

GOD IS FAITHFUL
Teaching-Learning Resources
BAPTIST LEADER

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Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:11–20

Key Passage: Deuteronomy 30:11–20

[Page 59]

The Biblical Background

This is the final lesson of a thirteen-week series on the Book of Deuteronomy. Last week's lesson concluded the study of the three discourses, or speeches, of Moses which make up most of Deuteronomy. Today's lesson, entitled "God Is Faithful," concludes Part III of the series, which has been concerned with "Covenant Renewal." In the appendix that now concludes Deuteronomy (chapters 31–34) are two poems that have become known as the "Song of Moses" (32:1–43) and the "Blessing of Moses" (33:1–29). Today's lesson focuses on the first nine verses of the Song of Moses.

Since it is clearly stated that Moses "spoke" the words of this "song" before the assembly of Israel (31:30), it seems most probable that 32:1–43 was originally composed as a poem rather than a "song" set to music. The Hebrew words *shir* and *shirah*, meaning "song," are the same words used to designate a literary poem.

Before developing the theme "God Is Faithful," which highlights the main point of the Song of Moses, it is important to recognize that this poem was specifically written to serve as a "witness" for the people of Israel of the covenant between them and Yahweh. The origin and significance of this witness motif can be summarized under two points.

GOD IS FAITHFUL

I. Literary Parallels for Requiring Covenant Witnesses

It has been established with a fair degree of certainty that the covenant between Yahweh and Israel was expressed literarily along the pattern of ancient Near Eastern treaties between a king or suzerain and his vassals. Characteristic features of the “suzerainty treaties,” which is the term used to designate these international treaties, were the following six components.

(a) *Preamble.* This was the introductory statement of the treaty in which the king identified himself and asserted his claim of authority over the other party of the treaty. Exodus 20:1, “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,” is one example of the preamble from the Sinai covenant.

(b) *Historical Recitation.* This included a review of historical events from the perspective of the king, designed to create a bond of obligation and gratitude for the way the king had previously treated the parties of the covenant and their predecessors. Joshua 24:1–13 is one such historical recitation in traditions of Israel’s covenant with Yahweh.

(c) *Covenant Stipulations.* The covenant, or treaty, stipulated that the vassal must remain loyal to the suzerain under all circumstances. This was the primary and paramount treaty requirement. Joshua 24:14, “Now therefore fear Yahweh, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River . . .” incorporated this main stipulation. The detailed requirements of the treaty were then spelled out in detail, much like the covenant stipulations in Exodus 20:2–17 and Deuteronomy 5:4–21; 6:1–15.

(d) *Provision for Keeping and Reading the Treaty.* The treaty stipulations generally included provisions for depositing the

GOD IS FAITHFUL

legal document in a sacred place. It would be removed from its sacred place of deposit at specified intervals and read to the people to remind them of their obligations and to permit them to renew their covenant vows of loyalty. This was probably Joshua's intent when on Mount Ebal "he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law" (Joshua 8:34). In Deuteronomy 31:9–13, provision was made for the reading of the Law every seven years, and according to Exodus 34:23, it was probably done also three times a year during the three major feasts. The ark of the covenant had several functions, one of which was to be the depository for the tablets of the law (1 Kings 8:21; 2 Chronicles 6:11; Exodus 25:16, 21).

(e) Witnesses to the Treaty. Provision was made in the international treaties for an assembly of the gods of the contracting parties to "witness" the treaty. This validation alerted the human and divine parties under the covenant to be on guard for any violation of the covenant. Not only were gods called upon to be witnesses, but provision was also made for mountains, rivers, wind, clouds, heaven, and earth to function as witnesses. At the time of the Mizpah benediction (Genesis 31:44–49), when Jacob and Laban gathered stones to act as witnesses of their covenant, it was already customary to use physical objects as witnesses to validate a covenant. (Note also how David and Jonathan appealed to Yahweh to witness their personal covenant, 1 Samuel 20:12–23.) This feature is particularly important for today's lesson, since the Song of Moses was written to serve as one witness to Yahweh's covenant with Israel.

(f) Blessings and Curses. The themes of blessings, which result from obedience to the covenant, and of curses, which

GOD IS FAITHFUL

come from disobedience, have been dealt with in previous lessons on Deuteronomy 7:12–15; 8:1–10; 27:15–26; 28:15–68. Such blessings and curses were an integral part of international treaties. Generally, the curses in such treaties outnumbered the list of blessings, a feature that also finds its biblical parallel. In the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17–26, the blessings are listed in Leviticus 26:1–13, but it takes twenty-five verses, 26:14–39, to list the curses.

This lesson on God’s faithfulness as stated in Deuteronomy incorporates material that was stated in the form and/or context of items *(a)*, *(d)*, *(e)*, and *(f)*.

