

Editorial: Reading Deuteronomy for God's People Today

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It is difficult to overstate the importance of Deuteronomy in Scripture and God's unfolding redemptive plan. Positioned strategically at the end of the Pentateuch, concluding the incredible life and ministry of Moses, renewing and expanding the Sinai covenant for the post-wilderness generation, Deuteronomy serves as the covenant instruction (*torah*) for a new generation posed to enter the Promised Land. Finally, after thirty-eight years of delay and the death of the previous generation due to their rebellion in the wilderness, God's patriarchal promises are now finally being fulfilled as the people of Israel are on the verge of entering the land. But Deuteronomy gives us more than a mere recounting of this unique episode in Israel's history. Through Moses' instruction, Deuteronomy also describes the future of the nation, which later biblical authors use as a template to interpret Israel's history and to hold out hope for a new and better covenant (see e.g., Deut 29-30). Deuteronomy, rightly understood and placed in its location in redemptive-history, is far more than an ancient history book of Israel. In truth, it is a Gospel book which describes beautifully the covenant relationship between Yahweh and his people, the deep and abiding problem of the human heart, and the only remedy for uncircumcised hearts, namely, God's sovereign and gracious action to redeem by the provision of a greater and better Israel, the true obedient Son and servant King. Let us highlight each of these areas in turn.

First, Deuteronomy beautifully describes the covenant relationship between God and his people. There is no greater privilege for humans than to know, love, obey, and serve our glorious covenant Lord. For God to say to any people: “I am your God and you are my people” is the very reason and purpose for our existence as God’s image-bearers. In the storyline of Scripture, Israel was privileged to be in this position, not because they were better or more numerous than the nations (Deut 7:7), but solely due to God’s sovereign choice and his covenant loyalty to Abraham (Ex 19:4; Deut 7:8). In fact, given sin’s entrance into the world, Israel’s role in the world was not only to be the nation by which Messiah would come and reverse the effects of sin and death (see Gen 3:15; 12:1-3); they were also called to live as Adam and the entire human race was supposed to live—as obedient sons (Ex 4:22-23) and servant kings—in relationship to the Lord and the entire creation. Israel was to fulfill the role of Adam by living as a “kingdom of priests” (Ex 19:5-6), to serve as God’s son and representative and thus display to this poor, fallen world what it means to be truly human.

In this regard, Deuteronomy’s exposition of the law-covenant must be viewed as wholly positive: *torah* from the living covenant Lord who speaks and relates to his people on how to live life in the land and know God’s blessing in their lives and in all of their relationships. In all of this instruction, Israel had the supreme privilege of learning the fear of the Lord (Deut 31:12). Even though Christians are not under the law-covenant as a covenant, we need to be reminded of the incredible privilege it is to be God’s covenant people and take seriously Paul’s admonition that all Scripture, including Deuteronomy, is for our instruction and admonition (2 Tim 3:15-17). No doubt, we have to apply carefully the old covenant to us in light of Christ, yet we must never forget that it is applicable to us as *Scripture* and thus we need to learn anew what God is teaching us today through this wonderful book.

Second, Moses in Deuteronomy does not “pull any punches” regarding the deep problem of the human heart. After all, he is speaking to the generation whose parents died in the wilderness due to their disobedience and rebellion (Deut 1-4). Now he addresses their children and commands obedience in them (Deut 4). Moses lays out the blessings which will result (Deut 28:1-14), but he also warns them that disobedience will result in judgment and exile from the land (Deut 28:15-68), which in fact, he predicts will occur. Even though the old and new generation have received innumerable blessings from the Lord, their hearts are hard. In fact, one of the purposed effects of giving the law to Israel was to reveal and intensify sin—to show

us clearly that apart from God's grace and provision, we cannot change our hearts (Deut 30:6; cf. Rom 5:20-21; 7:13)—a lesson we must never forget.

Third, even though Moses predicts the future rebellion of this new generation and their children, he holds out hope, not due to them, but solely due to God's unilateral action to redeem. Israel is called to be an obedient son, yet they have failed and will fail. What is needed is for the covenant Lord unilaterally to act and circumcise their hearts (Deut 30:6). By so doing they will become faithful sons, which wonderfully and gloriously, God promises to do in the future. In this way, Moses not only describes and predicts the future history of Israel, he also anticipates God's future redemptive work by which he will circumcise the hearts of the entire community, thus creating a people who will be wholly devoted to him from every tribe, nation, people, and tongue. Ultimately, of course, this is what the OT prophets and the NT announces occurs in the dawning of a new covenant secured by the life, death, and resurrection of God's own obedient Son (Rom 3:21-31; cf. Heb 2:5-18; 7-10).

In all these ways, Deuteronomy is a Gospel book and required reading for God's people today. It is my prayer that the various articles and contributions in this issue of *SBJT* will lead us to a greater understanding of Deuteronomy and a renewed appreciation for our Lord Jesus Christ, the one whom the message of Deuteronomy ultimately points.