

**GOD CHOSE ISRAEL**  
**Teaching-Learning Resources**  
**BAPTIST LEADER**

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Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:16–7:26; 9:4–5

Key Passage: Deuteronomy 6:20–25; 7:6–11

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In this lesson, entitled “God Chose Israel,” the focus of attention remains on the introductory portion of the lengthy second discourse of Moses in Deuteronomy 4:44–26:19 (see the outline in the “Teaching-Learning Resources” for June 7). As noted in the previous lesson, the high point of Deuteronomy came with the declaration of ancient Israel’s credo in Deuteronomy 6:4–5. After last week’s study of that text, which Jesus called the greatest commandment on which depend all the Law and the Prophets, there is bound to be a letdown. The exhortation of Moses to the Israelites that they obey the Law may not be as inspiring to study as was the study of the actual statement of the Law. Consequently, today’s lesson picks up the narrative of Moses’ exhortation; and although somewhat less inspirational, it will be equally informative.

The study of Moses’ first discourse required some discussion on the different theological viewpoints contained within the biblical traditions. In the lesson of June 14, “Claiming God’s Promise,” attention was drawn to the absence in Moses’ recalling God’s covenant with Abraham of God’s statement to Abraham: “In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” This omission is significant since Abraham’s progeny and the Promised Land were to be the means to that end, namely, a divine blessing for all people. In the

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lesson of June 21, “Recalling God’s Action,” we looked at differences in “holy war” theology, especially those texts which speak of Yahweh alone fighting for Israel as opposed to those texts that speak of Israel’s fighting for or instead of Yahweh. In the lesson of June 28, “Experiencing God’s Presence,” notice was made of those statements attributed to Moses that asserted that the people of the world were expected to worship the sun, moon, and stars, as God intended, as opposed to those passages that have the ring of a pure monotheistic faith. Today’s lesson from the second discourse of Moses, about the choice of Israel as God’s unique possession, brings us back to some of these issues from the first discourse.

The events behind the historical allusions in Moses’ second exhortation to obey the Law (Deuteronomy 6:10ff.) are recorded in greater detail in Exodus 17–19. The passing reference to the testing of Yahweh at Massah (Deuteronomy 6:16) refers back to the story in Exodus 17:1–7 about the murmurings against Moses. The Israelites were at a place called Rephidim and were without drinking water until Moses struck the rock with his rod, as Yahweh commanded, and water flowed from the rock. Although the Israelites had witnessed with their own eyes the mighty act of God at the Red Sea, they panicked when drinking water became scarce. To allay their fears and spirit of rebellion, Yahweh had to act again to prove what should have been obvious, that God was the God of drinking water as well as the God of the sea waters. As a consequence of this act, the place where the test occurred was renamed. It now became known as Massah and Meribah (meaning “proof” and “contention”) as well as Rephidim (meaning “outstretched supports”).

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The narrative in Exodus 17:8–13 continued with the story of an attack on the Israelites by the Amalekites and how in self-defense Israel fought back. They were encouraged by Moses' raised arms and uplifted rod (compare Exodus 14:21) and possibly his affirmation, "The hand is over the congregation!" Thus, in Israelite tradition even the name "Rephidim" ("outstretched supports") took on new meaning in light of Moses' outstretched arms supported by Aaron and Hur.

These two events were part of the historical prologue to Moses' declaration, just before the Sinai revelation, that Israel had been chosen as Yahweh's own special possession: "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation . . ." (Exodus 19:5–6). This election of Israel as God's chosen people was viewed by some to have taken place in a distant prehistorical age. In the words of the "Song of Moses" in Deuteronomy 32:8–9,

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance,  
when he separated the sons of men,  
he [Yahweh] fixed the bounds of the peoples  
according to the number of the sons of God.  
Indeed, Yahweh apportioned Jacob as his people,  
[Israel] as his own inheritance.

In less poetic terms and within the historical framework, the election of Israel came in the covenant of Yahweh and Abraham:

I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly . . . you shall be the father of a multitude of nations . . . I will make nations of you,

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and kings shall come forth from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant. . . . And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God<sup>1</sup> [page 54]

Moses' declaration of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel mentioned explicitly an element only implicitly expressed in Genesis and the "Song of Moses." That element is the conditional "if" clause. Only if Israel obeys God's word will the election take effect. It was not automatic and irrevocable. It was contingent, and the Israelites had to ratify the covenant with a commitment: "And all the people answered together and said, 'All that Yahweh has spoken we will do'" (Exodus 19:8). It is important to note that only after Israel pledged to fulfill the covenant condition that the actual stipulations of the covenant were revealed in the Torah (Law/teachings) and Decalogue at Sinai/Horeb.

