

Deuteronomy 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Deuteronomy chapter 1. These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel beyond the Jordan in the wilderness, in the Araba opposite Soth, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazoroth, and Dizahab. It is eleven days journey from Horeb by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh Barnea.

In the fortieth year, on the first day of the eleventh month, Moses spoke to the people of Israel according to all that the Lord had given him in commandment to them. After he had defeated Sihon the king of the Amorites who lived in Heshbon, and Og the king of Bashan who lived in Ashteroth and Adriai. Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to explain this law, saying, The Lord our God said to us in Horeb, You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Turn and take your journey and go to the hill country of the Amorites and to all their neighbours in the Araba, in the hill country and in the lowland, and in the Negev, and by the sea coast, the land of the Canaanites and Lebanon, as far as the great river, the river Euphrates. See, I have set the land before you.

Go in and take possession of the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give to them and to their offspring after them. At that time I said to you, I am not able to bear you by myself. The Lord your God has multiplied you, and behold you are today as numerous as the stars of heaven. May the Lord, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as you are, and bless you, as he has promised you. How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife? Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads. And you answered me, The thing that you have spoken is good for us to do.

So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officers throughout your tribes. And I charged your judges at that time, hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother, or the alien who is with him.

You shall not be partial in judgment, you shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it. And I commanded you at that time all the things that you should do. Then we set out from Horeb, and went through all that great and terrifying wilderness that you saw, on the way to the hill country of the Amorites, as the Lord our God commanded us.

[2 : 3 1] And we came to Kadesh Barnea, and I said to you, You have come to the hill country of the Amorites, which the Lord our God is giving us. See, the Lord your God has set the land before you. Go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has told you. Do not fear or be dismayed.

Then all of you came near me, and said, Let us send men before us, that they may explore the land for us, and bring us word again of the way by which we must go up, and the cities into which we shall come. The things seemed good to me, and I took twelve men from you, one man from each tribe.

And they turned, and went up into the hill country, and came to the valley of Eshcol, and spied it out. And they took in their hands some of the fruit of the land, and brought it down to us, and brought us word again, and said, It is a good land that the Lord our God is giving us.

Yet you would not go up, but rebelled against the command of the Lord your God. And you murmured in your tents, and said, Because the Lord hated us, he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to give us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us. Where are we going up? Our brothers have made our hearts melt, saying, The people are greater and taller than we. The cities are great, and fortified up to heaven, and besides, we have seen the sons of the Anakim there.

Then I said to you, Do not be in dread, or afraid of them. The Lord your God who goes before you, will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place. Yet in spite of this word, you did not believe the Lord your God, who went before you in the way to seek you out a place to pitch your tents, in fire by night, and in the cloud by day, to show you by what way you should go. And the Lord heard your words, and was angered. And he swore, Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh. He shall see it, and to him and to his children I will give the land on which he has trodden, because he has wholly followed the Lord. Even with me the Lord was angry on your account, and said, You shall not go in there.

[4 : 42] Joshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall enter. Encourage him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit it. And as for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there. And to them I will give it, and they shall possess it. But as for you, turn, and journey into the wilderness in the direction of the Red Sea. Then you answered me, We have sinned against the Lord. We ourselves will go up and fight, just as the Lord our God commanded us. And every one of you fastened on his weapons of war, and thought it easy to go up into the hill country. And the Lord said to me, Say to them, Do not go up or fight, for I am not in your midst, lest you be defeated before your enemies. So I spoke to you, and you would not listen. But you rebelled against the command of the Lord, and presumptuously went up into the hill country. Then the Amorites who lived in that hill country came out against you, and chased you, as bees do, and beat you down in Seir as far as Horma. And you returned and wept before the Lord. But the Lord did not listen to your voice or give ear to you. So you remained at

Kadesh many days, the days that you remained there. In Deuteronomy chapter 1, Israel is about to enter into the promised land. The book is a reiteration and renewal of the covenant of Sinai with Israel on the plains of Moab, just as it is about to enter into the promise. The focus is upon preparatory teaching, with a series of lengthy addresses from Moses unpacking the meaning of the covenant.

It is also the conclusion of Moses' own life and his leadership of Israel. He is going to have to die before entering the land, and the book concludes with his final blessing of Israel. There is a transition here in Moses' role. Moses has formerly been the deliverer, the intercessor, the lawgiver, the leader and the ruler, the prophet, but now he is primarily the teacher. He is instructing Israel in the way of the Lord.

There appears to be some sort of ceremony involved in the book, as the background for all these things that he is teaching. The nation is assembled to hear Moses' words, and it seems to be a formal renewal of the covenant. This is suggested in places like Deuteronomy chapter 26 verses 16 to 19.

