

The Uniqueness of the God of Israel

Deuteronomy 1:1-4:43

Public Reading, 4:32-40

Deuteronomy begins where Numbers ends, with Israel gathered on the Plains of Moab east of the Jordan poised to enter the Promised Land.

What should have been an 11-day journey had become 40 years of disaster. In his opening message (chs 1-4), Moses put the 40-year history of Israel in perspective for the present generation. His aim is to help them not be paralyzed by the past but move beyond the failures of the former generation.

Out of that failure, God, true to his word, raised up a generation that he would bring into the land (1:39).

Moses takes up their history in chapters 1-4 to show them that while they had been impacted by the failure of the exodus generation, that history did not need to determine their future. They must learn the ways their history had impacted them, the lessons it could teach them, and that they are not defined by the failure of the past but rather by their covenant relationship with the God of Israel.

Dear Brother and Sister, you are not defined by your history. But I fear some may be imprisoned by it. History is not destiny. Israel had to move past the failure of their parents to enter into the destiny God had for them (cf. 4:1,40). Victimhood may get you the pity of friends, but it will not give you freedom to live. As believers, our identity is in Christ. We are Christians. God rules our destiny.

Know your history. Know its potential to control you. Know how it tends to impact you and your relationships. Know those things not so you can embrace them but fight them. Then, embrace your freedom in Christ. For freedom Christ has set you free (Gal 5:1). You are free to love, to serve, to obey, to live, but you are not free to wallow in guilt and shame.

In Chapters 1-3 Moses recounts Israel's history of failure in order to point to ways God had prepared the present generation for the future possession of the land. In chapter 4, he shows them how to move beyond the past by finding their identity and strength to face the future in their covenant relationship with God.

I want to approach this passage like I think Moses intended by walking through chapters 1-3 and then drawing our sermon points from chapter 4.

Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses

The death of Moses looms over the entire book of Deuteronomy. It frames the book (1:37; 3:26; 4: 21-22; 32:48; 34:1-8). In light of his impending death, Moses had a deep pastoral concern for Israel.

The loss of Moses could be a devastating and destabilizing event for Israel.

The contexts in which he speaks of the death are instructive.

In 1:37, he speaks of his death in the context of the spy story framed by references to Caleb and Joshua, the only two from the exodus generation who remained faithful and would lead Israel into the land (1:36-38).

In 3:23-26, Moses recorded his moving prayer asking LORD to let him live and see the land. The LORD's answer is sobering (3:26). On either side of this reference to his death, Moses charged the tribes, assigned to possess the Amorite lands east of Jordan, to lead in the conquest of Canaan. He is, also, charged to commission Joshua to lead the conquest (18-22 and 28).

The trans-Jordan victories over Sihon and Og and the possession of their land seem to have excited in Moses a desire to enter the land with Israel. Possession of the land, however, was not contingent on Moses. God had already provided general to lead the armies of Israel.

In 4:21-22, on either side of Moses's mention of his death, are warnings against idolatry and exhortations to covenant faithfulness (15-19, 23-24). They must not idolize Moses. Their hope and faith must be in God.

Moses as pastor/teacher

You probably noticed in those 3 references to his death, Moses said to Israel, *The LORD was angry with me because of you* (1:37; 3:26; 4:21). If you are like me, I think, *not so fast, Moses. You yourself acted in unbelief at Meribah and did not treat God as Holy in the sight of Israel* (cf. Deut 32:51; Num 21:12).

My tendency is to read this in the worse possible light. On the surface it sounds like Moses is a bitter old man and is blaming Israel for his own failure.

I don't think that is what is going on here for at least **3 reasons**.

One, the tone of Deuteronomy is pastoral. The purpose of Deuteronomy is to prepare Israel to move into the future without Moses.

God was moving Moses off the scene, to move Israel forward. God was not replacing Moses; There was no replacing Moses. The next prophet like Moses would be Christ (18:15-19; cf. Acts 3:22-23).

