

CLAIMING GOD’S PROMISE
Teaching-Learning Resources
BAPTIST LEADER

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Thomas McDaniel

Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 1

Key Passage: Deuteronomy 1:19–26

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The current lesson entitled “Claiming God’s Promise” is the second in a series of thirteen lessons on the Book of Deuteronomy. In this first of three units within the series, the focus is on the “Foundations for Faith.” In last week’s introduction to the series our study dealt with the discovery of the Law Book in the Jerusalem temple during the reign of Josiah, around 621 B.C. That rediscovered book of the covenant, given through the hand of Moses, has long been recognized as Deuteronomy, based mainly upon the similarities between the commandments in Deuteronomy and the reforms that Josiah initiated. The major themes of Deuteronomy 10 were then studied because of the parallel between the story of Moses’ and Israel’s first receiving of the Law at Sinai/Horeb and Josiah’s and Judah’s first (for all practical purposes) receiving of the same Law in Jerusalem about six hundred years later. But receiving the word of God and hearing it for the first time are only the beginning. Next comes the challenge to claim the promises by obedience in love.

The Biblical Setting

As noted in the outline of Deuteronomy given in last week’s presentation, the first five verses of Deuteronomy 1 are editorial notes providing geographical and historical information. It is a composite introduction of at least two variant

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traditions. According to the first part of verse 1, the speech was given east of the Jordan in the land of Moab, which in Deuteronomy 3:29 is located more precisely as a place opposite Beth-peor, which is just northeast of the Dead Sea. But according to 1: 1b–2, the location was south and southwest of the Dead Sea, since Laban and Hazeroth (mentioned as Libnah and Hazeroth in Numbers 33:17, 20) were on the way to Kadesh-barnea from Sinai/Horeb.

These variations as to the locations of the Israelites when Moses addressed them should alert the reader to look for other variations within the traditions of Deuteronomy as well as differences between Deuteronomy and other parts of the Pentateuch. Our particular interest in this lesson will be on differences related in the tradition about the promise of God concerning the Promised Land which Israel never claimed.

Moses' speech commences with a summary statement of the journey from Sinai/Horeb toward the Promised Land which they were then to possess—before the rebellion which resulted in the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Possession of the land was to have been a simple matter, as Moses recalled, “Behold, I (Yahweh) have set the land before you; go in and take possession . . . (1:8). According to the longer parallel narrative in Exodus 33:1–17, the possession of the land was to have been implemented by an angel of Yahweh: “I [Yahweh] will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites. . . . My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (vv. 2, 14). The promise that Yahweh and/or Yahweh's angel would take care of the fighting that was necessary was included in the “Decalogue” recorded in Exodus 34, “Behold, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the

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Hivites, and the Jebusites. . . . For I will cast out nations before you, and enlarge your borders” (vv. 11, 24).

The nations residing in the Promised Land were expected to oppose the settlement of Israel in their territories. Some kind of violence and warfare was probable. But Yahweh had promised, just as the land was promised in the first place, that any opposition or warfare would be taken care of, just as Yahweh had taken care of the opposition of Pharaoh and Pharaoh's army before and during the Exodus. Almost as often as the assurances of Yahweh's intent to give the Israelites the land promised to their ancestors was the assurance that Yahweh would give them the land without their fighting for it. God would take care of any conflict. Exodus 23:20–33 contains an explicit statement of just how Yahweh would do this and how long it would take:

“Behold, I send an angel before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place which I have prepared. . . . When my angel goes before you, and brings you in to the Amorites . . . and I (Yahweh) blot them out. . . . I [Yahweh] will send my terror before you, and I [Yahweh] will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I [Yahweh] will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. And I will send hornets before you. . . . I will not drive them out . . . in one year [but]. . . . Little by little I [Yahweh] will drive them out from before you, until you are increased and possess the land.”

This idea is summarized in Moses' first speech by the words, “[Yahweh] your God who goes before you will himself fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt . . . and in the wilderness” (Deuteronomy 1:30–31).

Except for the last few words of Exodus 23:31, “and you shall drive them out before you,” there is no indication that

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the Israelites would have anything more [page 47] difficult to do in the possession of the Promised Land than they had to do in the Exodus from Egypt. (But the verb in the Hebrew text of Exodus 23:31 is problematic. The Septuagint, the Vulgate, and the Samaritan texts read, "I [Yahweh] will drive them out," which is probably the more original reading than the Hebrew rendering "you will drive them out.") As it took time to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go free, so it would take time for the Israelites to enter freely into Canaan; and as plagues were a part of Yahweh's way of convincing Pharaoh, so plagues of hornets would facilitate Israel's success over Canaanite opposition.

