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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	4
DEUTERONOMY AND THE LAW	
Rick Marrs	5
THE RISE OF JUDAISM: FROM EXODUS/SINAI TO SIANAI/EXODUS	
Michael Weed	18
JESUS OF NAZARETH: A LIBERAL AND A LEGALIST	
Allan McNicol	31
PAUL, THE LAW, AND LEGALISM	
James W. Thompson	51
CONTRIBUTORS	61

FOREWORD

Throughout the history of the Christian movement there has been an almost irreconcilable tension between law and grace. Even today this remains a fundamental issue for Christians. At a practical level the course between an austere legalism and a sentimentally cheap grace has too often been steered by correcting the one abuse with a measure of the other. Legalism and license, however, are both mutations of the faithful and responsible Christian life. The solution to this long-standing problem is not to be found in crowding the boundaries or reacting to the abuses. Rather, it is to be found in grasping the proper relationship between the Gift of God and the Divine Command.

These essays are presented in an attempt to encourage Christian reflection upon the shape of the faithful Christian life: to exhort those who have life in the Spirit and freedom in Christ to fulfill the “law of Christ.”

Michael R. Weed, Editor

DEUTERONOMY AND THE LAW

By Rick Marrs

See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendents may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

One can scarcely read these stirring words without catching a vision of the centrality and challenge of the law to the life of ancient Israel. To interpret properly the place and function of the law in ancient Israel, it is crucial that one view the law in Deuteronomy, first and foremost, through the eyes of the original recipients of that law, rather than viewing the refraction of that law through later centuries of historical development and experiences.¹ In its original context, the message of

Deuteronomy is somewhat singular--it is the message of gift. However, the gift is twofold. For Deuteronomy, the story concerns not only God's gift of land, it also concerns God's gift of the law.

Background to Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy relates the impassioned pleas of Moses to a people living between promise and fulfillment. The people stand on the banks of the Transjordan, eagerly anticipating the fulfillment of the ancient Abrahamic promises. In the more recent past, the salvific acts of Yahweh evidenced in the Exodus and Red Sea crossing, in the beneficent care of Yahweh during the wilderness wanderings, and in the over-throw of intransigent Transjordanian kings, have renewed an awareness of the present reality and validity of those ancient promises. However, complete fulfillment of those promises remains across the Jordan.² In this context, a central concern for the Israelites becomes: How do we appropriate and bring to complete realization the ancient Abrahamic promise? Deuteronomy addresses this issue most clearly with its theology of the law.

The form and style of Deuteronomy are important for appreciating the theology of the law. It is a mistake to understand Deuteronomy as a code of legalistic laws forced upon the people as a burden.³ Rather, the language is parenetic and hortatory, using homiletic style to urge the people to understand the true motive for obedience--love of Yahweh. Many scholars maintain the book is written in a form similar to the Hittite suzerainty treaty of the ancient Near East. Although this is probably true, one can also see sermonic discourse throughout the book. The "preacher" strives to bring his listeners into the proper relationship with God. Thus, the book of Deuteronomy is an attempt to relate the Mosaic faith to

Israel's new life in Canaan. It attempts to show that Israel's covenant faith, born in the wilderness, is compatible with and possible in the more advanced land of Canaan.

The Gift of the Land

Essential to a proper understanding of the Deuteronomic view of the law is an understanding of the Deuteronomic view of God. In Deuteronomy, Yahweh is not simply Creator, he is also Sustainer. Yahweh, giver of life, continues to sustain his creation through love.

And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord. (Deut. 8:3)

Take heed lest you forget the Lord your God, by not keeping his commandments and his ordinances and his statutes, which I command you this day: lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage, who led you through the great and terrible wilderness with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, who fed you in the wilderness with manna which your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. Beware lest you say in your heart, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth; that he may confirm his covenant which he swore to your fathers, as at this day. (Deut. 8:11-18)

In Deuteronomy, the clearest evidence of God's continued gracious sustenance is the gift of the land itself. Land theology plays a central role in Deuteronomy. In fact, there are only two chapters in which "land" is omitted. The phrases "go in and possess" and "the land which the Lord your God has given you" occur thirty-five and thirty-four times respectively. However, one must see the theology of the land in relation to the law and covenant of Yahweh. By noticing various passages in the book one can see theologically how the land is considered as a gift from God, as a possession for them to take, as a continued possession only through obedience to the Law, and as an essential to real "life."

