

RECALLING GOD'S ACTION
Teaching-Learning Resources
BAPTIST LEADER

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Thomas McDaniel

Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 3:12–4:14

Key Passage: Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 5–10

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This is the third of thirteen studies on the Book of Deuteronomy, and the third study of Unit 1, “Foundations for Faith,” which focuses on the first discourse of Moses in Deuteronomy 1:6–4:43 (see the outline in the “Teaching-Learning Resources” for June 7). The last lesson dealt with Moses’ recollection of events which led to the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. He recalled how the Israelites had failed to settle in the Promised Land immediately after the Exodus because they had failed to claim the promise that God would fight for them and see to it that they were securely settled in the land promised to the patriarchs. However, when the Israelites heard about the strength of the Canaanites and Amorites and their fortifications, they panicked and refused to attempt the possession of the land. They lacked confidence in themselves and confidence in Yahweh’s ability and dependability.

Today’s lesson picks up at that point and proceeds with Moses’ recalling God’s actions. The one-week interval between these lessons spans “many days” (Deuteronomy 1:46) in Moses’ review of events which culminated in Israel’s return to the borders of the Promised Land. According to Deuteronomy 2:7, 14, Moses skipped over thirty-eight of the forty years of wandering. These were the “silent years,” much like the silent years of Jesus between the ages of twelve and thirty.

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The impression is given in this first discourse that the Israelites simply killed time for thirty-eight years waiting for the “men of war” to die off. Because they had sinned by pre-empting Yahweh’s role as the sole warrior for Israel, these men were doomed to die before another opportunity came for Israel to enter the Promised Land.

They perceived their sin to be their unwillingness to fight for Yahweh soon enough (Deuteronomy 1:41; Numbers 14:40–45); but it may have been their desire to fight at all. Moses countered their plans to fight with this question: “Why now are you transgressing the command of Yahweh . . . ?” (Numbers 14:41).

Some of the events during this period were more exciting and significant than Moses’ brief sermon would suggest. Fortunately, the Book of Numbers provides many details only touched upon in Deuteronomy. As will be demonstrated below, the second trip through Moab was almost as awe-inspiring as was the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 14–15). Less fortunately, the “Book of the Wars of Yahweh” referred to in Numbers 21:14 has not survived except for the one-verse poem there and possibly in the poetry of Exodus 15 and Judges 5:4–5 (Psalm 68:7–8). These texts preserve, in a more ancient language than ordinary biblical Hebrew, traditions of how Yahweh—without human help—fought for the Israelites during and after the Exodus. The poems reflect a “holy war” concept which recognized that God would do whatever fighting had to be done. This concept seems to have died out during the wilderness sojourn. The condemned “men of war” died off, but a younger group of armed “men of valor” (Deuteronomy 3:18) took their place and perpetuated their theology, which replaced the “holy war” concept espoused in the Book of the Wars of Yahweh.

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This lesson on “Recalling God’s Action” necessitates our looking carefully at those mighty acts which Yahweh performed in a “supernatural” way through very natural forces. We begin with the fragment from the Book of the Wars of Yahweh in Numbers 21:14. The meaning of this short but difficult piece of poetry has only recently become intelligible. What appears as a meaningless geographical note in the RSV and *The New English Bible*, for example, is actually a poem that reads, “The Benefactor (i.e., Yahweh) came in a storm! Yes, he came to the wadies of the Arnon; he caused the wadies to rush forth. He marched in an earthquake to destroy Ar. Then we easily entered the very borders of Moab”¹ Like the poetic lines of Judges 5:4–5 (“O Yahweh, when you went out from Seir, when you marched from the plain of Edom, the earth trembled noisily, the heaven dropped open, the clouds dripped copiously. The waters of the mountains flowed from the presence of Yahweh, from the presence of Yahweh my God”),² the poets recalled God’s unique way of fighting for Israel. God fought solely through the forces of nature: windstorm, rainstorm, thunder, cloudburst, earthquakes and flooded wadies, rivers, and plains. With such forces of nature to command, Yahweh needed no help from Israel’s “men of war.”

1 . See T. F. McDaniel, *Deborah Never Sang: A Philological Study of Judges 5* (Jerusalem: Makor, 1979), pp. 13–15; D. L. Christensen, *Transformation of the War Oracles in Old Testament Prophecy*. Harvard Dissertation in Religion 3 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1975), pp. 50–51.