In the first speech of Moses in Deuteronomy 1:1–4:43, no reference is made to the promise of hornets; but in his second speech Moses recalled, "Moreover [Yahweh] your God will send hornets among them, until those who are left and hide themselves from you are destroyed . . . [Yahweh] your God will clear away these nations before you little by little" (7: 20–22a). Joshua, in his sermon at Shechem, acknowledged that Yahweh was true to this promise: "I [Yahweh] brought you to the land of the Amorites . . . they fought with you, and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land, and I [Yahweh] destroyed them before you. . . . I [Yahweh] sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you . . . it was not by your sword or by your bow" (Joshua 24:8–12).

But between the promise of Yahweh, given at Sinai/Horeb, and Joshua's acknowledgment that Yahweh had fulfilled the promise in Canaan, tragic events occurred, the consequences of which reach all the way into our twentieth century. The tragic events are most obviously seen in the

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Israelites' refusal, due to fear, to enter the Promised Land simply on the assurance that Yahweh would provide for their safety and security. The rejection of God's promise resulted in the wilderness wandering—forty years of waste. Less obvious but more significant is the tragedy reflected in the way the covenant of Yahweh with the patriarchs and even the covenant with Israel at Sinai were modified to accommodate and to legitimate a different “holy war” theology and Israelite warfare during and after the days of Joshua.

This is a point where a look at the variations in the traditions of Deuteronomy and other parts of the Pentateuch becomes very important. Perhaps the most important element in God's covenant with Abraham was omitted from Moses' first discourse. The reasons for the omission are unknown and are therefore certainly debatable; but nonetheless, the omission was serious. In the record of God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3) are three specific features: (1) the promise of a large progeny (“I will make of you a great nation”), (2) the promise of a land of their own (“to the land that I will show you”), and (3) the promise of blessing for all the nations/families on earth (“you will be a blessing . . . and by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”). However, the third item of this covenant fell into obscurity. It was repeated again only in Genesis 18:18 and 22:18; part of the latter reads, “By your descendants shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” It was not mentioned again until the sermon of Peter in Acts 3:25, “In your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”

The covenant with Abraham is repeated in Genesis 15:7–18 (where mention is made of land and progeny, but no reference is made to “blessing the nations”) and in Genesis

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17:2–14 (where mention is made of progeny, land, and circumcision, but no mention of “blessing the nations”). With Abraham the Promised Land was understood to be a means to an end, the end being God’s desire to bless all the families of earth (which certainly would have included the Amorites, Canaanites, etc.). But after Abraham the Promised Land idea became an end in itself. The other “families on earth” became increasingly viewed as a threat to the possession of the land. They became the enemy to be eliminated rather than the peoples to be blessed.

The omission of the theme of “blessing” amounts to a theological shift which was harmonious with a “holy war” theology current throughout the ancient Near East. This theology required the people to fight for their gods, with their gods, or in lieu of their gods. In this spirit the Israelite “men of war” stated, “We will go up and fight, just as [Yahweh] commanded us” (Deuteronomy 1:41). The fact that Yahweh’s response was, “Do not go up or fight, for I am not in the midst of you” (1:42), did not deter them. They fought anyhow, only to be defeated. These “men of war” perished, but their theology survived! It is their theological legacy that shaped the events subsequent to the wilderness wandering, and it was their theological legacy that reshaped older and more peaceful covenantal statements. (This legacy has survived to stimulate and legitimate even the “holy wars” of our day.) According to Numbers 21:21–2 and Deuteronomy 2:26–36, shortly after the defeated “men of war” had perished, the Israelites probably for the first time took up the sword at Heshbon and “helped” Yahweh keep the divine promise. (The narrative of Numbers 21:1–3 is a misplaced fragment.) Thereafter, the “I” of Yahweh was replaced by the “we” of the Israelites, e.g.,

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Deuteronomy 2:33 reads, “we defeated him . . . we captured all his cities . . . and utterly destroyed every city, men, women, and children.” This new theology which encouraged Israel to fight precluded any possibility of Yahweh’s doing for them in Canaan what had been done for them in Egypt, i.e., Yahweh would fight for them. They failed to claim the promise that God would do the fighting and God’s angel would protect them as they entered the land God had promised them.

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

Deuteronomy 1:21—“ . . . God has set the land before you; go up, take possession, as [Yahweh], the God of your fathers, has told you . . .”

