

Deuteronomy: More than the Law Revisited

As we close Numbers and open Deuteronomy we find Israel camped at the northern edge of the Wilderness of Sinai where they are poised to enter the land promised to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses, now one hundred and twenty years old and still full of his natural vigor (Dt. 34:7), has, nevertheless, come to the end of his mission. He has labored for nearly forty years to lead the unruly rabble that God released from Egypt, but, because of a momentary indiscretion, will not lead them into their promised rest. At Kadesh in the Wilderness of Zin, he angered God when he was directed to draw water out of the rock for the thirsty mob. Frustrated with this perpetually complaining people, Moses carelessly spoke before Israel as God, not for God (Num. 20:1-13). The Lord was angry and punished him by denying him his goal of bringing Israel into the beautiful land, a task toward which he had labored hard for four decades. On many occasions Moses had been able to intervene on Israel's behalf to turn God's judgment away from them for their offenses, but he was unable to do so for himself. Resigned to his fate, Moses proceeds to deliver a series of farewell addresses to this second generation of Israelites who would enter Canaan under their new appointed leader, Joshua. Deuteronomy is the record of Moses' last words.

Deuteronomy, sometimes referred to as Moses' "Upper Desert Discourse," is called *Haddebarim* in Hebrew, meaning "The Words," and is a reference to "the words which Moses spoke (Dt. 1:1)." The Jews sometimes referred to the book as *Mishneh Hatorah*, which means "Repetition of the Law." This phrase, in turn, was translated in the Septuagint as *To Deuteronomion Toutho*, or "Second Law," and is the root for the English translation, Deuteronomy. As the Jews properly understood, Deuteronomy is not a second law, but is more like a second reading of the law. But even that expression does not adequately describe its contents. While we do find a restatement of the Ten Commandments in chapter 6, and chapters 12-29 essentially repeat many of the specific statutes found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, the book is much more than a restatement of a legal code. It is the message of a great paternal figure as he prepares to leave this life.

In addition to the repetition of the Law, Deuteronomy records that Moses incessantly implored his people to follow it, as well as warned them repeatedly of severe consequences with failure to do so. There are vivid descriptions of the beautiful blessings that lay ahead for a faithful Israel (6:10-11; 8:7-9, et al) balanced against reminders of how their fathers failed to receive these blessings and died in the desert. In the early chapters, and periodically throughout the whole discourse, Moses reviews the great works that God performed as He led them from slavery in Egypt and sustained them in the wilderness. He reminds them of how they were able to defeat utterly the kings Sihon and Og. Then, he declares that God "will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the nations under the whole heaven who shall hear the report of you (2:5)." Yet, he cautions Israel that the good prospects do not come without a price. They must

give in return to the Lord heartfelt affection and obedience, declaring "Therefore, you shall love the Lord your God, and keep his charge, His statutes, His judgments, and His commandments always (11:1)." Moses warned that failure to do so would end in severe consequences, pointing again to their wilderness wanderings as evidence. Thus, the great blessings on the horizon come with a disclaimer. Moses warned Israel that "I set before you today a blessing and a curse; the blessing, if you obey... the Lord your God; and the curse, if you do not... (11:26-27)." Interestingly, neither the blessing nor the curse is an option, but will certainly be one or the other.

Moses also revealed to Israel (and to us today), whether understood or not, things that transcended the Law and obedience thereto. In chapter 4 we find a purpose in Israel that is of greater consequence than the blessings God wished to bestow on this nation. In chapter 6 we find an expansion or, maybe better stated, a fulfillment of the law contained in the Ten Commandments. In Chapter 18 et al, we find evidence that the Law, Moses, Israel, and all that has transpired thus far are all a foreshadow of the true reality to come. All these things, and more, are found in Deuteronomy, some of which we will consider in future articles.

Call it Moses' legacy to Israel or his extended epitaph, Deuteronomy is certainly more than a repetition of the Law. Maybe it could be best viewed as a love message composed by the patriarch as he approached his death. Deuteronomy is the final testimony of Moses, the man molded by God into His personal mediator between Himself and His people, who became the foreshadow of the Mediator of the New Covenant and Savior of the world, Jesus Christ, and who, nonetheless, remained a humble man, "very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth (Num. 12:3)."