II. Three Witnesses for the Israelites

The Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32) is only one of several witnesses to be used for or against Israel. It was to remind the people of God’s faithfulness expressed in the covenant with them and to give them an opportunity to repent and/or renew their loyalty to God. According to Deuteronomy 31:9–13, 24–29 (verses which should be read as a literary unit), Moses wrote “this Law” that it might be placed beside the ark of the covenant as a witness against Israel when the covenant was broken.

According to 31:16–22, 30, Moses also wrote the poem now contained in 32:1–43 as a second witness to the covenant when Israel would forsake Yahweh, as stated, “Now therefore write this song [poem], and teach it to the people of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel” (31:19).

The third witness to the covenant was to be heaven and earth: “Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes that I may speak these words in their ears and call heaven and earth to witness against them” (31:28). This is a repetition of the

GOD IS FAITHFUL

theme of 30:19, “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day. . . .” A pile of stones served as a “hill of witness” for Jacob and Laban, but God’s covenant with Israel was so great that nothing short of heaven and earth together could function as an adequate witness.

The Song of Moses is a poem that readily divides itself into the following parts:

- (a) 32:1–3 are an introduction to the poem;
- (b) 32:4–9 speak of the faithful God and a faithless people;
- (c) 32:10–14 address themselves to the goodness of God;
- (d) 32:15–18 speak of Israel’s prosperity and apostasy;
- (e) 32:23–27 detail the execution of God’s judgment;
- (f) 32:34–38 highlight the possibility of God’s compassion following the judgment;
- (g) 32:39–44 assert there is no other God than Yahweh, and God will take vengeance on foes.

This lesson on God’s faithfulness draws primarily from sections (a), (b), (c), and (f).

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

Deuteronomy 32:1 — “Give ear, O heavens, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth”

As noted above, heaven and earth were addressed as witnesses to the covenant between Yahweh and Israel (4:26; 30:19; 31:28). But in this text the poet appealed to heaven and earth to listen to his own words of testimony articulated in this poem, which was itself a witness to the covenant. The words of the poet are similar to the words of the prophets who appealed to heaven, to the earth, and to the mountains or foundations of the earth as witnesses against Israel.

GOD IS FAITHFUL

Deuteronomy 32:2—“**May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distil as the dew, as the gentle rain . . .**”

Attention in this verse should be given first to the poet’s elegant style. He used synonyms in four sets of parallel phrases to express emphatically a single idea. These can be outlined as follows:

my teaching	— drop	—— rain	
my speech	— distil	—— dew	
		gentle rain	—— grass
		showers	—— herb

The teaching mentioned here refers to the poem itself. The literary excellence of the poem guaranteed that it would fall with gentleness upon the ears of heaven and earth and, it was hoped, upon the ears of the Israelites.

Deuteronomy 32:3—“**For I will proclaim the name of Yahweh. Ascribe greatness to our God!**”

The last part of this verse should not be taken to mean that “I will ascribe greatness to our God.” In Hebrew the verb “ascribe” is a plural imperative (“ascribe ye”), indicating the intent of the poet to have heaven and earth, whom he had summoned, to join him in an antiphonal response. The poet would call out the holy name, Yahweh, and heaven and earth were to respond with proclamations of Yahweh’s greatness. Such a response would be similar to the words of Psalm 29:1,

Ascribe unto Yahweh, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.

Other psalm texts that could serve as a commentary on this verse include Psalms 19:1; 96:7–8; 97:6; and 148:1–2, 7–9.

GOD IS FAITHFUL

Deuteronomy 32:4—“The Rock, his work is perfect; yea, all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and right is he”

This is the first of several statements in the poem that contrast the perfection of Yahweh and the imperfection of the people. The epithet “the Rock” (see also 32:18, 30, 31) used for Yahweh may reflect the poet’s attempt to associate Yahweh with Sinai or the rocks of Sinai/Horeb. In the poem of Judges 5, Yahweh is referred to by the epithet “the One of Sinai” (5:4), which is a more explicit designation. The epithet “the Rock” occurs elsewhere in Habakkuk 1:12, and the metaphor occurs in 2 Samuel 23:3; Psalms 18:2, 31; 31:3; 62:7; 71:3; 89:26; 92:15; 95:1; Isaiah 17:10; 26:4; 30:29.

The common poetic device of synonyms used in parallelism is well illustrated in this verse. In a less poetic way this statement in Deuteronomy 32:4 would have been, “The works and ways of God are perfect and just.” The alliteration used by the Hebrew poet cannot be reflected in translation, but it is a noteworthy example [page 61] of this poem’s elegant style. The poetic line “a God of faithfulness and without iniquity” is composed of four words beginning with a similar sound, namely, *'El*, *'awwel*, *'en*, and *'emunah*.

