

DEUTERONOMY

Lesson 5 - Chapter 4

Last week we ended by studying the Shema, which is perhaps the central tenet of the Hebrew faith. The Shema (which is a combination of a prayer and a statement of fact and faith) actually occurs a couple of chapters ahead of where we are right now (the Shema begins in Deuteronomy 6), but the reason we looked at it is the repetition in Deuteronomy and all throughout the Bible of the word **shema** that is usually translated into English as “hear” or “hearken”.

What we learned is that hear and hearken are not passive words; they do not mean to simply notice a bird chirping or to take notice of the peaceful melody of a waterfall as is our modern Western way of thinking. Inherent in the word **shema** is to act upon what is said. Depending on the context of the passage the word means to “hear and obey”, or “listen and then act”, or “observe” as in observing a holiday (meaning to take part in it’s rituals and festivities).

Further, what Deuteronomy is generally about (and Deuteronomy 4 in particular) is Moses making an impassioned address to the new generation of Israel to take to heart and to go forward with all they had learned. For all practical purposes we are hearing Moses’ last words to those he has cared for, for the last 40 years. Moses knows that his death is but a few days away and so wants to impart to the Israel the national identity they have been given by Yehoveh and this national identity is all wrapped up in the God of Israel, His covenants and laws, and can only be maintained by the people’s determination to obey and love Yehoveh.

What Moses is saying is set in the context of the history of Israel because it is this history that (itself) offers the proof of what he is saying. And it offers the proof that God is who He says He is and will do what He says He will do.

Deuteronomy 4 is quite a long chapter and we’ll not even finish it this week because if I were forced to choose only 10 chapters (out of the almost 1200 chapters that forms our modern Bible) from which to best define Yehoveh’s character, His plan, His justice, and those God-principles that were the most powerful and centrally important to the lives of His Believers, this would be near the top of that list of 10.

Therefore before we read this monumental chapter, I want to say something of a personal

note. Sometimes I get quite frustrated and discouraged at the current state of the Church of which I am part, and that I love. Along with the Lord blessing me (as he has so many of you) with an understanding that **all** of His Word is valid and that Yeshua meant what He said when He told us that He did not come to abolish the Torah or the Prophets, also came a realization that much of the Church I dearly love has strayed so far from the Lord. We Christians have become a precise replica of the Jewish religious society in which Yeshua lived; a society that claims and proclaims for God, but at the same time generally prefers to observe our manmade doctrines and traditions instead of the rather plain and straightforward proclamations and instructions given to us in the Lord's written Word.

I'm reminded from great Biblical teachers of the past and present whom I study and rely upon that being a teacher means that some foundational principles and facts must be restated over and over, in varied contexts, so that they can finally be comprehended and internalized by the students. Therefore as your teacher I want to take a few minutes to remind you of just WHY it is so critical for us to become advocates of the Torah, the Old Testament, Israel, the Jewish people, and the entire body of the Holy Scriptures that we call the Bible. And I do this in the spirit of Moses in Deuteronomy who is NOT giving out new information for the most part; but rather is reminding people of what they have already heard and might already know; yet so critical is it that it **must remain** at the forefront of their thinking at all times and throughout all their generations, and especially to this 2nd generation of the Exodus that he is addressing.

Sometimes in our little world of Torah Class we forget that the largest part of the Church thinks somewhat differently than what **we** think about Holy Scripture. So many of you have come to me in frustration as to why you have to constantly defend yourself; why you have to repeat ad nauseum to friends and family that you have not joined a cult, or renounced Jesus; and all this because you have chosen to study the Old Testament portion of the Holy Bible and to recognize that the Bible is a Hebrew document. We can also rather easily forget that the vast bulk of modern Christian doctrine is at its core anti-Semitic and declares straightaway that a) Israel has been replaced by gentile Christians, b) that when God came to earth as Yeshua He changed most of His former rules and principles and abolished His covenants, and c) that to even open the books of the Old Testament (let alone actually study them and take them seriously) is tantamount to discarding our Savior and returning to the Law (whatever that means to their minds).

