteronomic writer. Indeed, it is a good and sound advice for us all: Be sure that the leaders you choose are the ones whom the LORD has chosen. #

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