This day the Lord your God commands you to do these statutes and rules. You shall therefore be careful to do them with all your heart and with all your soul. You have declared today that the Lord is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his rules, and will obey his voice. And the Lord has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, and that he will set you in praise and in fame and in honour high above all nations that he has made, and that you shall be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he has promised. We see the same thing in chapter 27 verse 9.

[7 : 38] Then Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, Keep silence and hear, O Israel, this day you have become the people of the Lord your God. They are presented with blessings and curses in consequence for obedience or disobedience. Instructions are given for a covenant ceremony to be performed upon their entry into the land in chapter 27. Joshua is established as the successor for Moses. Instructions are given for the placing of the covenant document of the book of the law in the ark of the covenant as a witness, and further instructions are given for later covenant renewal ceremonies at specified intervals. Moses speaks a song of witness to Israel and teaches it to them. Deuteronomy then solidifies what was first established at Sinai, and ensures that it will be an enduring reality in Israel's life, repeatedly brought to their attention, and Israel reconstituting itself on the basis of what God did at Sinai at key intervals in its life. Many have maintained that the book exhibits the structure of what has been called a suzerain vassal treaty. So these would be established in the ancient Near East between a greater king and a lesser power that would come under him. And that structure is basically seen in the literary form of this document. So we have a beginning in the preamble in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 1, then there's a historical prologue telling the events that led to that point in chapter 1 verse 6 to 4 verse 49, then there's general stipulations in chapters 5 to 11, specific stipulations in chapters 12 to 26, blessings and curses in chapters 27 to 28, witnesses being called in places like 30 verse 19, 31 verse 19, and 32 verses 1 to 43. And then there's a concern for succession. How is this going to be continued in the future? What ways is this going to be reiterated and re-established at certain key intervals?

There are a great many common features that we can observe then. However, we should beware of a complete association or identification. Israel is not just a vassal. Israel is the son of Yahweh. Israel is the bride of the Lord. The covenant is not a contract. It's a loving bond, unilaterally established by a gracious act of deliverance as God delivers his people from Egypt. So while we can recognize certain similarities that give us a sense of the provenance and also the genre of the book, we must also be alert to the many differences. The first five verses of the book are a preamble. They give context for all that follows. Israel is about to enter into the land and Moses is addressing them. They have already won some key victories, but have yet to cross the Jordan. We are told that Moses is undertaking to explain the law. He's expounding and unpacking the meaning of the covenant so that the people will understand what it means and entails. We could in many respects see this as an act of preaching. He's unpacking the word of God and addressing it to the conscience of the people for the sake of action. He wants to call them to do something at the end, to make a particular decision, to choose life and the way of the Lord, as opposed to their own way and the way of death. And in order to achieve this, he's unpacking scripture. The law of Deuteronomy is the law that we find at Sinai much more unpacked and illuminated.

The rest of Deuteronomy chapter 1 recounts the experience of Israel to that point, beginning at Horeb or Sinai, when the Lord charged them to move on from the mountain and take possession of the land.

Moses is speaking to every individual. That wouldn't be possible. There are over 600,000 people here. But rather he's addressing their elders and rulers, and the priests and Levites in particular, who would then instruct the rest of the people accordingly. Nevertheless, the law is by no means exclusively or even overwhelmingly addressed to rulers. It is addressed to everyone as members of the covenant body. It is a civil, moral, and religious code for all to abide by. Moses recounts the refusal of Israel to enter the land and their rebellion against God at Kadesh. The Lord condemned that generation to wander in the wilderness until they all perished, save for Caleb and Joshua, who would then lead the people into the land. The Lord was even angry with Moses on their account. Moses' association with them, and his failure to resist the contagion of rebellion in chapter 20 of Numbers, caught him up in their consequences, even though he was able to intercede with them on many previous occasions.

[13:30] The retelling of the history to this point foregrounds many of the issues of the book as a whole. Moses is reminding Israel where it has come from. He is reminding Israel of the incredibly costly errors that they have made in rebellion. A journey that should have taken no more than a couple of weeks ended up taking 40 years. Israel is reminded of how they went off course so that now they can take the right route. Deuteronomy is a book about the decision between life and death, and in the choice not to enter the land, Israel's fathers chose death, except for Caleb and Joshua, who are held out as the examples for Israel at this point. The fact that after being told that they could not enter the land, they tried to enter in under their own power, and failed so abysmally, serves as evidence of their need to depend upon the Lord for this. So they find themselves at this juncture in history, about to enter the land. They're looking back on what has happened in the past, and they're being instructed as they go forward. A question to consider, what might Deuteronomy chapter 1 highlight for us about the importance of reflecting upon the past within the task of obedience?

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