

Justice and Obedience to the Law
Deuteronomy 5:1-3, 10:12-13, 27:1-10
December 5, 2021

Today's scripture readings from *Deuteronomy* draw on excerpts of that book which address the topic of "Justice," the theme for this winter quarter. Unlike many previous *Bible* Study multi-year cycles of lessons, these skip around through the scriptures to follow selected topics rather than focusing on particular books or epochs. The Introduction in our lesson books explains that the themes of this quarter and other recent quarters follow themes from this statement formulated by the team that supervises the materials of this *Bible* Study material:

"The God of the Bible, the source of creation, loves us and calls us in covenant through our faith to worship and to do justice." (page v.)

Each quarter focuses on one of the underlined words. Last quarter was "worship." This quarter the word is "justice." So, that's why we don't focus on particular books or parts of the *Bible*; the agenda is driven by this focus.

As we begin to look at the issue of "Justice," we need to be a bit careful. This word has become caught up in political arguments, and may have taken on meanings that are different from those in the *Bible*. As with the word "equity," the current modern usage may differ from how the word was used in antiquity by the writers of the *Bible*. Furthermore, it is possible to read the word "justice" into passages in which the word doesn't actually appear. If you read what this lesson in our book has from *Deuteronomy*, you won't find it! So, here at the outset, I will be trying to focus first on the *Bible* passage, and not approach with pre-conceived notions about justice that may lead us to miss something else important.

Deuteronomy, unlike much of the earlier four books of the Torah, is pretty much one unified work collected together by an author / editor sometime before King Josiah's reform. The "book" found in the temple during renovations, as reported in *II Kings 22*, is believed to be *Deuteronomy*. The language and details of *Deuteronomy* seem to match that period, scholars say. It was the reading of this book that led to Josiah's reforms. Thus, *Deuteronomy* critically contributed to the survival of the Israelite religion during the Exile, and its flourishing as Judaism afterwards. It was during the Exile that the earlier books of the Torah were taken from various sources and edited into the form that we now have in the *Bible*.

Deuteronomy is set at the conclusion of the Exodus, as the Israelites have set up camp on the Plains of Moab, across the Jordan River from Jericho. The generation of Israelites that had fled from Egypt about forty years ago, who had been at Mount Sinai (called Mount Horeb in *Deuteronomy*) is gone. It was they who rebelled against Moses and God when the spies gave a report of the Promised Land of Canaan saying, “There are giants there!” In the forty years of waiting in the wilderness (mostly in the vicinity of Kadesh Barnea), only a few, notably Moses as well as Joshua and Caleb, the two faithful spies, remain (Numbers 13, 14).

So, in *Deuteronomy*, Moses articulates what God has done for the Israelites, and the covenant made at Sinai. The covenant was not just with that earlier generations, but with all Israel, including those listening in the present. A Covenant is a treaty. Perhaps in its earliest usage, a covenant was a treaty effected by marriage that would bind one tribe, one people, to another. That usage was applied to treaties between nations, where usually a bride was taken by one monarch or prince from the daughters of another. For example, King Ahab’s marriage to Princess Jezebel, daughter of “King Ethbaal of the Sidonians,” cemented an alliance between Israel and Sidon (modern Lebanon), a useful alliance against Syria (*I Kings* 16:31). God’s covenant with the Israelites effectively made the LORD, who had been the God of their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God also of the family of Israel there at Mount Sinai. And, therefore, the God of those Israelites gathered at the Plains of Moab, prepared to cross into the Promised Land.

The Ten Commandments

5 Moses convened all Israel, and said to them:

Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently. ² The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. ³ Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. ⁴ The Lord spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire. ⁵ (At that time I was standing between the Lord and you to declare to you the words^[a] of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he said:

⁶ I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; ⁷ you shall have no other gods before^[b] me.

Chapter 5 continues with the rest of the Ten Commandments. That's followed by an extended exhortation to obedience. In Chapter 6 Moses then gives the "Great Commandment":

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.^[a] ⁵ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem^[b] on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

This is followed by exhortations to teach following generations, and then the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience in Chapters 7 to 9. That brings us to the second excerpt in our Lesson book, from Chapter 10. It is, like the Great Commandment, another summary of the Law:

The Essence of the Law

10:¹² So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹³ and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God^[c] and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. ¹⁴ Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, ¹⁵ yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. ¹⁶ Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. ¹⁷ For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, ¹⁸ who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. ¹⁹ You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. ²⁰ You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. ²¹ He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. ²² Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

The lesson book included only verses 12-13. I have included the rest of this chapter as well for additional context. Yes, 12-13 are the central message. But, why should the Israelites obey the conditions of this covenant? It is for their own benefit and for their own good. The following verses make that clear, and in doing that, challenge the Israelites to show that love to others, just as God has loved them. God **“executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.”** The Israelites are to do likewise. Notice that here we see the word “justice” used. It is what God does for those in need. For “strangers” it is helpful to think, “refugee.” The word, also translated as “sojourner” (RSV), means a foreigner who has taken up refuge among the Israelites, likely after having fled his homeland for some reason or another, probably leaving everything behind. Recall that Moses himself was such a sojourner when he fled from Egypt.

When you read verse 12, **“So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you?”** did something else come to mind? Very likely you thought about the passage from Micah 6: 6-8:

What God Requires

**⁶ “With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?**

**Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?**

**⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?**

**Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”**

**⁸ He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?**

The message of the post – exilic prophet is consistent with Deuteronomy. It is another beautiful expression of what God seeks in us and through us.

Our last excerpt is from the end of Deuteronomy, 27: 1-10. Moses exhorts the Israelites to write this message on stone for the sake of future generations.

The Inscribed Stones and Altar on Mount Ebal

27 Then Moses and the elders of Israel charged all the people as follows: Keep the entire commandment that I am commanding you today. ² On the day that you cross over the Jordan into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and cover them with plaster. ³ You shall write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over, to enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you. ⁴ So when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, about which I am commanding you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall cover them with plaster. ⁵ And you shall build an altar there to the Lord your God, an altar of stones on which you have not used an iron tool. ⁶ You must build the altar of the Lord your God of unhewn^[a] stones. Then offer up burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God, ⁷ make sacrifices of well-being, and eat them there, rejoicing before the Lord your God. ⁸ You shall write on the stones all the words of this law very clearly.

⁹ Then Moses and the levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying: Keep silence and hear, O Israel! This very day you have become the people of the Lord your God. ¹⁰ Therefore obey the Lord your God, observing his commandments and his statutes that I am commanding you today.

The point is to propagate this message to future generations. Alas, inscriptions on stone are insufficient. Even in our day, we see people destroying the works and messages of past generations. The Ten Commandments are being banned and removed from court houses. Christianity is being purged from public life in many places. Statues will not endure. That isn't new. What endures is what is carried forward to new generations through teaching and obedience and example. Those stones mentioned in Deuteronomy 27 are not to be found in our day. But, the words of Deuteronomy and Micah live on through the faithfulness of Jews and Christians who have carried the Bible and its message even unto our day.

There is much more worth reading in the lesson book, and much more that could be said about these passages in Deuteronomy. I regret that we can't get into that here. I'm also disappointed that we won't meet for the next lesson concerning David and Mephibosheth. It's an interesting story.

Prayer: Great God, on this second Sunday of Advent, we give you thanks for the call to be your holy people and for the gift of the Christ child. Through him, may we be moved to work for peace and justice as a witness to your loving presence among us. Amen.