In summary, the biblical traditions that predate and/or illuminate the declaration in Moses' second discourse of God's election of Israel as God's unique possession are found in Genesis 12:1–3; 15:7–21; 17:2–8; Exodus 17–18; and Deuteronomy 32:8–9. In Moses' statements before Sinai and after the wilderness wandering there is no reference to Israel's being the nation through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed, which was explicit in the covenant with Abraham. On the other hand, the Mosaic statements made

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1. Genesis 17:2–8; note also 12:1–3 and 15:7–21.

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explicit the conditional element in the covenant relationship. Forty years later, in Moses' recollection of the covenant at Sinai, in Deuteronomy 6–7, the sequence of events are reversed. Whereas in Exodus 17–20 the statement about God's choice of Israel preceded the revelation at Sinai and the receiving of the Ten Commandments, in this second discourse the receiving of the Decalogue is reiterated before there is any reference to Israel's being God's chosen people. On the borders of the Promised Land, Moses' statements about Israel's unique relationship to Yahweh became part of his warning to the Israelites to refrain from any and all social or religious intercourse with the Canaanites / Amorites.

As the text now stands, the inspiring announcement, "For you are a people holy to Yahweh your God; Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy 7:6), is tucked between two exhortations to destroy the inhabitants of the Promised Land. These exhortations are in Deuteronomy 7:2, 16. To omit them from the study or to sidestep the issues they create is to miss part of the biblical message. These verses read as follows: "When Yahweh your God gives them over to you, and you defeat them; then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them" (v. 2). "And you shall destroy all the peoples that Yahweh your God will give over to you, your eye shall not pity them. . . ." (v. 16). Similar sentiments are found in 7:24 and 9:3.

Before the wilderness wandering, the Israelites were afraid of the physical strength of the Canaanites, but forty years later the threat of the Canaanites came more from their religious vitality. They were now viewed as a threat to the purity of

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Israel's religion and as an irresistible temptation for some spiritually weak Israelites. This threat was a mortal threat to Israel, for in the light of the first two of the Ten Commandments, which carried the death penalty for violators (Exodus 22:20; Deuteronomy 13:6–10; Joshua 24:20), Israel was committed to the worship of Yahweh alone. The covenant status of being God's elect was contingent on full fidelity; otherwise Israel would be quickly destroyed (Deuteronomy 7:4). Life was at stake for Israel as a nation and for Israelites as individuals. For Israelites to live, non-Israelites would have to die; this was the only sure guarantee for life. Every possible source of temptation had to be removed. Not only was it commanded that sacred shrines and graven images be destroyed, but the people who worshiped at those places were also to be destroyed. This precluded the reconstruction of shrines and the manufacture of new idols that would tempt the Israelites into idolatry. (Note especially 7:5, and compare Exodus 23:23–25.)

One must appreciate the predicament in which the Canaanites and Amorites found themselves. According to one theology, they were among the nations (referred to in Deuteronomy 4:19 and Micah 4:5) that were to worship, at best, the sun, moon, and stars. They had not been selected as Yahweh's possession but had been made the inheritance of the "sons of God" (following the Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy 32:8–9) when Yahweh apportioned the nations and established their boundaries. But according to the dominant theology, such worship as was practiced among the nations was utterly detestable and an abomination. It was just plain wickedness, which carried with it its own death penalty (Deuteronomy 9:4–5). The Canaanites / Amorites were in a no-win

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position. The worship of the gods allocated to them set them up as a snare for the Israelites. Yet they were not free to convert, for the children of Yahweh were all Israelites by this covenant: “You are the sons of Yahweh your God; . . . you are a people holy to Yahweh your God, and Yahweh has chosen you for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth” (Deuteronomy 14:1–2). The Canaanites were caught between a rock and a hard place; they were caught between two conflicting theologies. Just to live the life ordained for them was to create that irresistible temptation for Israel that was, in turn, a capital offense. (Note again Deuteronomy 7:2–4.) Their fate was sealed by the fact that it was their territory that the Israelites were destined to possess.