God was simply moving forward. Moses was getting too old to lead (cf. 31:2). He was and had been slowly developing the leadership structure for a future without Moses (Ch 31).ⁱ Like Bob Dylan sang, *The Times, They Are A-Changin'*.

Perhaps, pastorally there is a warning to Israel to strive to make the task of their leaders as peaceful as possible. Be careful not to overburden them.

Two, Moses recognized his own inadequacy to lead Israel alone. Moses began his message recounting how because of the LORD's faithfulness to his promise to Abraham, he alone could not lead them and meet their needs (1:9-10). The LORD, however, had provided *wise and experienced men* to aid in leading the people (1:15).

Three, I want to be careful here because Moses is unparalleled in OT history. It would be difficult to exaggerate his importance. Instead of reading the phrase as blaming Israel, we can read it in the sense of, *for the sake of Israel* Moses could not cross the Jordan.

Moses had disqualified himself at Meribah. If it would have been better for Israel for Moses to continue to lead them, the LORD would not have denied Moses.

If there is a warning in Moses's words to Israel regarding their deportment, there is a warning here to future leaders to guard their lives so that they do not disqualify themselves, and to realize the work of God will move on without you.

The death of Moses in Deuteronomy. You can see how the loss of Moses could have been devastating to Israel moving into the future. His words are pastoral.

The Spy story or the Spy Debacle (1:18-3:29)

Aside from the exodus and exile, the spy story is the most consequential event in the OT.

This story defined the exodus generation as an unbelieving, evil generation (cf 1:32, 35). It sealed their destiny to wander 40 years in the wilderness slowly dying off.

We know the story. Israel sent spies into the land to bring back a report before they launched their attack (1:22). **Moses related** the good report of spies here (1:25; cf Num. Chs 13-14). The **people related** the majority report, *Our brothers have made our hearts melt, saying, “the people are greater and taller than we. The cities are great and fortified up to heaven. And besides, we have seen the son of the Anakim there”* (1:28).

Moses endeavored to persuade them to go up and take the land: *Do not be in dread or afraid of them. The LORD your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes, and in wilderness, where you have seen how the LORD your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place* (1:29-31).

The root issue of the exodus generation serves as a warning to the present generation: They did not believe (1:32). Nothing had changed in the land. The people were still greater and taller; their cities were still great and fortified; and the occasional descendant of Anak was there.

The present generation had been raised with the fear, rebellion, and unbelief of their parents as their model for life. How can they be prepared for the conquest, to face the very things their parents feared? How does the spy story help?

Moses answered their history, by recounting **two stories** in their immediate experience.

In route, Israel had to pass through the territories of the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites and into Amorite territory east of Jordan (2:1-3:29).ⁱⁱ This journey served to prepare the present generation to possess Canaan by counteracting the spy debacle.

2:3-23 A possession given: the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites

As they passed through Edom, Moab, and Ammon, they were instructed not to contend with these peoples because God had given them their lands as a *possession* (2:5b, 9b, 19b). The word *possession* is a key word related to the conquest. What

God was giving to Israel in Canaan, he had already given to Edom, Moab, and Ammon.

Further, two parenthetical paragraphs show us why Moses included these stories in his opening message of Deuteronomy (2:10-12, 20-23). The people that were dispossessed so that Edom, Moab, and Ammon might have a *possession* were everything the exodus generation feared: *great, many, tall* (10, 21). Like the feared Anakim, they were giants.

This text argues that if God dispossessed giants to give the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites a possession, He would certainly give his people with whom he was in covenant a possession.

Do you see how Moses answers the spy narrative?

2:24-3:11 A possession given: Sihon and Og

If 2:1-23 is an example of God dispossessing peoples to give other peoples a possession, Israel's defeat of the Amorite kingdoms provides a taste of conquest, surprisingly, now on the eastside of the Jordan (2:24-3:11).