The first thing that Israel must realize is that the land is a gift from God. This is fundamental for a proper relationship with God. The reason for this gift is twofold. Stated negatively, God is not giving the Israelites this land because they are righteous. Rather, it is because the other nations are wicked and he is fulfilling the promise which he made with the patriarchs (Deut. 9:5, 6). The themes of gift and promise are interrelated. The Deuteronomist reminds the people that this gift is completely unmerited, for Israel is in fact herself a "stubborn people" (Deut. 9:6). Yet he also strives to show that the promise which was made to the patriarchs is now being realized in the present hearers. It is given to them because God loves them and is keeping his promise to the fathers (Deut. 7:8). The people should not

become arrogant, claiming that they are self-sufficient. Deuteronomy envisions the danger of Israel forgetting the salvific acts and profusion of blessings with which Yahweh has blessed her, and of becoming self-confident and arrogant. Thus, he also urges Israel to remember continually the great love that Yahweh manifested in his acts of salvation (Deut. 8:11, 17, 18). The religious message of Deuteronomy is that Israel can never claim to be self-sufficient and independent because her very beginning was from God. She must continually remind herself that the land is a gift and that her existence will always have its basis in Yahweh. Yahweh, the giver of the land, is also the giver of life in that land.

Inseparably linked with God's gift of the land is the possession of that land which Israel must accomplish. The writer of Deuteronomy argues that Yahweh is in control of all nations. He goes before the Israelites to conquer the land and give it as an inheritance to the people whom he has chosen. It is significant that Deuteronomy refers to the land of Canaan as Israel's inheritance, a term originally used in reference to land possessions of a family or a clan.⁴ Seen in this context, the conquest is not "just another war." It is "Yahweh's war": Israel is his agent to secure a land. Israel has no natural right to the land; it is God's gift as an inheritance. However, there is more to possession than Israel just having received an inheritance. Israel will find "rest" in the possession of this land. The combination of these motifs is seen in Deuteronomy 3:18-22. Yahweh tells his people to go possess the land that he has given them; they are not to be afraid for the Lord is fighting for them and he will give them rest. This promise contains

special significance when one remembers the historical context. This is an exhortation to a weary people who have come from severe affliction in Egypt and have spent forty years homeless in the wilderness. The land gains new significance as a gift from Yahweh in which Israel will experience “rest from her enemies” (Deut. 12:10). Here Yahweh’s people will claim their inheritance and live in safety.

The Gift of the Land

It is in this context of the promise-fulfillment theme of the land that the centrality of the law and the covenant appear. The book of Deuteronomy contends that it is impossible to possess the land and not live under the covenant of God. To appreciate the relationship between the law and the land one must see these laws in their proper perspective. It is imperative that one remember that Israel’s election is not based on a prerequisite of obedience to the law, but vice-versa. The promise extended by Yahweh always precedes the attendant law enjoined upon Israel. Theologically as well as historically, the Exodus (salvation) precedes Sinai (law). It is none other than the redeeming and preserving God of the Exodus who again at Sinai demonstrates his love toward this escaped band of slaves. For a people who have recently experienced the joy and exhilaration of deliverance and freedom, this merciful God now lovingly proclaims the appropriate and obedient response to these gracious acts. Thus, fulfillment of these commands is not a pre-condition of the salvation which Yahweh has given. Rather, the proclamation of the commandments takes place subsequently to the election. Hence, obedience follows the divine saving activity. God’s grace calls forth a love for him which results in the desire to follow humbly his regulations and to let him guide Israel in her daily life. Clearly salvation can never be earned; however, it can be responded to

appropriately or inappropriately. Obedience to the instructions of this loving God is the appropriate response of those who have experienced his redemptive love.

