

EXEGESIS OF DEUTERONOMY 32:15-18

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2123 Biblical Hermeneutics
For Prof. Nicholas
25th. May 1972

1. INTRODUCTION

(a) Deuteronomy in the History of Redemption

Deuteronomy contains the last address of Moses to the people of Israel (1:1, 31:1), delivered in the plains of Moab, just before entry into the promised land. Moses' address takes the form of a renewal of the covenant: there are no essentially new laws, but there are adjustments to previous laws given at Sinai in view of the change from a wandering life in the wilderness to a settled one in Canaan.

The land of Canaan had been promised to them as a land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 3:7-8), in contrast to the bondage and degradation in the land of Egypt. In the wilderness they were being moulded into the people of God. The New Testament indicates that Canaan was the land of their rest, a rest which was to typify the eternal rest of all the sons of God (cf. Hebrews 4:1-11). The law given in Deuteronomy was to set them apart from all other nations, for participation in their practices was expressly forbidden. Thus they were to be a people preserved for the Lord, hedged about by the law, that they might be the light of salvation to the Gentiles.

(b) Structure of Deuteronomy

Kline¹ sees in Deuteronomy a form similar to that of the recently discovered suzerain treaties of the ancient Near East, and thus divides the book up in the following way:

1. Preamble: Covenant Mediator – 1:1-5
2. Historical Prologue: Covenant History – 1:6-4:49
3. Stipulations: Covenant Life – 5:1-26:49
4. Sanctions: Covenant Ratification – 27:1-30:20
5. Dynastic Disposition: Covenant Continuity – 31:1-34:12

Within this covenant structure, Kline sees the Song of Moses as a lawsuit, a witness against Israel if they should transgress the covenant stipulations. So the stipulations have been replaced by charges of guilt. It thus forms an integral part of the last three chapters of Deuteronomy. Much that concerns the Song of Moses found expression in the words of Moses on that day in the plains of Moab (ch. 31).

(c) Purpose of the Song of Moses

The Song in particular was designed to be a witness against Israel (31:19-20), which was the function of the whole book of the law of Deuteronomy (31:26). The whole book was to be read every seven years in the Feast of Tabernacles (31:10) and was to be placed permanently by the ark (31:26). In addition to this, the Song of Moses was to be in the mouth as a witness against them (31:19). It was to be made internal and memorized, and by their children after them (cf. 30:14).

Heaven and earth are invoked as witnesses (32:1, cf. 4:26, 30:19, 31:28) for surely in the future Israel is going to break the covenant (31:16,20). The Song would testify to them the reason why trouble was coming upon them (31:17,21), their forsaking of the Lord. Coming from the hand of the Lord Himself, they would not be able to say that He is no longer amongst

¹ Kline, Meredith, *Treaty of the Great King* (Eerdmans, 1963).

them (31:17). They would thus know that it is not God who has forsaken the covenant, but Israel who has sinned. God remains the same; He is the Rock. The witness was to be primarily negative in revealing God's judgement for their sins (31:27,29); but also positive as God will show mercy for He is jealous for His own Name, and will preserve a remnant who will be a blessing to the Gentiles.

2. OUTLINE OF DEUTERONOMY 32:1-43

- (a) Verse 1. Heaven and earth are invoked as witnesses against Israel.
- (b) Verses 2-6. The perfection of God and the corruption of Israel are contrasted as a preamble to the Song so that the scene might be set.
- (c) Verses 7-14. In the form of a historical prologue, the Lord recounts the past blessings He has bestowed on Israel, indication that He, at least, has been faithful to the covenant.
- (d) Verses 15-18. The record of Israel's breaking of the covenant stipulations.
- (e) Verses 19-28. God will bring on Israel the covenant curses as judgement upon their sins, but He will not utterly destroy them that their enemies might have nothing to boast of against the Lord.
- (f) Verses 29-33. Appeal to Israel to recognize what has happened to them that they might repent and be saved from something worse.
- (g) Verses 34-43. In wrath God will remember mercy and His judgement will be redemptive, as it brings blessing to the people of God, both of Israel and the nations.