Nowhere, of course, does the Scripture say any such thing; but that's the basic problem of following doctrine (a least as far as doctrine is defined in the modern usage of the word). Doctrine based Christianity is often at odds with the original and ancient Scripture based Christianity. It is ironic that we seem to understand (because we've been taught it since children in Sunday School) that even though the Jews of Messiah's day claimed that their Traditions were but good and proper Scriptural interpretation, in fact too much of it was but Hebrew religious leaders espousing manmade philosophies that surrounded political realities of the day and embodied their own personal agendas, and it also enabled them to form separate groups loyal primarily to them and often for reasons of personal gain. The irony of it is

that the Church has done essentially the same thing for centuries and rather than recognize it for what it is, we have embraced it as normal and good. Just as ancient Jews were encouraged to study Jewish Traditions (the Talmud) and discouraged from studying all but a few select passages of the Torah that seemed to validate their Traditions so are modern Christians encouraged to accept various denominational doctrines without question, and discouraged from studying anything but select passages of the New Testament, primarily the Gospels.

In one of the seminal Christian documents of the modern era, late in the 1800's one of the eminent European Church leaders of that time, Adolf Harnack, said this:

To reject the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake the church rightly resisted; to retain it in the sixteenth century was a fate from which the Reformation could not escape; but still to preserve it (the OT) in the nineteenth century as one of the canonical documents of Protestantism is the result of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis.

In other words, while very early on the church had no choice but to retain the Old Testament because until the approach of the 3rd century there WAS no other Holy Scripture than the Old Testament (no such thing as a New Testament had yet been created), to Harnack's mind (19th century Europe) there was no further excuse for Protestants to retain any portion of the OT as valid biblical text. That it was only religious paralysis (as he called it) that the Church did not finally and explicitly state that the OT was an outdated document that had no place in our Bibles or Christian lives whatsoever.

His argument was well received and it became accepted as the standard by which the Western Church formed its theologies and doctrines; and so the door has, since that time, been slammed tightly closed on the Old Testament to Western Christianity.

Thankfully not all respected theologians fell prey to this horribly misguided but popular liberal mindset. About 100 years after Harnack's remarks, one such dissenter, Dr. Walter Kaiser, made this statement that so eloquently and powerfully sums up the current state of mainstream Christianity; a state and mindset from which it is my goal in Torah Class to escape, and I quote:

No matter how great the uniformity of opinion has been from the NT writers down to the Reformation, and no matter how great the difficulties in answering the formal and material questions posed here, the OT remains the most central and decisive problem for Christian theology. How we respond to this problem will automatically set much of our Christian theology—whether we do so in a deliberate or in an unreflective fashion.

The implications of this move in theological construction are massive. Our answers to this problem (of how we think of the OT) will decide:

. . . how we understand Jesus Christ in his historical character, his Jewish context, and his divine validation. It decides the church's view of itself as the church of God, as an element in the mysterion of God's saving action in history. It decides our interpretation of the salvation given us in Jesus Christ, . . . our estimate of earthly and temporal life. . . . It concerns . . . the relation of the church of Jesus Christ to the chosen people of Israel. Our whole understanding of the Kingdom of God—and therefore also of the universality of the Christian faith, the Christian church, and Christianity—is determined by what we think of the Old Testament and how we handle it.⁹

Thus, it is difficult to think of very many areas of Christian theology that are not affected in a major way, either by the inclusion or the deliberate omission of the OT data from its systematization. Moreover, when it is recalled that over three-fourths of the total Bible is found in the OT, it is enough to make one pause before cavalierly bypassing this most extensive record of God's revelation to mankind.

In other words, the Old Testament is the formative document OUT OF WHICH the NT came. The OT is the context of how one MUST understand Jesus, His mission of Salvation, what Salvation amounts to, what the church should look like and even how we define just what that entity called “The Kingdom of God” actually is. Kaiser says that how Christians value the OT, or alternatively discard it as worthless, will determine every element of our belief system.

Ladies and gentlemen, for our era, within the Church (whether you are Jew or gentile) there is no more decisive question for us to wrestle with than whether to accept ALL the Word of God, or to sever away everything given as Holy Writ that comes before the book of Matthew. Do we search out and act upon the actual oracles given directly from the Lord in the Torah; or do we only consider parts of certain books that serve to validate hundreds of years of theological philosophies developed by the institutions claiming to govern Christendom?