The Law and the Land

The connection of law and land is seen throughout the book. In Deuteronomy 4:1-8 (especially vss. 1, 5, 8) Moses urges the people to keep the ordinances and statutes of Yahweh so that they may be insured of possession of the land. The land is seen as a sphere of blessing and prosperity when there is obedience and submission to God's will.

A clear interrelation between God's law and God's land is found in Deuteronomy 6:20-25:

When your son asks you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord our God has commanded you?" then you shall say to your son, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes; and he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land which he swore to give to our fathers. And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as at this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us.

This passage discusses teaching a later generation why God's laws must be kept. It is quite significant to note that the father is to answer the son by reciting the old credos of God's salvific action on behalf of Israel. A later generation will be in peril of forgetting Yahweh's action and thus not comprehending the meaning

behind his laws. Thus, this passage reminds Israel that the laws come from a God who redeemed her from slavery and led her into a prosperous land, and who gave her a set of laws by which she could maintain that personal relationship with him. The writer states that the acceptance and observance of these statutes will be considered as righteousness to God. Righteousness here is not equivalent to goodness, but rather denotes a correct attitude toward the claims which another (here Yahweh) has upon a person. He who accepts and believes in God and his will has a right relationship with Yahweh, i.e., on the basis of his intention to be associated with God, God recognizes and blesses him. This close connection of the law and the land runs throughout Deuteronomy. Obedience to the law is the only way in which Israel can continue to exist in the land. Disobedience brings war, catastrophe, loss of land, and death. Therefore the law has a negative function in that it is the condition upon which Israel's existence depends. However, it also has a positive function in that it is the norm of life or the modus vivendi for real existence.⁵

Negatively, if Israel does not fulfill her covenant obligations she will lose the land. The Deuteronomist declares that only a God who could perform such great acts of mercy, who would choose a people out of love, and who would fulfill his promises by giving them a bountiful land could be worshiped.

The gracious love of God for his people was employed by the writer of our book to argue for a favorable response on the part of the people. Such great love ought not go unrequited. Simply because Yahweh is a merciful God (4:31; 13:18; 30:3) his people do not have license to flout his will or disregard his instruction (Torah).

It is unthinkable for Israel to reject a God who has stood by her in faithfulness and

made her a mighty nation. God's people must obey his laws, not solely for the necessity of worship or to avoid divine retribution, but because it is through obedience that a harmonious and satisfactory relationship is maintained. Life then is secure in the promised land. It is this positive relationship between the law and the land which Deuteronomy sees as central. Obedience to the law is seen as equivalent to life in the land (Deut. 30:15-20). Throughout the book laws are given so that the children of Israel may live in the land. The land is seen as a gift of salvation to the people of God. It is a home, a dwelling place where Israel can live in an ideal relationship with God. However, again it should be stressed that neither the land nor the law guarantee life; rather, they are the gifts of the one who does guarantee life.

In Deuteronomy 26:5b-9 Israel is commanded to return to Yahweh the first fruits of sacrifice. The central focus and thrust of the law again appear. Israel must return first fruits to the Lord, not because Yahweh wishes to lay a heavy burden upon her, but because this is the natural response to give to the one who gave and blessed the land. Every statute and ordinance of the law is conditioned on what the Lord has done previously for his people. The worshiper's gift is merely the fruit of God's gift to him. This passage contrasts the nomadic life of Abraham with the sedentary life of Israel. In faith Abraham "lost" his land and in humble obedience went wherever the Lord commanded. Now Israel is to enjoy the results of that obedience--the land. There is an intimate connection between Abraham's move from obedience and Israel's existence in a prosperous land because of that obedience.⁷

Deuteronomy 32:45-47 beautifully summarizes the theology of the law and the land in Deuteronomy. After the song of Moses has been sung, Moses stands

before the people and recites the religious message they need to hear:

Lay to heart all the words which I enjoin upon you this day, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no trifle for you but, it is your life, and thereby you shall live long in the land which you are going over Jordan to possess.