3. EXEGESIS OF DEUTERONOMY 32:15-18

As a witness against the future covenant-breaking of Israel, the Song of Moses takes the form of poetic prophecy. It cannot be understood properly except in the light of the stipulations of the covenant that the Lord had graciously given to Israel, and in the light of a consideration of its fulfilment(s). The particular section to be dealt with here, the record of Israel's breaking of the covenant stipulations, will therefore not only be dealt with by exegeting the passage in its given context, but by carrying through the themes represented back into the law, and forward into the future history of the nation of Israel.

The record of covenant breaking is set in the context of the wonderful blessings that God has bestowed on the nation. God has been faithful; Israel has been rebellious.

(a) Verse 15

- (i) Israel is given the name Jeshurun יֵשׁוּרֻן. This appellation only occurs in three other places in the Bible (Deuteronomy 33:5,26, Isaiah 44:2). יֵשׁוּרֻן was originally thought of by many to be a diminutive form meaning 'little Israel', but there is no evidence that ין has a diminutive force. K-B² consider it as being the opposite of יִצְקָב and Bacher believes it to be a euphemism

² Koehler-Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti* (Brill: Leiden, 1953).

for יִצְקָב (i.e. the supplanter), giving Israel an honourable title, a usage which passed from Isaiah into Deuteronomy. But in Isaiah 44:2, Jacob is in parallel with Jeshurun, so it would seem vain to make too much of a distinction between them. It is generally agreed (BDB, ³ K-B, KD, ⁴ Calvin ⁵) that the word derives from יָשָׁר meaning 'straight, upright', thus poetically designating Israel under its ideal character. Its first three radicals are actually the same as the first three in Israel יִשְׂרָאֵל. Thus it is a synonym for Israel, describing the nation as being one of just men, because Jehovah, who is just and right, had called it to uprightness, to walk in His righteousness, and had chosen it as His servant. ⁶ As the Song goes on to condemn Israel, the title must be seen as a taunt. The nation called to be like God (32:4) is just the opposite, and this is a reminder of their high calling (Exodus 19:6, Deuteronomy 14:2 ⁷). The verse goes on to describe how far the nation was from being morally upright.

(ii) Under the figure of fatness, the prosperity which was an integral part of the covenant-breaking of Israel is described. שָׁמֵן describes prosperous and arrogant Israel as a fat beast. In its Scriptural contexts, as here, it is linked with a misuse, a wrongful trust in the blessings the Lord had given them (32:13-14). This is exactly what Nehemiah describes as having happened when the people entered the land of Canaan (Nehemiah 9:22-26). Jeremiah makes the connection complete as he equates waxing fat with self-dependence, self-seeking, exploitation of others and overall gross covenant disobedience (5:28). Waxing fat on God's blessings so as to turn away from God is not coincidence, but is attributed in the Scriptures to the work of God in hardening the heart, that is to make it wax fat (Isaiah 6:10, cf. Matthew 13:15, Acts 28:27). Thus the very blessings of the covenant give rise to the curses of the covenant through the hardening of Israel, as prosperity causes disobedience to the unthankful and self-sufficient. Of this same thing, Moses had already warned them (Deuteronomy 6:11-12, 8:10-17, 31:20).

Three separate words are used in this verse to convey the idea of fatness: שָׁמֵן meaning 'to grow, be fat'; עָבָה 'to be thick, gross' (cf. Rehoboam for the same sinful spirit in 1 Kings 12:10); and כָּשָׂה 'to be gorged'. Thus repetitiveness is for emphasis, denoting their great affluence and thus all the more aggravating their impiety and ingratitude which followed. ⁸

(iii) Israel, under the continuing figure of a fatted beast, is next said to have kicked, בָּעָט. Israel is refractory, having been graciously fed as a heifer she refused to acknowledge her master just as a heifer refuses to be yoked in order to serve its master. This resisting of the lordship of God was something that was characteristic of Israel (Acts 7:51-52), even of the betrayer of Jesus (Psalm 41:9). To kick is to rebel, to be morally and ceremonially disobedient, to turn from following the ways of the Lord to one's own ways. This is what the house of Eli did in not performing the functions of the priesthood as the Lord had commanded (1 Samuel 2:29). Burroughs, in his commentary on Hosea, claims that Deuteronomy 32:15 is fulfilled in

³ Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1st ed., 1907).

