

Session 5: Deuteronomy

D. The greatest commandment

D1. The 'shema'

When Jesus was asked which he thought was the greatest commandment of the law, he quoted part of Deuteronomy 6:

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and your children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 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. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

In doing so, Jesus was being completely orthodox. This commandment was recognised as the heart of the law. Verses 4-9 are the passage that was written on tiny scrolls and placed in the phylactery, the small boxes worn on the forehead and arms by orthodox Jews at prayer, and in the mezuzah, the small cylinders placed on the doorposts of Jewish houses still today. They were to pass on the teaching of the law to their children; literally, 'sitting at home and walking by the way', a way of saying 'everywhere and at all times'.

The central text is: 'the Lord is our God, the Lord alone' (probably a better translation than 'the Lord our God, the Lord is one'). Israel is to be entirely loyal to Yahweh, to love him with heart, soul and might, a love virtually synonymous with obedience to the Law. Thus Josiah was marked out as a king who 'turned to the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul and with all his might, according to the law of Moses' (2 Kings 23:25).

Later, Jesus said to his disciples, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments, and I will give you another Comforter, the Spirit of truth'. The Spirit is given at Pentecost, the festival at which Israel celebrated the giving of the law. He came to be that law written on the hearts of those put their faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Thus the fulfilment of the new covenant, prophesied by Jeremiah, involves the fulfilment of the old.

D2. 'Torah'

So far we have been reading Deuteronomy as a book of law. It is the fifth of the five 'books of the law' or 'torah'. But 'torah' literally means not 'law' but 'teaching'.

Deuteronomy has many of the features of a book of teaching. It is written in a characteristic preaching style; it has high-flown phrases, frequent repetition and places great emphasis on motivation. Moreover, many of the 'laws' of Deuteronomy would be very difficult to enforce. Who is going to bring the king to book for having too much wealth (17:17)? Who is going to decide whether someone setting a slave free is being generous enough (15:13-14)?

The purpose of Deuteronomy seems to be to hold up a mirror to Israel: not a picture of the society they once were, or even a blue-print for the future, but a picture of the kind of society they should and could be if everyone takes the law to heart. The ideal for such a society can be summed up in the word 'SHALOM'. Usually, this is translated as 'peace' but in fact its meaning is much wider. 'Shalom' describes a society in harmony; where no one lives in poverty or is oppressed, where the rich accept responsibility to care for the poor and powerless, where conflict is kept to a minimum; where justice is available to all and is impartial; where everyone has the maximum opportunity for prosperity and well-being; and where the value of individuals is balanced by the importance of society and relationships. The same ideals can be seen to be at the heart of the message of the prophets. For later Jewish teachers and still today, 'shalom' is a description of God's 'kingdom', the kind of society that would result if God were to rule in the hearts of all. It is 'shalom' that was announced at the coming of Jesus:

Luke 2:14

'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace (shalom) among those whom he favours!'

Throughout Deuteronomy, it is emphasised that the law should be seen as a gift of grace: not as set of burdensome obligations, but as a way of life which, if we follow it, will lead to blessing and peace. It is given by a God who loves his people, who set them free from oppression in Egypt, gave them a fertile land with plenty of water resources and mineral wealth and a way of life to help them to enjoy it. As the book itself declares:

Deuteronomy 30:19

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,

In teaching, preaching and living God's requirements today, we are not to relate to these as dead law, but as a gift of grace, a way of life, blessing and fulfilment.

Further Reading

Background reading for session 5 can be found in:

John Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament*, pages 51-55, chapters 6 and 11

Bernhard Anderson, *The Living World of Old Testament*, chapter 11

Preparation

The key Bible passages for session 6 are:

Joshua 1 and 24

2 Samuel 7

Judges 2 and 3

1 Kings 11 and 12

1 Samuel 12

2 Kings 9 and 17