The stories of Sihon and Og's defeat follow the same basic outline. Again, the stories echo and answer the spy story: *Not a city was too high for us* (2:36b); *All these were cities fortified with high walls, gates, and bars* (3:5). Additionally, Og was the last for the Rephaim, the giants (3:11).

The stories of chapters 2-3 offer a positive counterbalance to the disobedience and defeat we encountered in the spy story of chapter 1.ⁱⁱⁱ

Chapter 4

And now, O Israel, listen (4:1)^{iv} shows Moses is transitioning from the background of Israel's failure in the wilderness to the message he now wants to preach: It's not past failures, but the God of Israel who will determine their destiny.

Moses's sermon has a beginning (4:1-8), a middle (4:9-31), and an end (4:32-40) with each section highlighting the uniqueness of the God of Israel and how he shapes our lives.

1. The Nearness of God to his people (4:1-8)

Let's start with the questions Moses asked: *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 on him (7)? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today (8)?*

The *nearness* (qarob) of God speaks of his personal nature. No other people ever had a person relationship with a god. This is the uniqueness of the God of Israel. God personal and near, so near we heard him speak.

A. Obey the word and live (1-5)

Israel's ability to live in the land was conditioned on hearing and doing the word. They were not to add to or take away from it (2). The incident at Baal-peor served as a lesson not to disregard the word of God (3; cf Num 25). Perhaps Moses pointed across the valley to Beth-peor when he said this (3:29). There, the old generation was finished off. Baal of Peor was not near; he was nowhere to be found.

In contrast to the old generation, they held fast to the LORD and lived (4). Paul told Timothy that the Holy Scriptures are able to make you wise to salvation (2Tim 3:15). Obedience to the word does not stifle life, it gives life; it's the way to life. The good life is the obedient life (cf. 4:1,40).

B. Obey because of your witness (6-8)

We live in front of a watching world. Among ancient law codes, no people anywhere ever had a law code like Israel or a god like the God of Israel. The nations would see them obey the law of God and marvel at the *wisdom and understanding of Israel* (4:6).

The word of God was clear, and the person of God was near. No other nation knew that their god required, which god was angry, what provoked him, or how to appease him.

Into that world came the light of the revelation of God, a God who was near, and a word that was clear.^v He was so near you could talk to him (7b), and so clear we know what he requires. Israel was the nation's only view of that God.

2. The Faithfulness of God (4:9-31)

Verses 9-31 take up the topic of the covenant (13,23,31). Each paragraph is an exposition of some quality of the covenant. All of God's dealings with his people are covenantal.

God gave a possession to Edom, Moab, and Ammon, but he did not make a covenant with them.

The future of the Israelites was not determined by the past failure of their fathers, but by the covenant faithfulness of God. God is faithful.

A. God was faithful in the past (9-14)

Moses recounted the story of God giving them the covenant. God is true to his covenant. But how is faithfulness to be perpetuated in a people?

Moses cautions the people to keep the covenant carefully and not forget it (4:9; cf 4:23). To *forget* is not a lapse of memory but to disregard it as unimportant. They must carefully uphold the covenant.

Another way of keeping and not forgetting the covenant was to teach their children and each successive generation after them the covenant content. Moses gave them the content they were to teach in 4:10-14.

They were to teach their children how they stood before the LORD at Horeb so that they may hear his words, that they may learn to fear the LORD, and that they may teach their children so (10). Then Moses proceeds to describe that day at Horeb.

They stood at the foot of the mountain as it burned with fire that reached to the heaven and was wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom (11, cf. Ex 19:16; 20:21). They saw no form but heard the voice (12). The voice declared the covenant, defined here as the 10 Commandments. The 10 Commandments were written on 2 tablets of stone (13).^{vi} God commanded Moses to teach them the application of the commandments to life so that they might live in that way in the land (14).