The verbs in this verse speak more of inheritance than they do of conquest. The first verb in Hebrew is *nathan* (which can be recognized in the name “Jonathan,” meaning “Yahweh has given”), a common word meaning “to give.” The second verb is *yarash*, which means “to inherit” or “to take possession of.” Secondly, it developed the connotation “to dispossess” or “to impoverish.” The question is, “What was the intended meaning of the word in this passage?” Given the repeated statement that God would give them the land “little by little,” the idea of “inheritance” seems more probable since the acquisition of property or an inheritance generally took time, whereas “dispossession,” like repossession, could be swift, brutal, and impoverishing. The Israelites took the meaning to be “dispossess” and so treated the Canaanites, asserting that such treatment was what Yahweh intended. It is unfortunate that *yarash* was used for two really different ideas of such great consequence.

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Deuteronomy 1:22—“Let us send men before us, that they may explore the land . . .”

According to Numbers 13:1, it was Yahweh who instructed Moses to send men “to spy out” the land of Canaan; the spying out was not the suggestion of Moses’ fellow Israelites. Either way, the word “to spy out” does not mean covert or secretive intelligence work, as if this were the prototype of the CIA. The Hebrew word *tur* (pronounced like “tour” or “tore”) means “to explore” or “to look or move around.” It occurs as a participle in 2 Chronicles 9:14 and is correctly translated there “(caravan) traders,” i.e., people who move around and worked freely out in the open.

Deuteronomy 1:25—“. . . It is a good land which [Yahweh] our God gives us”

Deuteronomy 1:28—“Our brethren have made our hearts melt, saying, ‘The people are greater and taller than we . . .’”

This is a good example of “first the good news and then the bad news.” The committee of twelve who surveyed the property submitted a good report on the nature of the real estate under consideration after their forty-day tour. According to Numbers 13:27, they reported, “It flows with milk and honey.” But there the good news ended. What was next stated was heard as bad news—“Yet the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified . . . the descendants of Anak [live] there” (v. 28). The Anakim were believed to be the descendants of the Nephalim mentioned in Genesis 6:4, who were, in turn, considered to be the giants born of the supra-earthly “sons of God” who mated with beautiful women on earth. They were considered to be supermen with quasi-

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divine origins. Such people would make very threatening neighbors, even for those Israelites who intended to occupy the land peacefully. They would be a formidable enemy for those who intended to fight the indigenous population. The report of the committee of twelve destroyed the faith of the Israelites. They refused to claim the promise that God would give them the land and take care of any and all opposition. Fear, evoked by the “bad news,” preempted faith and created the atmosphere for rebellion against Yahweh.

Deuteronomy 1 :31—“[Yahweh] your God bore you, as a man bears his son, in all the way that you went until you came to this place”

It is commonly assumed that the concept of the “fatherhood of God” was a rare and late development in Israel. But while it was not a prevalent theme, it was common enough throughout the Old Testament. Yahweh was identified as “Father” in the popular name “Abijah,” meaning “Yahweh is my Father.” Here, in Deuteronomy 1:31, the word “father” could just as easily be substituted for “man,” and the text could be paraphrased, “as a father carries his son.” (The verb “bear” in this verse is not the word meaning “to bear/give birth to a child.” It is the word “to lift up, carry, bear [on one’s shoulder].”) Without doing anything, Israel’s security and safety had been provided by Yahweh who carried the people all the way, as parents lovingly carry weary, crying, scared little children. Yahweh was a terrific God, like terrific parents. But the Israelites were more terrified by the Amorites than they were impressed or awestruck by their loving Father.

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Applying the Lesson to Life

We need not wait for a Josiah-like rediscovery of a law book to tell us how to apply biblical truths to life. Yahweh made the Word flesh, and in God's anointed, the Christ, God provided all the clues needed for us to make our way through even the differing "theologies" of the Old Testament. We can approach the "promised land" of truth and can apply that truth in our lives as Christ's disciples. With spiritual sensitivity we are able to read a speech by Moses and immediately recognize that something significant was omitted or deleted. As Christians from non-Israelite stock, we know just how much God loved all the families of this earth, for divine love included us. Therefore, when the motif of "blessing the nations" is omitted from a recitation of God's covenant with Abraham, we really miss it. There need be no attempt to rewrite Moses' historical summaries; but we can make certain that the theme of "blessing the nations" is never omitted from our declaration of God's word. We can be more prepared than ancient Israel to love our enemies and to claim the promise that God will not only lead us to the Promised Land, but will also take care of us when we get there.

In a sense, every tomorrow is a "promised land," and those who explore future possibilities include those who know that "it's a good land which God gives us." But enough prophets of doom terrify us so that we long to go back to the "golden days" of yesterday, which were about as good as the fleshpots of Egypt. Our challenge is to move into the future fearless and faithful.