The purpose of the law is to insure existence in the land. It must not only be learned, but must also be taught to the children so that they will not lose the land. The land is a gift from God given to an undeserving people. By God's redemptive activity he himself creates for his people the prerequisites for their obedience and assurance of life. As Wright says, "The land was a wonderful gift of God's grace, but it was also a holy gift which demanded a definite covenant decision." Moses declares, "...it is no trifle (i.e., 'empty word'), but it is your life" (Deut. 32:47). Deuteronomy contends that the issuing forth of the law is the issuing forth of life itself. There is life in the mighty acts of deliverance from Egypt and possession of the land; there is also life in the word of Yahweh which teaches the people how to maintain a long and prosperous life in that land. The theology of Deuteronomy contains a powerful message. The writer draws upon the mighty salvific acts of Yahweh and the promise par excellence of a land in which God himself will care for and sustain his elect people. Israel, to maintain a personal and vibrant relationship with God must have the proper response and attitude toward him. This she demonstrates by accepting and fulfilling her covenant obligations. In so doing she receives life itself.

The message of Deuteronomy continues to speak forcefully to any people who considers itself to live in covenant with this saving God. The modern church

exults in the gracious salvation that has been extended in Jesus Christ. That salvation brings deliverance and freedom in a full sense to a people painfully acquainted with slavery and despair. Significantly, the same loving and sustaining God calls his redeemed to a life of obedience and commitment. As so eloquently stated in the ancient passages of Deuteronomy, this life of obedience and commitment is in no way intended to earn salvation, for salvation has already been given! Rather, it is always and only properly understood when viewed as a response to the grace of God. In such an obedient response, the modern covenant community manifests the proper relationship with God and in so doing receives life itself.

Notes

- ¹ Conversely, a most telling understanding of the Law is seen in the period of the Josianic reform. In Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1969, pp. 143, 144), Prof. D. Hillers catches the tenor of Deuteronomy quite well:

A better conception of the nature of the book [Deuteronomy] may be gained from seeing how it affected King Josiah: “When the king heard the words of the book of the law, he tore his garments. And the king commanded...’Go inquire of Yahweh for me and for the people and for all Judah concerning the words of this book that has been kindled against us.’” The impassioned sentences of Deuteronomy helped propel the most stringent reform ever attempted in Judah’s history and will serve us as a measure of the continuing vitality of the covenant idea, of the changes in its conception, and of the heroic efforts necessary to put the covenant back in force as a social reality.
- ² The book itself claims to be the words of Moses spoken to the people of Israel just after they have completed their wilderness experience and are about to enter the promised land. Most scholars however see the actual form of Deuteronomy as having taken place in the seventh century; they link it with Josiah’s reform of 621 B.C. G. Fohrer (Introduction to the Old Testament [Nashville: Abingdon, 1968, p. 175]) argues that the “core” of Deuteronomy could have been initiated in the eighth century under Jeroboam II, brought to Southern Judah after the fall of Samaria (721 B.C.), and put in the temple of Jerusalem. It probably was revised and edited in the reign of Manasseh (by loyal adherents to Yahweh) and found by Hilkiah in this form. If this is the case, then the book of Deuteronomy becomes the powerful living word of Yahweh. It spoke to the people of Moses who were in an interim between promise and fulfillment; it later spoke to the descendents of that people who were now in danger of losing that inheritance which God had given them.
- ³ The term law (Torah) means “instruction, guidance, teaching.” Its verbal counterpart means “to teach.” Thus, law for the Deuteronomist is not an impersonal system of regulations; rather, it is the loving concerned guidance of a caring parent.
- ⁴ Note especially Deuteronomy 32:8, 9 in the context of God’s gift and inheritance.
- ⁵ P. Miller, “The Gift of God,” Interpretation 32 (1969) 459.

- ⁶ J. Myers, Grace and Torah (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), 50f. Cf. also the comment of D. Hillers, “And since the prior oath of God is thus one of his gracious acts toward Israel, it is one thing that should motivate their humble obedience” (Covenant, 155).
- ⁷ Miller, “Gift of God,” 462f.
- ⁸ G. Wright, “Deuteronomy,” The Interpreter’s Bible, vol. II (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953) 328.

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