Imagine a father gathering his children around and telling them the story of the covenant. *When we reached Horeb, we gathered at the foot of the mountain. Suddenly, there was fire that reached to heaven but at the same time deep darkness, cloud, and gloom. We feared. We trembled. We saw no form, but we heard the Voice of God. He speaks, but he has no form. That is why he tells us to hear him. We thought we would die.*

We must tell our children of the New Covenant. They gathered at Calvary, and there they crucified the LORD of glory. The sky darkened and the earth quaked and the dead were raised as the Son of God laid down his life. But on the third day, he rose again. We preach in his name repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

B. God is faithful in the present (15-24)

In light of the covenant story of the past, Moses cautions against idolatry in the present (15-19, 23-24). In effect, Moses is saying idolatry is forgetting the covenant (cf 23). This is especially meaningful after we have just been reminded of the experience at Horeb. They saw no form but heard the voice. You can easily see how making an idol of any form denies the reality of what they experienced at Sinai.

The fire they saw that both revealed and concealed the divine presence is a consuming fire. It is the passion of God for his own glory. Paul quoted this text: *Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship in reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire* (Heb 12:28-29).

God will allow no rivals in our lives.

C. God will be faithful in the future (25-31)

Moses saw a day when their children would descend into idolatry, provoking the LORD to anger, so that he would scatter them among the nations (25-27). He would turn them over to their idolatry. When they would forsake the God who speaks but has no form, they would worship gods made out of stuff who do not see, hear, taste, or smell (28).

This is the binary every human is faced with. You may bow to the God of the Bible or you will bow to the god of your own making.

However, because God faithful to his covenant and is merciful, if from the farthest point away from him, you seek him and turn from sin and turn to him, you will find him (29-31).

3. The incomparability of God (32-40)

To show the incomparability of God, Moses began with series of questions. Since the dawn of creation, has anything ever happened like you have experienced (32)? Has anybody else ever heard the voice of God and lived (33)? Has any other god every

taken a nation from another nation all by himself like God did for you in Egypt (34)? When you consider that, you can only come to one conclusion: he did that that you might know him and that there is no other besides him (35).

Moses continued: God let you, out of all the peoples of the earth, hear his voice that you might fear him (36a). He let you see the fire and hear his voice from the midst of the fire (36b). He loved your fathers and chose their offspring and brought you out of Egypt (37). He drove out nations greater than you to bring you into their land as an inheritance (38). He did that that you might know He alone is God and there is no other (39). He has no peers. He is incomparable.

Conclusion:

The pastoral nature of this text is unparalleled in the ancient world. A God who loves his people (37), is so near you call on him (7), and whose law is for our good (40) is unheard of. Our obedience springs out of love for the God who loves us.

God answered their paralyzing past to move Israel forward into the future he had for them. He did that by showing them a greater reality than their failure. He gave them a fresh vision of his nearness, faithfulness, and incomparable nature.

Dear Friend, there is a greater reality than your past. There is the reality of the good news of Jesus who died for our sins and lives to secure our future.

Dear church, if we are to prosper and if our children are to have a future, we must stay centered on the cross work of Jesus.

ⁱ Joshua did not replace Moses. He took up only one aspect of Moses's leadership. Moses was part of developing leaders for the transition: Priests, Levites, Elders, Clans, Families.

ⁱⁱ Originally, they were to launch the conquest from the South at Kadesh-Barnea. Now 40 years later, they are to launch the conquest from the east, having traveled through the lands of Edom, Moab, and Ammon and dispossessing the Amorites. Why the change in direction? While we are not told directly, the reason is housed in the narrative.

ⁱⁱⁱ Dennis Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: a Theological Reading*, 28.

^{iv} Verse 1 marks the first appeal to *hear* (sema). The imperative *hear* always opens a new section of the book (cf. 5:1; 6:4; 9:1; 20:3; 27:9). See Dan Block, NIVAC, *Deuteronomy*, 114n3.

^v Block, 122.

^{vi} The two tablets are not two tables of the 10 commandments, but two copies of the 10 Commandments, one for God and one for Israel. They were both placed in the Ark of the covenant (10:5).