⁴ Keil & Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch* (Eerdmans, 1971), Volume 3.

⁵ Calvin, John, *The Pentateuch* (A. P. & A, Grand Rapids), Volume 1.

⁶ Keil & Delitzsch, op. cit., p. 475.

⁷ See also Calvin, op. cit., p. 1201.

⁸ Gill, John, *Exposition of the Old Testament* (Woodward: Philadelphia, 1817), pp. 170-171.

Hosea 4:16: 'Ephraim was grown prosperous, and had plenty of food, was fed full and large, and that made them go madly in the ways of wickedness and sin' (cf. Jeremiah 15:6).⁹

(iv) As their covenant Lord, God demanded perfect and exclusive loyalty, but Israel refused like an unruly beast, preferring to forget about God as a nobody. This is described in the last half of the verse where there are two clauses in parallelism. שׁוּט is to leave, forsake, permit (BDB). Forsaking God is equivalent to breaking His covenant (Deuteronomy 31:16) and as a result God forsakes them (Deuteronomy 32:20, 31:17, 2 Chronicles 15:2). In terms of the covenant, they do not recognize Him as their God so He does not recognize them as His people. They forsook both the worship of God and His written commandments (2 Chronicles 7:19). Although expressly forbidden to serve any other but the Lord (Deuteronomy 5:6-10), time and time again history records their forsaking of their God to follow after other gods (Judges 2:12, 10:13, 2 Kings 22:17, 2 Chronicles 7:19, Jeremiah 1:16, 22:9), strange gods (Joshua 24:20), the Baals, Ashtoreth, Chemosh, Milcom and others (1 Samuel 12:10, 1 Kings 11:33).

נָבִל is to be senseless, foolish (BDB). They considered God as a vile, wicked person, and charged and treated Him as such (Gill). The word also carries the idea of being ignorant (Ezekiel 13:3). Such a person is contemptible and abhorrent to others. It was with this idea that Jeremiah prayed to the Lord that He would not abhor them (14:21). Having such an attitude towards God is a slap in the face for the One who had given them everything. Instead of being accounted as the One who was worthy of all honour, He was accounted as worthless, not worth bothering with. When Christ came the Jews put no value on Christ, but only showed contempt; but He has now been made the cornerstone (1 Peter 2:4-8).

(v) Two rather special words are used for the God that they forsook:

צֹר is literally translated 'rock'. This word is used as a designation for God four times in this Song, and most of the other times in the Old Testament are in the Psalms. As a name for the Lord, it has also found its way into the proper names of people, e.g. Elizur (Numbers 1:5, etc.), Zuriel (Numbers 3:35), which both mean, God is a rock. While in the Psalms in particular it is used to denote the fact that God is the source of strength, comfort and protection in difficult times, the reference in this Song is more to the nature of God which makes Him a hiding place for the troubled and weary ones. God is perfect and unchangeable in all His ways (cf. 32:4,30,31). Thus He is seen as the Saviour of His people and the One who preserves them (32:15,18, Psalm 18:46, 62:2, 78:35, 89:26). It was only their Rock, by His very nature, who could bless and keep them, yet it was from Him to no-gods that they turned showing that they were indeed a foolish and unwise people. The LXX only once translates צֹר, when it refers specifically to God as πέτρα. It is usually rendered as θεός, that is, without the figure. However, Paul does tell us that the rock from which the drinking needs of the Israelites were satisfied in the wilderness was none other than Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4).

אֱלֹהִים is used almost exclusively in poetry or for poetic expression. In Job it is used more times than anywhere else in the Old Testament, and it is more common in Job than אֱלֹהִים, which is possibly its plural form. Its derivation is quite uncertain because its origin is prehistoric and

⁹ Burroughs, Jeremiah, *Commentary on Hosea* (Nichol, 1643/1853).

because it is common to Semitic languages and religions beyond the range of Hebrew records (ISBE ¹⁰). Thus it is doubtful whether it has any particular significance here.