### **Interpreting the Biblical Lesson**

#### **Deuteronomy 6:22—“... Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. . . .”**

In Moses’ first discourse brief reference was made to the Exodus experience (Deuteronomy 1:30; 4:35–37), but it was described in a long series of descriptive nouns or phrases: trials, signs, war, wonders, mighty hand, outstretched arm, great terrors, God’s presence. The statement here in Deuteronomy 6:22 is not as descriptive, with only the phrases “mighty hand” and “great and grievous signs and wonders.” The expression used in Exodus 19:4 is even more brief but much more imaginative, namely, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” But, however brief the statement about [page 55] the Exodus, every text where it is mentioned specifies that Yahweh alone secured the victory over Pharaoh. In Deuteronomy 11:24, the reference to Yahweh’s victory at

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the Red Sea is followed up immediately by a reference to the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram against Moses (see Numbers 16:3–11). Yahweh settled the rebellion and inflicted the death penalty on these men without the help of a single Israelite. The ground opened and swallowed them up alive into Sheol. Yahweh could manage war and rebellion without human assistance.

**Deuteronomy 7:6—“For you are a people holy to Yahweh your God; Yahweh your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession. . . .”**

The word “holy” carried the connotation of being “wholly different” or “unique.” The holiness of Yahweh was grounded in God’s being the Creator, God’s standing uniquely outside the creation. The holiness of Israel was derived from the holiness of God. Frequently articulated in the “Holiness Code” of Leviticus 17–26 is the statement, “You [Israel] shall be holy; for I [Yahweh] your God am holy” (see Leviticus 19:2; 20:7, 8, 26; 21:6, 8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32). It was expected that the Israelites would be wholly different from all the other peoples on earth because of their unique relationship to the Creator. As the holy people of Yahweh, the Israelites were required to “do what is right and good in the sight of Yahweh that it might go well” with them (Deuteronomy 6:18). A casual reading of the “Holiness Code” of Leviticus 17–26 will suffice to demonstrate that holiness was to be indicated by a highly moral lifestyle and very ethical human relationships.

**Deuteronomy 7:7—“...Yahweh set his love upon you and chose you . . . because Yahweh loves you. . . .”**



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This theme of the “Chosen People” is also found in Deuteronomy 4:37; 10:15; 14:2, 21; 26:19; and 27:9. It is a theme found on the lips of many Old Testament writers: Solomon (1 Kings 3:8), Amos (Amos 3:2), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 32:38; 33:24), Ezekiel (Ezekiel 20:5) and Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 41:8–9; 43:10, 20; 44:1–2). As indicated in the study of July 12, the word “love” is a term for covenant allegiance and loyalty, drawn from the language of international treaties between a king and his subjects. One significant difference can be noted between the covenant Yahweh made with Israel and the treaties between the ancient suzerain and his vassals. The suzerain or king made only general statements about being loyal to his subjects; he said nothing specific or in detail. But Yahweh pledged in great detail to give the Chosen People land, peace, and security in return for their love and loyalty.

**Deuteronomy 7:9—“Know therefore that Yahweh your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him. . . .”**

This is a very emphatic statement in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew employs the definite article so that the text reads literally, “Yahweh your God he is *the* God.” In the first two uses of the noun “God,” the Hebrew uses the plural of majesty coupled with the singular pronoun. The next phrase, “the . . . God who keeps covenant,” employs the singular form of the noun “God” rather than the honorific plural, but it also has the definite article, signifying that Yahweh is *the* God, the one and only God. The language here is the language of covenant. The imperative “know” carries with it the meaning of “acknowledge,” or “confess, confirm.” Those who “love” Yah-

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weh are not those with a sentimental or emotional attachment to God but those who are pledged in covenant loyalty and obedience to do as God wills. For those who love God, there is life; but for those who hate or disobey God, there is death. (See Leviticus 26:3–13, 14–39.)

### **Applying the Lesson to Life**

Relatively few Christians can claim Abraham as father and thereby share in the covenant election enacted at Haran or Sinai/Horeb. Most of us are from among “the other nations of the earth,” and had we lived in Moses’ day, we would have been among the Canaanites and the Amorites who were destined to have the sun, moon, and stars as our gods, with all the deadly consequences. But Israel’s theology was not limited to legitimating holy wars. It was Yahweh’s universalism rather than Israel’s nationalistic emphasis that addresses us. Israel’s election was for a witness to the nations; Israel was elected for service, not for privilege. The God of Israel was Lord of all. In the words of Exodus 19:5, “For all the earth is mine,” or, in the words of the psalmist, “The earth is the Lord’s and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1). The blessing promised us through Abraham has become a reality for us through Jesus of Nazareth, a son of Abraham, who filled full the Law and the Prophets. The covenant responsibility and contingencies once limited to Israel have been extended to us. In the words of 1 Peter 2: 9–10, which were addressed to Gentile Christians, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession. . . . Once you were no people but now you are God’s people. . . .”