

A Peculiar Purpose Revealed in Israel

Part of Moses' final words to Israel before he was relieved of his mission and taken to his fathers described a beautiful home for an Israel that would be faithful to their God. He told them the Lord was bringing them into a "good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing... (Dt. 8:7-9)." This vision may have had more appeal to the ancient Hebrew than the modern reader accustomed to collecting his food from shelves that seem never to empty, to burgers and fries within the grasp of his moving car, and to "blackberries" that bring up images of electronic gadgets rather than fine food, but to an ancient people who had been slaves for centuries, had no place to call home, and had wandered in a desert wasteland for the last four decades, the picture looked like nothing short of heaven. In that ancient world no finer picture could be placed before a people who had known little but deprivation and affliction.

While Israel would not realize the promise without the labor of war, the land would in no way be something they earned. Reminding them of the strength of the Canaanites, which was at the root of their fathers' refusal to enter, and of their fathers' folly in attempting to enter it later without the aid of the Lord, he told them they alone had not the power of conquest. Describing the land as "houses full of good things you did not fill, hewn-out wells which you did not dig, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant (6:11)," Moses warned them that once the land is theirs, "beware, lest you forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage (6:12)." Israel would be unable to attribute their future achievements to the power of their own right arm.

Furthermore, Israel should not think that they were granted this fine land because of their own virtue. Pointing out various rebellions of their fathers, Moses recounted that, except for his intervention, they would have been destroyed, rather than poised ready to receive a blessing. "Do not think in your heart," Moses told them, "after the Lord your God has cast them out, 'Because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land (9:4).'" It was not because of Israel's faithfulness, but because of that of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and because of Canaan's sin. God declared through Moses, "It is not because of your righteousness..., but because of the wickedness of the nations that the Lord your God drives them out..., and that He may fulfill the word which the Lord swore to your fathers (9:5)." In spite of Israel, not because of them, God proclaimed a great work was about to unfold: "Hear, O Israel: You are to cross over the Jordan today, and go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourself, cities great and fortified up to heaven, a people great and tall... Therefore understand today that the Lord your God is He who goes over before you as a consuming fire (9:1-3)."

Considering the character of the nation of Israel, one wonders if they ever pondered why God was doing this great thing for them, the promises to

Abraham notwithstanding. If they recalled God's declaration that He could destroy this rebellious people and build a great nation from Moses (Ex. 32:10), Israel should have been aware that God did not need them, regardless of how badly it might have looked to the Egyptians. God certainly could have worked around the difficulty. With minimal reflection, Israel should have marveled that they were even alive, much more so that they were about to receive a much undeserved reward; a blessing that extended beyond anything found worthy in them. Declaring that he had taught Israel "statutes and judgments, just as the Lord my God commanded me (Dt. 4:5)," and appealing to Israel to "be careful to observe them (4:6)," Moses revealed that the peoples who would hear all these statutes and see this people would declare, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people (4:6)." Israel was to become the shining light among nations, declaring the glory of God to an ignorant world. Those who learned of Israel and the God who made them into a nation would see, as Israel should have, "For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law... (4:7-8 ESV)." Israel's purpose was to become a vehicle for bringing the knowledge of God into the world and, ultimately, God Himself.