

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Have you ever wondered what the scriptures teach about the origin of the universe? What about the patriarchs, who were they, and why are they important? What relevance does the account of the exodus of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt have for Christian growth? What can the seemingly tedious ceremonial laws of Leviticus as well as the long list of names in Numbers teach us about godly living? How should a believer read and reflect on the five books of Moses collectively called the Pentateuch (or Torah)? How do these five books “fit in” to the over-arching story of scripture? These questions and more will be explored as we seek to understand this section of God’s Word.

The objective of this class is: to gain an overview of the first five books of the Bible (otherwise known as the Pentateuch), and understand the relation between these foundational books to Christ and Christian living.

A Retelling of God’s Story (Deuteronomy 1-3): The book of Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book in the Pentateuch. The name Deuteronomy comes from the Greek and means literally “second law” as in the second telling of the law. This is attributed to the fact that many of the laws delivered to Israel on Sinai are here rehearsed by Moses at the border of the Promised Land as parting advice. This retelling of the law serves a purpose – it offers God’s people former slaves and children of the desert, an identity rooted and grounded in their relationship with the one true God. To understand the book of Deuteronomy, we must learn about the context and purpose of the book. Israel had just completed a forty year journey through the wilderness. The adult population were children when the exodus event occurred and the children present were not yet born. Moses had contended with the rebellious Israelites from the beginning until now and was bestowing upon them parting advice by way of evoking their memories of the previous forty year period. The book of Deuteronomy must be seen as a series of sermons delivered by the aged leader of God’s people and mediator of the covenant a short time prior to his death. This perspective is critical to maintain as we progress throughout the book because it serves to highlight the creedal statements that become the confessional language of God’s covenant community.

Part One: Leaving & Loss – The first thing of which Moses reminds God people is the fact that they encamped around Mt. Horeb, the mountain of God, until God told them it was “long enough”. Mt. Horeb and Sinai are used interchangeably in scripture and are believed to have been the same mountain. Horeb was the site from which God appeared to Moses the first time when he was tending to his father-in-law’s flocks and instructed him to return to Egypt and demand the release of God’s people from Pharaoh who had subjugated them to a life of bondage. God told Moses at the time that he was to come back to Mt. Horeb and worship him on that mountain. It was here that he brought the redeemed congregation, and where the law of God was given to his people.

It is easy to understand how one might become comfortable camping beneath such a holy place. The language used of Moses is provocative to say the least. In 1:6-7a we read, “*The Lord our God said to us in Horeb, ‘You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Turn and take your journey...’*” Regardless how memorable the site of the giving of God’s law was for his people it was not the end of the journey, but rather a stop along the way. As a NT believer, you cannot but help think of Peter’s exclamatory remark atop the mount of transfiguration. There in the presence of Moses, Elijah and Christ Peter states, “*Rabbi, it is good that we are here. Let us make three tents, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah*” (Mark 9:5). Perhaps a similar sentiment possessed the people of God at the foot of the mountain from which his divine law had been revealed and given to his people. God quickly enables them to

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

understand that it was not his intention that they remain in the shadow of the mountain, but *“...see, I have set the land before you. Go in and take possession of the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them and to their offspring forever”* (1:8).

Moses continues his retelling of the story by stating, *“Then, we set out from Horeb and went through all that great and terrifying wilderness...”* (1:19). In this short sentence he summarizes the various trials and temptations the people of God suffered and experienced in the desert. He brings them to the border of the land of the Amorites. There is a slight change in the details as relayed to the people by Moses and as relayed earlier in the book of Numbers. In 1:22 he states, *“Then all of you came near to me and said, ‘Let us send men before us, that they may explore the land for us and bring us word again of the way by which we must go up and the cities into which we shall come.’”* The text in Numbers gives the following account, *“The Lord spoke to Moses saying, ‘Send men to spy out the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the people of Israel’* (Numbers 13:1). So, was it the people who asked for spies in order to know the direction they should take or God who instructed Moses to choose spies and send them into the land? Here we have one of the great antinomies of scripture: the antinomy of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, which many have injuriously chosen to divide as incongruous with sound doctrine. It is to be understood that God did indeed command Moses to choose spies to spy out the land of Canaan by using the people of Israel to set forth a request. The prophet would have immediately seen in their reasoning a divine and providential working to which the congregation was being employed to accomplish the good pleasure of God.

The outcome in both accounts is the same: God’s people refuse to trust him though he carried them, *“...as a man carries his son...”* and provided for them throughout their journey. They complained against God thinking that he like a mere mortal possessed adversarial motives and had brought them into the wilderness to kill them. Moses’s memory of the event was vivid: *“Yet in spite of this word, you did not believe the Lord your God, who went before you in the way to seek you out a place to pitch your tents, in fire by night and in the cloud by day, to show you by what way you should go”* (1:32-33). God swore that the adults of Israel would die in the wilderness and he instructed them to, *“...journey into the wilderness in the direction of the Red Sea.”* They were judged and condemned to wander the wilderness in order to bear the penalty for their rebellion and more intimately learn the ways of the Lord. They did suffer loss, but it was loss of the lesser for gain of the greater. The apostle Paul would later state, *“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”* (Philippians 3:8).