(vi) God is described in the parallelism of the two clauses as being the One who both made them and saved them. This is the One from whom they have turned away. Again, this emphasizes the grossness of their rebellion for they turned their backs on the One who saved them, in who alone they have security.

(vii) There are other prophecies in Deuteronomy which foretell the same turning away from God as a result of the great blessings they had been given (Deuteronomy 6:11-12, 8:10-17, 28:47-48, 31:20). That such apostasy actually happened is revealed again and again in the Scriptures (Nehemiah 9:22-31, Isaiah 5:1-2, Ezekiel 16:8-22, Hosea 2:5,8,12). The following verses go on to explain what the crux of their apostasy involved, going after other gods.

(b) Verse 16

(i) The cause of their forsaking the Lord was their worship of strange gods, which are called abominations, if the two clauses are to be taken parallel to one another. מִן־זָרִים is syntactically a qal participle from זָרִים with the general meaning of ‘to be strange’. Since the word which is parallel to it, תּוֹעֲבָה, which means abomination, has particular reference to unlawful worship which is against what God has specifically commanded, זָרִים in this context can be assumed to have the meaning of strange gods, something which is specifically brought out in the next verse. Very often in the Scriptures the worship of other gods than Jehovah is said to be an abomination to Him (Deuteronomy 7:25-26, 12:31, 13:14, 20:18, 27:15, 32:12, 1 Kings 14:24, 2 Kings 16:34, 21:2,3,11, 23:13, Jeremiah 44:3-4,22-23, Ezekiel 16:36, 18:12, Malachi 2:11). These verses also reveal how often God’s people did turn to these abominable practices of other nations. The LXX adopts the reading ἄλλότριος for זָרִים (cf. Genesis 35:2,4). The same basic Greek word is used for those who are false Messiahs (John 5:43).

(ii) As a result of such abominations God was provoked to a jealous anger, כַּחֲסָד. It is anthropomorphic to speak of God being jealous. His jealousy is based on a feeling in a husband of inclusive right to His wife. God is conceived as having wedded Israel to Himself, and as claiming therefore, its exclusive devotion. Disloyalty on the part of Israel is represented as adultery, and as provoking God to jealousy (Deuteronomy 32:21, 1 Kings 14:22, Psalm 78:58, Ezekiel 8:3, 16:42, 23:25). God is a jealous God over His name, and His glory He will not give to another (Exodus 20:5, 34:14, Joshua 24:19-20, Deuteronomy 4:23-25, 5:9, 6:14-15).

The abominations also provoked God to anger, כַּחֲסָד. God’s anger is the response of His holiness to outbreking sin, revealing His hatred of sin as it is against His own nature. God had promised that this would be His reaction towards their evils, and specifically towards the works of their hands (Deuteronomy 4:25, 9:18, 31:29, Judges 2:12, 1 Kings 14:9,15, 2 Kings 17:11, 21:6, 22:17, 2 Chronicles 34:25, Psalm 78:58, 106:29, Jeremiah 7:18, 11:17, 25:6-7, 32:29, 44:8, Ezekiel 8:17).

¹⁰ Orr, James, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Eerdmans, 1955), 5 volumes.

(c) Verse 17

(i) **דִּשְׁדִּשׁ** is literally translated 'idols', to which Israel is accused of sacrificing. The LXX translates ἑθυσσάν δαίμονιους, and here and in three other places the A.V. uses the word 'devil' (Leviticus 17:17, 2 Chronicles 11:15, Psalm 106:37). In the R.V. the first two of these passages renders it 'he-goats', **שְׂעִיר**. This is literally correct but conveys an erroneous conception. The practice reprobated is the worship of satyrs or wood-demons, which were supposed to be like goats in appearance and to inhabit lonely places (cf. Isaiah 13:21, 34:14). The word 'demons' in the R.V. is both times used in connection with the rites and abominations of heathen worship. So the use of **דִּשְׁדִּשׁ** in Scripture is to describe heathen worship in its own terminology (ISBE). Such a practice will never stop to the end of this age (1 Corinthians 10:20, Revelation 9:20), as all such sacrifice which continues after the sacrifice of Christ is considered by the Lord as offered to demons (Gill). It is only in the Apocrypha that δαίμονιον begins to answer to our idea of evil spirits.