2 . McDaniel, *op. cit.*, pp. 167–174.

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The celebration of the Passover and the recital of God's deliverance from Pharaoh's charging chariots was (and still is) Israel's declaration of this particular "holy war" theology. As stated in Exodus 14:13, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of Yahweh, which he will work for you today Yahweh will fight for you, and you have only to be still!" In Exodus 15:3 Yahweh is labeled as "a man of war." The use of the word "man" in that text for the God of gods and the Lord of lords is most unusual and unexpected. But the poet seems to have been reluctant to have called Yahweh "the God of war," since this would glorify war and suggest that Yahweh was a "warlord." Thus, the seemingly crass use of "man" for the holy God of Israel may have been an inspired attempt not to sanctify war and to say that Yahweh was, when required, a "warrior" but never a "warlord."

Consequently, with this ancient concept of "holy war" Israel never needed to fight but needed only to stand in awed silence, dumbfounded at the mighty acts of God. God would—without help—employ the forces of nature as weapons against the oppressors of God's people. The later "Song of Deborah" (Judges 5) still held, in part, to this theology and celebrated God's deliverance of Israel by storms, cloudbursts, and swollen wadies that swept the drowning oppressors toward the sea.

But in the first speech of Moses, as it now stands in the text, when Moses reviewed the actions of God after the wilderness wandering, he made only passing reference to Israel's second passage through Moab, stating simply, "Yahweh said to me, 'This day you are to pass over the boundary of Moab at Ar. . . . Rise up, take your journey, and go over the valley of the Amon'" (Deuteronomy 2:17, 24a). There was

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little interest at this point in the awesome power of God as recorded in the Book of the Wars of Yahweh. Interest was focused mainly on the implementation of a new command: “Go to war with Sihon, king of Heshbon” (see 2:24*b*). This command reflects that, although Israel returned to the same physical location after the forty years in the wilderness, they were at a different theological position. Holy war had become something different from what it was in the Book of the Wars of Yahweh. Yahweh was no longer fighting for Israel with the hosts of heaven and the forces of nature. Yahweh was now represented as using the hosts of Israel and human military forces to do the fighting. Consequently, “recalling God’s action” shifted to a recitation of what the Israelites themselves had done to the enemy in the name of God: “We defeated him . . . we captured all his cities . . . and. . . destroyed [everyone]” (2:33–34) and “we smote him until no survivor was left. . . . And we took all his cities . . . (3:3–4).

Whereas, Yahweh when working alone had used nonfatal plagues throughout Egypt, except when the angel of death visited the first-born—but the first-born only—the Israelites, when fighting in lieu of God, are pictured as exterminating everyone so that complete dispossession of the land preceded their full possession.

To make Moses responsible for this theological shift would probably be doing him a great injustice. Although many commentators have argued for the complete Mosaic authorship of Deuteronomy like the rest of the Pentateuch, other commentators have convincingly demonstrated that Deuteronomy was edited during the time of Josiah. Although the prohibition against adding to or subtracting from the Word of Yahweh given through Moses is stated in Deuteronomy 4:2, the evi-

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dence suggests that this was interpreted as referring to a rather limited corpus of Mosaic material. Thus, the theological shift may reflect ideas current in Josiah's time rather than a change during Israel's settlement in the land.

Josiah had ambitions of restoring the Davidic kingdom. It was a politically feasible desire since Assyria was at that time experiencing internal difficulties which provided a mood for rebellion throughout the empire. But the restoration of a Davidic kingdom would require a standing army. But Assyria had robbed Judah of its wealth through tribute and taxes, and this economic situation ruled out the possibility of an army of mercenaries or well-paid volunteers. Josiah needed to institute "the draft." But for that to be effective, he would have to create a religious climate which would legitimate his political goals. To that extent, at least, the focus of the first discourse of Moses seems to have been edited so as to glorify the Israelite soldier as much as—if not more than—Yahweh's ability to do it alone. Consequently, it was not the Passover or the Red Sea victory which was appealed to first as an indication of God's power but the defeat of two petty kings by the Israelites themselves.

