

Lest We Forget

Deuteronomy 8

March 27, 2022

Our Bible Study jumps from *Ezra* back to *Deuteronomy* today. Next week it's in *Matthew*. The reason for all of this jumping around is that the lesson book follows a theme, "God Frees and Redeems." So, the author of the lesson book has chosen various texts from various parts of the *Bible* to convey this theme, rather than focusing on particular books of the *Bible*. Since we have just been in *Ezra*, we need to be alert that we are going back to a much earlier time, and with respect to the Israelite faith, what I will call a more primitive stage.

Deuteronomy differs significantly from the earlier four books of the Pentateuch, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. Several different ancient sources thread their way through those earlier texts. There is a "J" (Yaweh) source, associated with Judah, an "E" (Elohim) source thought to be associated with northern Israel, the "P" (Priestly) source, and some other smaller or later sources. The "J" source seems to be the most ancient. The second version of the Creation story is from J. The more structured first creation story is them the "P" source. Most genealogy and date and age notes are from the "P" source. In many passages the J and E sources are woven together, as in the story of Joseph being sold into Egypt by his brothers.

In contrast, *Deuteronomy* is associated with a single primary "D" (Deuteronomic) source. *Deuteronomy* re-tells the story of Israel from the Exodus to the Jordan River in the form of a farewell address by Moses. The language (vocabulary and usage) is said to date to the late monarchy period, sometime prior to the scroll being discovered in the Temple in the time of King Josiah (*II Kings* 22). It is believed that scroll was *Deuteronomy*, perhaps not quite the same as what we have now on our *Bibles*, but without a lot of change. So, it would seem the "Deuteronomist" took more ancient material, and wove it into the *Deuteronomy* we have. As such, he was writing of Moses's message about how the Israelites were to live in the Promised Land after the conquest. However, he was doing so with the perspective of one who had seen what would go wrong.

Deuteronomy, as well as the earlier books of the Torah, were edited during the exile and Persian period into substantially what we have now. They were brought to Jerusalem by Ezra, and formally recognized as authoritative scripture, the Law.

So, as we read *Deuteronomy*, we get to Moses's address to the Israelites on the Plains of Moab, starting with Chapter 5. This is east of the Jordan River, across from Jericho. Moses begins with the Ten Commandments. In Chapter 6 Moses gives the Israelites 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.

a. Deuteronomy 6:4 Or *The LORD our God is one LORD, or The LORD our God, the LORD is one, or The LORD is our God, the LORD is one*

That is followed by cautions against disobedience, and an admonition for the Israelites to tell children to keep these statute and ordinances, telling them of how the Lord brought them out of slavery in Egypt. Then, Chapter 7 speaks of what they are to do when they enter the promised land. They are to destroy the inhabitants of the land, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and and the Jebusites. They are to do this, and not intermarry, "**for that would turn your children from following me, to serve other gods.**" (7:4). Starting with verse 12 are blessings for obedience.

Now, the fact was that the Israelites did NOT destroy all of these peoples of the land. Some survived by trickery, such as the Gibeonites (Joshua Chapter 9). Some simply were not conquered, such as the Jebusites in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was not conquered until David was king. Others, like the entire tribe of Dan, were displaced by the Philistines. The tribe of Reuben disappeared when the Moabites reconquered their territory, the Plains of Moab. Others simply continued to exist alongside the Israelites. Throughout the time of the Judges until the end of the Monarchy, the Israelites were often worshiping the gods of the Canaanites and other peoples, as well as the LORD. That meant also participating in the heathen practices, even to including child sacrifice and temple prostitution. The Deuteronomist knows this sad history of the Israelites. He sees the problem of the present, the Israelites following after other gods, as a consequence of failing to fully carry out God's instructions to Moses in Chapter 7:1-9. He is writing, perhaps in the time of King Manasseh, when the Assyrian god is being worshiped in the Temple, and the Ark of the Covenant has disappeared. The warning that the Deuteronomist brings his readers from Moses's time was not heeded. Defeat, destruction, and the Exile is coming. So, here's Chapter 8:

8 This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised on oath to your ancestors. ² Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commandments. ³ He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.^[a] ⁴ The clothes on your back did not wear out and your feet did not swell these forty years. ⁵ Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. ⁶ Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. ⁷ For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, ⁸ a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, ⁹ a land where you may eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and from whose hills you may mine copper. ¹⁰ You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you.