(ii) Although they sacrificed to the devils, these were in fact not gods at all, as they erroneously thought. **לֹא אֱלֹהִים** can be actually rendered 'not to God' (A.V., LXX) or 'not God' (R.S.V., KD). Keil and Delitzsch make it a composite noun in apposition to **דִּשְׁדִּשׁ** like the expressions which follow in verse 21. In either case, the thought conveyed is the same, that whether or not they considered they were worshipping God, in fact they were actually practising demon worship.

What made their worship all the more hideous, is that they were not really aware to whom they were sacrificing, for it was to gods which they did not know **לֹא יָדְעוּ**. Knowledge, when it is used with respect to God and of God, often attains a quite technical meaning. It implies not only an acquaintance with facts, but also a specific relation with a person. God had entered into a peculiar relation with His people, so that it was only they amongst all the nations of the earth that He 'knew' (Amos 3:2). He knows the way of the righteous (Psalm 1:6). Their relation with these strange gods was not the same relationship of blessing and protection that their covenant God had promised (cf. 1 Samuel 2:12, Job 18:21, Psalm 79:6).

(iii) Neither did they consistently worship one strange god but **דִּשְׁדִּשׁוּ**, new and fresh ones. This only serves to amplify all the more why God was raised up to jealousy. They worshipped a succession of gods, which ever one was in vogue according to the nations around them that had influence over them. **מְקַרְבִּים** refers to time (Jeremiah 22:23, Ezekiel 7:8, Job 20:5), as these are gods that vanish away as soon as they appear; they are not lasting. What a contrast with the Rock, Jehovah, who is from old (Deuteronomy 32:7), who abides for ever!

(iv) The last description of these no-gods is that they were also strange to their fathers. They had already been exhorted to remember the days of old (32:7). They were strange in the sense that they were not feared by their fathers. To fear is to reverence with awe (Psalm 34:11, Proverbs 1:7, Isaiah 11:2-3, Jeremiah 2:19, Ecclesiastes 12:13). This is the essence of the Christian religion, 'feeling of reverent regard for God, tempered with awe and fear of the punishment of disobedience'. As such it is a sentiment to be cherished (Exodus 20:20, Deuteronomy 6:13, Joshua 4:24, 1 Samuel 12:24, Job 6:14, Psalm 33:8, 34:9, Proverbs 23:17,

Ecclesiastes 5:7). The fathers had been instructed who they should fear, the Lord, their covenant Master alone.

(d) Verse 18

(i) The summary of their sins against the covenant is now summed up in the fact that they no longer worship their God, their Rock. He is the One who brought them forth, יָלַד. This verb is nearly always used in the physical sense of bearing offspring, and here is the only place where it is used of God begetting. The LXX translates יָלַד as γεννάω and this can be readily carried forward through the New Testament into such ideas as regeneration, being born of God, Christ as the only-begotten Son (John 3:3-8, Acts 13:33, 1 Corinthians 4:15, Hebrews 1:5, 5:5, 1 John 2:29, 3:9, 4:7, 5:1,4,18). As this is the activity of God, it seems consistent to take the sense in Deuteronomy 32:18 as referring to salvation, as in verse 15. This is supported by the verb which is in parallelism with it, יָצַק, 'to form', which occurs with יָלַד in Job 15:7 and in two other places (Proverbs 26:10, Psalm 51:5), both of which have the idea of birth. Thus the reference is to the time when Israel was constituted as a nation in the wilderness having been brought out from the bondage of Egypt.