The affirmation that God’s work is perfect embraced God’s work in creation and the selection of Israel as God’s people. The idea of perfection did not mean perfection in the absolute or abstract sense. The poet meant that God’s work has integrity and is unimpaired (see Psalm 18:30), complete, and in accord with truth (see Psalm 19:7). The affirmation that God’s ways are “justice” employed the language of the courtroom. It meant that Yahweh’s conduct and procedures were decisive, predictable, and dependable. Yahweh’s conduct was

GOD IS FAITHFUL

legitimate and right; it was always in full accord with the covenant stipulations and conditions. This theme of God's rightness/righteousness is attested elsewhere in Psalm 111:7; Isaiah 30:18; and Genesis 18:26b.

The affirmation that Yahweh was a God of faithfulness (Hebrew *'emunah*, related to the word "Amen") spoke to the fact that Yahweh's conduct was always in accordance with truth (Hebrew *'emeth*, also related to the word "Amen"), which was defined as something or someone being stable, reliable, durable, and permanent. This idea is repeated in Psalms 33:4–5; 36:5–6; 89:1–2, 5, 8, 25, 34, 49; Isaiah 11:5; 25:1; Lamentations 3:23; Hosea 2:20. The affirmation that there was no iniquity in Yahweh must be understood in the context of Deuteronomy 32:39,

. . . there is no god beside me;
I kill and I make alive;
I wound and I heal.

(Compare Isaiah 45:8.) As in Job 34:10, the statement here means that God cannot do that which is unjust, illegitimate, or unrighteous. God is no respecter of persons. The Israelites could count on the fact that as they sowed, they would reap. There was with Yahweh no room for partiality or caprice in God's exercise of blessings and curses.

Deuteronomy 32:6b—"Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?"

Reference to Yahweh as "Father" is seldom attested in the Old Testament. It is found in this verse and in Jeremiah 3:4, 19; Isaiah 63:16; 64:8; Psalm 89:26; and Malachi 1:6, 10. However, the idea was common enough in Israel. The con-

GOD IS FAITHFUL

duct of Yahweh is often depicted as that of a father (e.g., Psalm 103:13). The rather common Hebrew name “Abijah” meant “Yah(weh) is my Father.” It is unlikely that the name Abijah introduces a new theological tradition; rather, it seemingly reflects a longstanding tradition of viewing Yahweh as Father and Creator.

The few references to God as Father in the preexilic literature seem to be a deliberate attempt to avoid an epithet that carried with it definite sexual overtones. During the period when Canaanite religion flourished in and around Israel, the supreme god named El was worshiped as the heavenly father, along with his wife/consort Asherah and their son Baal and about seventy other divine children. Only after Canaanite religious traditions lost their vitality did the Israelite prophets and poets feel free to address Yahweh as Father with some degree of confidence that Canaanite ideas would not be read into this epithet. This concept of God as Father became increasingly important in Jewish tradition, as reflected in the book of Tobit (in the Apocrypha), where it is stated in 13:3–4,

Acknowledge him [Yahweh] before the nations,
O sons of Israel;
for he has scattered us among them.
Make his greatness known there,
and exalt him in the presence of all the living;
because he is our Lord and God.
He is our Father for ever.

Deuteronomy 32:8—“When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance . . . according to the number of the sons of God . . .”

GOD IS FAITHFUL

This verse was studied in the context of the lesson for July 19 entitled “God Chose Israel.” A brief comment will suffice here. Yahweh is pictured as dividing up the world’s population into the various nations and allotting a nation for each one of the “Sons of God” (not the “children of Israel” as in KJV, since the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls have “God” instead of “Israel”). However, God did not assign Israel to any of the sons of God. Rather, God kept Israel/Jacob as God’s unique inheritance and possession. This idea is presented emphatically in Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 7:6; 14:2; 26:18; Psalm 135:4; Malachi 3:17. In the New Testament the theological motif is picked up with reference to the “new Israel” created in Christ, especially in Titus 2:14 and Ephesians 1:14.

Applying the Lesson to Life

We would do well to appropriate the message of Deuteronomy about the faithfulness of God and sing with the psalmist,

I will sing of thy steadfast love, O Yahweh, for ever;
with my mouth I will proclaim thy faithfulness
to all generations.

For thy steadfast love was established for ever,
thy faithfulness is firm as the heavens. . . .

O Yahweh God of hosts,
who is mighty as thou art, O Yahweh,
with thy faithfulness round about thee?

—Psalm 89:1–2, 8

In Jesus Christ God has been faithful to the covenant of blessing made with Abraham: “In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (see Genesis 12:3). We can affirm with

GOD IS FAITHFUL

the Apostle, “God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9). As we love God because God first loved us, we respond in faithfulness because God has already demonstrated divine faithfulness—in the new covenant, in the cross, and in the church.