This interpretation of the historical and theological structure of Moses' first discourse is not offered casually but with due consideration for the inspiration of the Word and the lesson it presents to us on how politics changes theology. It is a sober attempt to deal with the incongruity between the covenant of God with Abraham (that in the descendants of Abraham all the families of earth would be blessed) and the commandment of Yahweh to Moses and his successors (that some of the peoples whom Abraham would have blessed are to be dispossessed and eliminated). Facing this incongruity is

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a painful, but unavoidable, issue on a lesson concerned with “Recalling God’s Action.” In all the different actions attributed to God, in all the different theologies articulated within biblical tradition, in all the commands alleged to come from God, and in all the examples of people doing what they perceived God commanded them to do (e.g., the “men of war” in Deuteronomy 1:41), how does one distinguish between truth and the perception of truth?

The sermonic section of Moses’ speech (4:1–40) gives some insight on how to resolve some of the problems which the “historical review” in 2:24–3:11 produced. Obedience to those laws articulated in the Ten Commandments would serve as Israel’s witness to the nations:

“He [Yahweh] declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone that you might do them in the land which you are going over to possess” (4:13–14).

The idea of being a witness to the nations comes up earlier in the text but was from a later time, the time just before the possession of the land, when Moses stated,

Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as Yahweh our God is to us. . . ? (4:6–7).

This type of witness before the nations presupposes a peaceful and rather pleasant interchange between the peoples of the land and the Israelites. There is not even a hint of violent dispossession or extermination in these statements. The goal

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of Israel's obedience is, in part, the creation of the spirit of awe among the nations for Yahweh and his people. The creation of such a spirit would be the first step in blessing all the families on earth.

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

Deuteronomy 4:6—“ . . . for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who . . . will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’”

Solomon is generally recognized as the one Israelite who truly esteemed wisdom, for he prayed only for “an understanding mind to govern [God's] people,” and God answered that prayer, stating, “Behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you” (1 Kings 3:9, 12). But Moses had long before announced that wisdom and understanding were to be among the conspicuous qualities of God's people. Moses and Solomon do not stand in a different theological tradition from Paul who stated, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” and “for the wisdom of this world is folly with God” (1 Corinthians 1:27; 3:19). Paul was condemning the prostitution of wisdom and was expanding on Isaiah's denunciation of human stupidity (Isaiah 29:10–16). As will become clearer in the next lesson, God's people were commanded to use their minds.

Deuteronomy 4:7—“For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as Yahweh, our God, is to us. . . ?”

Although Israel acknowledged Yahweh as God of gods and Lord of lords to whom belonged the heavens, the earth, and all that was in them (Deuteronomy 10:14, 17), there was also

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the recognition that God was always near at hand. God's transcendence did not preclude God's presence on earth or action in human affairs. Divine nearness had been evidenced in the voice out of the midst of the fire, "Yahweh spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice" (4:12). God's presence was not visible to the eye, yet God was nearer than the idols of people who held their gods in their hands.

Deuteronomy 4:9—" . . . make them known to your children and your children's children"

This is part of Moses' appeal to Israel to remember the mighty works of God that they had seen with their own eyes. It is ancient wisdom that experience is the best teacher. But even the lessons learned from experience can be forgotten. Not every Israelite could be present to experience firsthand the mighty acts of God. By teaching one's children and grandchildren the laws and the ordinances of God and the ways God delivered the people, a person would never be able to forget. Later generations, denied the privilege of having been there as eyewitnesses, could still share the traditions of the faith and learn the laws of God which make for life (4:1).

Applying the Lesson to Life

"Recalling God's Action" raises issues which would be serious enough if they were merely academic or if people were still fighting with sword and shield. But the issues are all the more serious in light of our dependence on a nuclear arsenal and our motto "In God We Trust," as though faith in God and faith in weapons were the same thing.

Moses offers good advice for this period of history with his words, "Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently" (4:9).

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It suggests the words of Jesus: “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36, KJV). In a day of operational nuclear weapons, experimental neutron bombs, and laser weapons on the drawing boards, the stakes are high when it comes to implementing any “holy war” theology. The fate of our corner of creation could hinge on how the issues raised in this lesson are resolved by Christians with political and military influence. If we make a mistake in our interpretation of Moses’ first speech and in the process theologically legitimate the nuclear destruction of our enemies, who will survive to tell us that our theology was wrong, that we just forfeited all life on this good earth? But at this moment in history we are still in an excellent position to recall God’s action in Jesus Christ and reaffirm our commitment to act as his disciples for the blessing of all the families on earth.