Do we shrink our bibles even further by discarding the 50% of the New Testament passages that are but direct OT quotes? Because if the OT is dead and gone and nailed to the cross, then how do we justify retaining the portion of it's contents that forms more than half of the New Testament?

This is the core of the message Moses is bringing to Israel in Deuteronomy. Moses asks: will you trust and DO the entire Word of God, Israel; or will you return to men's doctrines and the elemental spirits and worship nature as back in Egypt? Will you listen to and obey the Lord, or will you merely condescend in order to retain the benefits of the society and culture to which you belong? Will you realize that the Lord's Wisdom is the ultimate truth, or will you choose to value your intellect (or the intellect of your leaders) as superior to the divine? Moses says one

of these two ways is life, and the other is death. So choose life.

Let's focus ourselves, with the Lord's help, on this mighty 4th chapter of Deuteronomy.

READ DEUTERONOMY CHAPTER 4 all

After Moses explains that Israel is to obey (for their own sakes) what is about to follow, and that nothing should be added, removed, or altered from these instructions, he says in verse 5 that these rules are to be obeyed inside of the Promised Land (Canaan) that they will soon be living in.

We talked briefly last week about Hebrew verb tenses and that in biblical Hebrew there are no such things as past, present or future tenses like there are in English. Rather, there is what scholars have labeled as the **perfect and imperfect** that more denotes in the one case an ongoing process, and in the other case that a process has been completed.

At the beginning of verse 5 we get a nice example of this issue of verb tense and the problem it causes in interpretation; normally the English translation of this verse is something like, "**.....see, I have imparted to you laws and rules.....**". The past tense is employed indicating that the laws and rules Moses is speaking about were given in the past. But that is NOT the meaning of the Hebrew tense employed here. Rather this is the imperfect (sometimes called the incomplete) tense indicating that Moses is speaking of an ongoing process. So a better translation might be, "**....I am imparting to you laws and rules**". Better, but still not precise because this is an ONGOING process; this means that some laws were given and some are still being given. The continuing process of giving the Laws and defining they're meaning and application has been occurring since Mt. Sinai and it is not yet over.

Then an important principle that of course carries over into the New Testament is presented in verse 6: it is that the PROOF of Israel's loyalty to Yehoveh will be in that those who HEAR the Lord's laws DO His laws. Don't confuse this PROOF with it being the same thing as a SIGN. The SIGN of Israel's relationship with the Lord is male circumcision (from Abraham's covenant) and the observance of the Shabbat (from Moses' covenant). The PROOF (.that is, the sum of the outward evidence of their faith in Yehoveh) is in how well they acted it out. The NT version of this principle is found in the book of James: ^{NAS} **James 2:17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself. ¹⁸ But someone may well say, "You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works."**

Don't ever let anyone tell you that the PROOF of your faith is the acceptance of Christ. No. The SIGN of your acceptance of Christ (the SIGN of the New Covenant) is the Holy Spirit in you (which, by the way, is invisible and so no one can see it including yourself). Therefore the PROOF of your faith (says Moses and later James) is in the fruit it produces, your works. And works generally means good deeds towards men and full obedience to the commands of God.

It's not that the Lord God needs to see your works as the proof He's looking for; He's the one who made the decision to GIVE you the Holy Spirit so He's already determined the status of your faith. Rather the proof (in the form of visible and tangible works) is that so OTHERS may benefit. As it says in Deut.4:6, ***"....observe them (the Laws) faithfully for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment TO OTHER PEOPLES, who on hearing these laws will say, Surely that is a great nation....."***

So while on the one hand the Hebrews did not seek to proselytize or to convert, it was the living out of their faith in view of non-Hebrews that Yehoveh says would be attractive to those foreigners. I've stated many times that the most effective (and really, only) method of bringing the Good News to the Jewish people of Israel is to live out your faith and allow them to see your love (or better, Yeshua's love IN you) not to merely quote to them NT Bible passages. In reality that is probably also the best and most biblically authentic method to bring the Gospel to anyone, including your family.

