

Deuteronomy 27: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Deuteronomy chapter 27 begins the third speech of the book Deuteronomy. Within it Moses instructs Israel to perform a ceremony after they enter into the land and this corresponds with the end of the great sermon upon the first commandment that begins the central section of Deuteronomy consequently framing the intervening chapters 12 to 26 Deuteronomy chapter 11 verses 26 to 32 reads,

The elders lead and they represent the congregation and so it's fitting that they are involved at this point.

There may also be a theme of succession because the elders will take the place of Moses when he leaves. The stones covered with plaster on which the words of the law are written are a testimony to Israel on Mount Ebal, the mountain associated with the curse.

[5 : 01] Partly because as witnesses they would be summoned against Israel in the and oath-taking occurs with reference to curses.

They're supposed to build an altar of uncut stones as we've seen described earlier in Exodus chapter 20 verse 25 The erection of the altar and the sacrifice of burnt offerings and peace offerings is reminiscent of Exodus chapter 24 verses 3 to 8 and the establishment of the covenant at Sinai. Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And the people answered with one voice and said, All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do. And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord.

He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord.

And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will be obedient.

[6 : 23] And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words. In the second part of the ceremony in Deuteronomy chapter 27, Moses is accompanied by the Levitical priests who represent the Lord.

Just as there is a transition from Moses to the elders, there is also a transition from Moses to the Levites. They will take the place of teaching the people the law. While the elders represent the Israelite people, the Levites represent the Lord to the Israelites.

That day was one in which Israel formally ratified the covenant, becoming the people of the Lord. And they are charged to perform a covenant ceremony when they arrive in the land. The Levites are the ones who will read the curses of the law, to which the congregation must respond, Amen. The tribes are instructed to divide into two groups. The tribes on Gerizim are Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin. The tribes on Ebal are Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali.

The rationale for this division is not entirely clear. It is possibly ordered geographically, with the northern mountain of Ebal associated with the northern and trans-Jordanian tribes, Dan perhaps being included among them as it moved north at a later point.

[7 : 41] Gerizim is associated with the southern tribes and with Levi. The tribes are also roughly divided according to the mothers, listed in birth order. Rachel's two sons and the elder sons of Leah, minus the judge Reuben, are in the Gerizim group.

The other group contains the handmaid's sons, with Reuben and Zebulun. This ceremony was actually performed in Joshua chapter 8 verses 30 to 35. At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool.

And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written.

And all Israel, sojourner as well as native-born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim, and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded at the first to bless the people of Israel.

And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.

[9 : 08] The verses that follow this are a sort of oath-taking on Israel's part. The blessings are not attended by the amens, but the curses are. Israel is accepting the sanctions of judgment upon themselves, should they sin and break the covenant.

There are twelve curses stated, and these correspond with the number of the tribes. The twelve statements particularly focus upon actions that could be done in secret, or which wouldn't be brought before any human court.

Where human punishments wouldn't occur, Israel called down divine curses upon the covenant breaker. And the curses involve idolatry, the first one, dishonouring God, dishonouring father or mother, the second one, mistreating neighbours in the third, the fourth, and the fifth, the neighbour's landmark being moved, the blind man being misguided, and the prevention of justice for the vulnerable.

Sexual offences follow in curses six to nine. Lying with your father's wife, with an animal, with your sister, or with your mother-in-law. Next we have two curses concerning murder, secret murder, and also taking a bribe to kill an innocent person.

And then finally, curse number twelve, the failure to confirm the word of the law that has been given. Here as elsewhere, Israel is summoned to hear the voice of the Lord, not just blindly to obey.

[10 : 27] Jonathan Sachs observes the way that the law operates on two different levels. On the one hand, it speaks to people at a childlike level of understanding, where the aversion to negative consequences, the aversion to the curse on disobedience is prominent.

If you do this particular sin, this bad thing will happen to you. However, the law also speaks at a higher level, communicating the truth that its laws are not arbitrary. The Torah is remarkable in being law that gives a rationale for itself, and which seeks to persuade.

Reasons are given for the commands. Narrative and law are mutually illuminating. The law is grounded in the order of nature as an expression of natural law, and the law itself is shown to have an inner structure that will yield insight to the one who meditates upon it.

The law, then, is not just bare divine command, a word from the heavens for people thoughtlessly to obey. No, to those who meditate upon it, it is the unlocking of the world of wisdom.

A question to consider. What might the curses reveal about the dependence of the system of the law upon the Lord and his action? A question to consider.