(ii) That they no longer worship Him is because they have both neglected and forgotten Him. The verb נִשְׁיָה, 'to neglect', occurs only here in the Old Testament; and the verb שָׁכַח, 'to forget', is a common one in Deuteronomy (4:9,23,31, 6:12, 8:11,19, 9:7, 25:19). Israel's history shows how easy it is for the people of God to forget that their prosperity is from the Lord Himself, and thus the word of God is replete with warnings to remember the goodness of God. And this is exactly the context in which this is found here, and because they continue to forget, then judgement from the Lord in the form of the covenant curses is to come upon them.¹¹

4. SUMMARY OF THE TEACHING OF VERSES 15-18

The verses considered outline the fact that Israel has broken the covenant, particularly the stipulation that they were not to have any other gods but Jehovah. Because they did turn to other gods then God's jealous anger was aroused upon them in judgement.

It was peculiarly the blessing that they received under the covenant that was a means of their spiritual adultery. These blessings made them inward looking and so they considered that all they had was due to their own power. Particularly where other gods of nearby nations were worshipped because of their supposed facility for increasing fertility, there was the constant temptation to turn to these and to forget the God who had poured out such blessings upon them in the past.

¹¹ "Good work! A well-written exegetical study; very well organized. You made abundant use of the Scripture; you might, however, made more use of some other passage in interpreting your text. You did select important matters to discuss – for the most part. Perhaps the area you would want to work out the most in the future (though you did work here) is that of giving full attention to the particulars of this text with a view to setting forth the meaning of the text." (Nicholas)

Covenant breaking is essentially rebellion against the lordship of Jehovah, who demands absolute sway in the life of His people. Turning to other gods is a violation of His rights and claims.

5. FULFILMENT(S) OF VERSES 15-18

It has clearly been shown that not only one fulfilment of these verses, which represent the breaking of the covenant, is to be looked for. Again and again, Israel was guilty of turning from the Lord to other gods, thus breaking the covenant (Joshua 23:16, Judges 2:20, 1 Kings 11:11, 19:10,14, Jeremiah 11:3,10, 22:9, Ezekiel 16:59, Hosea 6:7, 8:1, Malachi 2:10).

However, there were two crises in the history of the Israelites which might particularly be referred to. The exile was because they had persistently gone whoring after other gods, and was the culmination of successive judgements. In fact the exile cured the nation of open idolatry, so that worshipping foreign gods was never seen in the land after their return from Babylon. Yet the fact that they did not accept their Messiah when He came, showed how far they had again forsaken the Lord as a nation. They had substituted the Law and tradition as a god instead of formal idols and as a result they were rejected finally as a people and the gospel was opened for the first time on a world-wide scale to the Gentiles, and Jerusalem was destroyed, 70 A.D. They did not consider all the Lord had done in the past, nor did they hearken to His commandments, but had grown fat on the thought that they alone were the people of God and they need not worry about anyone else, for, they thought, only they mattered to God.

6. PREACHING OUTLINE

(a) Introduction: Verses 15-18 appear in the context of the reception of great material privileges and blessings for the people of God. This the congregation must be reminded of what God has done in Christ, the Rock of our salvation, who has begotten us; and then of all the blessings that have been received with Christ and in Him (Romans 8:32, Ephesians 1:3).

(b) Unthankfulness: These blessings caused Israel to forget that it was the Lord Himself who had graciously given everything, as if they had deserved it all having obtained it by their good lives. Have you become presumptuous of receiving good at the hand of God? Do you presume on the forgiveness through Christ because of past mercies received?

(c) Forsaking God: The next step after unthankfulness is the outward forsaking of God, both His written word and His worship (Romans 1:21). Presumption leads to a careless attitude to obedience to the will of God. Has open declension set in on you, so that you no longer care about holiness or attendance at the means of grace?

(d) Idolatry: The outcome of this declension is idolatry, a turning to other sources for living, a seeking after the things in the world. Desiring anything above God, who has absolute claim on His people, is idolatry in the form of covetousness (Colossians 3:5).

(e) Conclusion: God is jealous with anger over His name and His right to your absolute loyalty and, so if you remain unrepentant, judgement is sure to follow.