Moses is in the midst, here, of drawing out two points: First, that the giving of the Law specifically to Israel indicates the creation of an unprecedented relationship between God and a particular nation of people that has no parallel in history or in any other society; and second, that the Laws of the Lord are superior to all manmade laws and principles and the justice inherent within His ordinances is perfection. That in reality God's Laws are but a reflection ***of*** God. His character was made known and echoed in His Laws. Do you REALLY want to know who God is? Then learn His laws and commands and DO them.

Next Moses gives Israel a warning against idolatry. The BASIS for the prohibition against making god-idols is explained in a little more detail here in Deuteronomy chapter 4 and it is this: since the Lord did NOT appear in any kind of physical form to Israel at Mt. Sinai, then Israel should NOT try to manufacture any kind of physical form to represent God. After all, if you've never seen what God looks like, how can you possibly make an accurate representation of Him? Rather, since God made His presence known to them in "words" (recall God SPOKE audibly to Israel at Mt. Sinai), then Israel should pass along the knowledge of Yehoveh to future generations in words and deeds and not in god symbols and images like the heathen do.

This was such a radical departure from the norms of all the world cultures of that era. The thought was that without a god image (an idol), there was no way to worship that god. Idols

were handed down from generation to generation as a means of instructing family members about the family gods. Yehoveh says DO NOT MAKE an image of Me because I am not of this world and therefore nothing you could make could ever capture My essence.

Let me make a point here that I think might be helpful to explain just HOW it is, then, that we **are** to perceive the Lord since we're not to do it with visible images. A.J. Herschel captures it beautifully: ***"The essence of Jewish religious thinking does not lie in entertaining the concept of God, but in the ability to articulate a memory of moments of illumination by His Presence. Israel is not a people of definers, but a people of witnesses."*** In other words the PEOPLE of Israel actually **witnessed** what God said directly to them, and actually witnessed God's great deeds on their behalf, and then that information was reliably passed on generation-to-generation; it was by means of eyewitness proof from hundreds of thousands (even millions) of ordinary people that God's Torah is indeed a direct oracle from the Lord.

Neither Judaism nor Christianity base our religion on speculative thought and grand religious philosophies (although both have been infected by this over the centuries, and part of Torah Class's goal is to distinguish between truth and tradition); rather our faith is to be based on actual experience with God: both the experience of our faith fathers and our own PERSONAL experience with God. The Israelites ACTUALLY heard God's words, and Believers of Yeshua have ACTUALLY received the Lord's Holy Spirit. Both of these experiences are relationship based. NEVER was the religion of the Jews based on some mechanical following of a legal code, nor was it based on sacred god-symbols; it was based on a historical experiential relationship with Yehoveh. Following those laws was merely the proper response TO this relationship, just as a modern Believer's proper response to our Salvation should be obedience as well.

Therefore, says Moses, you (Israel) saw nothing of God at Mt. Sinai but you did hear His words directly from His voice. That doesn't mean there wasn't a visual experience that went along with it. The Israelites saw fire and smoke; the sky turned dark as night. The idea is that the Lord's presence made quite an unforgettable impact because it was designed to do so. Nature itself was affected because of God's power and presence. It was **supposed** to elicit awe, reverence, AND a healthy fear. I just hate it when I hear some well-meaning Christian say that since the advent of Christ we have no reason to fear God anymore. Wow. There aren't too many doctrines more dangerous than that one. You BETTER fear God. All the apostles feared God. Goodness, even the first gentiles who accepted the God of the Jews were called God-fearers.

Verse 15 continues the admonition by Moses to make no image of YHWH because the Israelites have never seen God's shape. Keep in mind Moses is NOT talking about making images of false or pagan gods. Is it not interesting that this particular command and admonition takes up so much time on Moses' agenda? Well it should; for the failure to keep this command led to the death of scores of thousand of Israelites out in the Wilderness, and it

would happen again and again with alarming regularity because the people just didn't take this warning seriously enough.

As concerns God, idolatry is dangerous because it offends His holiness. As concerns men, idolatry is dangerous because God has ordained that it is a capital offense. Idolatry is dangerous on a number of levels; that's the problem with it. I'm curious: do you suppose that one day the Israelites scrupulously made NO god images at all, and the very next day they woke up and started idol factories and turned them out by the thousands? Is it possible that they went from a determination NEVER to make idols on Monday, but on Tuesday they had a meeting and said, "hey, I've got an idea, let's start worshipping idols!"