¹¹ Take care that you do not forget the Lord your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today.

a. Deuteronomy 8:3 *Or by anything that the Lord decrees*

Earlier the warning concerned obedience in the matter of conquering the land. Here we have a warning against complacency. The Israelites are about to take possession of a good land in which it will be easy to forget why and how they came to be there. Moses recalls the difficulties in the wilderness. These difficulties are interpreted as God disciplining the Israelites, much like a parent disciplines a child.

The idea of discipline being important to a child growing up to be a good, competent, and caring adult has merit. Children need to learn about limits. Their perspective needs to somehow and painfully be reoriented, so that they come to understand that they are not the most important being in the universe. I can't speak with any degree of authority on this, not being a parent myself. *Deuteronomy* is applying this idea to the relationship between God and his people, the Israelites.

The Israelites rebelled many times between the Red Sea and the Jordan River. As Pharaoh's army chased the fleeing Israelites toward the Red Sea, they said to Moses, **"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is not this the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."**(Exodus 14:11-12). And, as recently as the Israelites coming to the Plains of Moab, some turned away to Moabite or Midianite women and worshiped their gods, resulting in the LORD sending a plague upon them (Numbers 25). In between, they complained about a lack of food and were given manna. They complained about the manna and were given quail.

The idea that doing what is right gives a better path in life, and doing what is wrong can, and often does, lead to destruction, is on the average validated. On an individual level, there are exceptions. There are people who gain power and wealth through evil means, seem to live a celebrity life, and die old, rich and famous. There are good people who, like Job, suffer. The Deuteronomy point of view cannot explain this, and doesn't try. Bad things that happened to the Israelites were because of sin. If they are righteous, they will live in the Promised Land in health and prosperity. If they cease being righteous, God will punish them.

This perspective can lead to a way of understanding God and the Creation that sees in everything that happens God's hand at work. If someone dies of a disease, someone might say, "It must have been part of God's plan." Or, worse, "This man must have sinned, for look at what has happened to him." That is the general assumption made by the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus's time. The book of Job is one response to this issue. We recently looked at that.

Another answer is given by Jesus. To his disciples, Jesus didn't promise wealth and prosperity. He did promise God's love and caring. The Beatitudes in Matthew 5 begin with Jesus finding God's blessings in places nobody thought to

look before. Blessed are the poor; blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek (humble)..." It is the humble who will inherit the earth.

That is actually consistent with a core idea in Deuteronomy 8. As our lesson book quotes it, "God is God, and we are not." Recognizing that we do not own and control the universe is a start. But, so many humans, though mortal, seek to control all that they might, including others. It takes humility to accept discipline. Without humility, discipline is taken as acts cruelty, domination, and tyranny. For the atheist, anything that goes wrong either is the result of an uncaring universe or a perverse one. With sufficient power, that shouldn't have happened!

For the believer, one can ask God, "Did I do something wrong?" Is this a matter of discipline? Or, it is just something that happened, and there is just no explanation I can find or understand? We are promised, as Christians, as Paul wrote to the Romans, "**8²⁸ We know that all things work together for good^[a] for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.**" That does not make the kinds of promises we find in Deuteronomy 8:11. But it is enough, knowing that God loves us, and has demonstrated that love in the life and teachings of Jesus, and in the faithful lives the saints who have followed His way since.

Prayer: God our provider, guide us in times of transition. Help us to remember your provision in the past so we can enter new experiences with grateful hearts. Help us form new habits that enable us to continue to trust you. Amen.