That's not how humans operate, is it? We begin with a determination to obey but in time we find a reason to make a very small compromise here and there. We rationalize and we debate what the meaning of "is" is, and we slice the onion thinner and thinner to prove our case, and pretty soon we take just a tad more liberty. We look around and observe that God hasn't struck us down yet, so we figure everything's OK and take the next small step. Israel went for centuries skating by and progressively impinging on God's laws prohibiting idolatry. Nothing obviously bad happened recently so they took yet further liberties. Suddenly, exile. And what is interesting is that despite the warnings of the Prophets to STOP the idolatry or the Israelites would suffer the consequences, the people generally responded with, "what idolatry?" They thought, hey, we all love and worship Yehoveh. We might have these little symbols lying around but that couldn't be what those commandments were about; they seem so harmless. But the minute divine judgment struck, the people whined and cried and yelled out to the Lord, "WE HAVE SINNED." They instantly knew what they had done.

Where am I going with this? Notice some of the examples that follow that the Lord KNEW the Hebrews would instantly be attracted to and use to make images of Him; so He says, "don't go there". Verse 16: "no image in any likeness whatsoever". Well, that seems pretty comprehensive. A little later in that same verse: "no image of a man or a woman." OK, that would certainly seem to limit religious statues. Verse 17: "no image of an animal that lives on the earth, and no birds". Got it. Now, when the Hebrews DID wind up making god-images of cows and birds and all sorts of other things did they really believe that this is what God looked like? No, they didn't. The animals were but commonly accepted symbolic representations of God's attributes, NOT His actual physical appearance. The Hebrews didn't think God looked like an eagle or a sheep or a brazen serpent. Rather this but represented that the Lord soared above them in the heavens, that he was kind and gentle on one hand and could kill (or heal) as instantly as a snake could strike on the other. The Lord says: THIS is idol worship.

Now take a look at verse 18. Uh-oh. Another example of a tempting but prohibited object that might be used as a god-symbol was..... "FISH!" Hmmm; that couldn't POSSIBLY mean MY fish. Because I don't worship my fish as an image of God. Now, that other guy's fish symbol might be wrong but my fish just REMINDS me of my faith. My fish just symbolizes the work of

my Savior, who IS God, that He is a fisher of men. It just symbolizes an attribute.

Do you see the problem here? You all know the fish I'm talking about. The problem is this: WE don't always know when we have crossed over the divine line in the sand. And that is because it is NOT us who draws the line or judges when it's been violated. Wearing a fish symbol is not necessarily idol worship, but it can become idol worship. There weren't very many Israelites around in Bible times that admitted to idol worship. When the Prophets beseeched Israel to stop their idol worship most wouldn't acknowledge it because they deceived themselves into believing they had it all under control. That what they were doing might have been close to the line but it wasn't over the line. Then, boom! Judgment! And they all thought, "I should have known better." Too late.

Next Moses says don't get into attaching divine characteristics to the stars or the sun or moon. It's not that these heavenly objects weren't divinely made for divine purposes (they were). But so were we and we are certainly not divine! Are you into astrology? Be wise and drop it now; it is a slippery slope. Look: the essential principle is that we are not to worship any created thing and since God created everything but Himself, we need to take this seriously. So this prohibition includes the worship of angels, demons, the winds, the Saints, the heavens, pastors, teachers and even tel-evangelists.

An amazing statement is made in verses 19 and 20; the Scriptures say that Israel is not to bow down to the stars and the moon because they were allotted for worship to the other nations? Oh my what does THAT mean? The idea is that it was natural, though wrong, for men to be so awed by the celestial bodies that the response could be little else but to bow down to them. And that if the Lord hadn't given instruction to the contrary, and if He hadn't given HIMSELF as the object of worship, men would be drawn to worship of these objects like a moth to flame. But since He **did** set Israel apart; and since He **did** take it upon Himself to give them something that no other nation had (His Torah), then it followed that it was Israel's duty to put away worship of these spectacular, but created, objects and to enjoy the privilege of knowing that the only thing worth worshipping was the self-existent God, Yehoveh.

We'll finish up chapter 4 next week.

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