Part Two: *The Battles of Preparation* – Moses’s focus in retelling the events following the rebellion of God’s people and their refusal to enter the Land of Promise was centered on the various kingdoms they were and/or were not allowed to engage militarily. The remaining forty year period is summarized in chapters 2 and 3:1-22 with the key note events being God’s preservation of Mt. Seir (Edom) and Moab because he had given those lands to the descendants of Esau and Lot respectively. It is interesting to note similar language in the entitlement of Edom and Lot to their lands as used to express Israel’s right to the Land of Canaan. Regarding Mt. Seir he states, *“Do not contend with them (Edomites)...because I have given Mt. Seir to Esau as a possession...the Horites also lived in Seir formerly, but the people of Esau dispossessed them and destroyed them from before them and settled in their place, as Israel did to the land of their possession, which the Lord gave to them”* (2:5; 12). We read in greater detail of the descendants of Esau and their possession of Mt. Seir in the Genesis chapter 36. There is good reason to believe that Esau’s inheritance of the land of Seir (Edom) can be attributed to the fact that he too,

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

though not the heir of the covenant of grace (Malachi 1:2; Romans 9:13), benefited from the promise God made to his grandfather Abraham. However, we have no reason to believe that God entered into covenant with any other nation in the same manner in which he did with Israel even if he did indeed drive out the inhabitants of specific lands for other nations (2 Samuel 7:23). We see beautifully portrayed in scripture the truth that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof and he gives the various borders and lands to whomever he chooses.

There is mention made of two great kingdoms that fell by the hand of God's people while they were wandering in the wilderness, both kingdoms of the Amorites: the kingdom of Sihon (of Heshbon) and the kingdom of Og (of Bashan). The Amorites were a Semitic tribe (descendants of Shem) who occupied large parts of Mesopotamia from the 21st until the 17th centuries before Christ (B.C.). The height of their accomplishment was the creation of Babylon as a city-state. We have already seen that Nimrod a descendant of Cush was the founder of Babylon, but the Amorites purportedly made Babylon into a city-state. The Amorites were traditionally a nomadic group whose existence centered on the keeping of sheep and the herding of cattle. For this reason, their land possessed by the children of Israel on the eastern side of the Jordan was prime for the grazing of cattle and greatly appealed to the descendants of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh (Numbers 32:1). It was because the sin of the Amorites had not yet reached an intolerable level that God, in his covenantal promise to Abraham (Genesis 15:16), delayed the immediate possession of the land. Now, God instructed Israel to attack and completely destroy them.

From the first three chapters of Deuteronomy, we are provided a better understanding of why God allowed the Amorites to be defeated at this specific time in Israel's history. According to 3:21-22, *"...Thine eyes have seen all that the Lord your God has done unto these two kings: so shall the Lord do unto all the kingdoms where you pass. You shall not fear them: for the Lord your God, he shall fight for you."* So, not only was the land allotted to the Amorites on the East side of the Jordan now part of the Land of Promise, but the battles fought were illustrative to the covenant community: they instructed them to have faith, for God was fighting for them.

One final comment regarding the Amorites before we move on: the motif of the city-state begun in the book of Genesis here continues through the conquest of the land of the Amorites. As the people group responsible for the perpetuation of the ancient city of Babylon into a city-state we see again a contrast between God's original intent at the time of creation and the way in which the Fall devastated the original agenda of God the Creator with an ulterior agenda, an attempted usurpation of the divine plan on the part of fallen and depraved humanity. Just as Babel (what would later become Babylon) was a city to make a name for man, Jerusalem would become the place where God would make a name for himself. What is being called to remembrance by the aged prophet is not solely the faithfulness on the part of a redeemer God to bring his chosen people to the land promised to their forefathers, but the faithfulness on the part of a creator God to his creation. A shadow is here cast of the day when all nations would know the Lord and his temple-city would fill the earth. Israel is a microcosm of that macro event. The conquest of Canaan, here promised and assured by the battles in which God's people have already triumphed, is a foreshadowing of God's cosmic agenda.

Part Three: The Designation of Joshua – Even though God had forbidden Moses from entering the land of promise, he did not leave his people without a shepherd. On the heels of Moses's death is the assumption of responsibility by Joshua. It was important that all Israel see a continuation between the call of Moses, the mediator of the covenant, and the newly appointed general who would lead the Baney, Lesson 13 Fall, 2015

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

covenant community into the land promised to them by God. For this reason, the select section for this week ends with a reference to Joshua and a legitimization of his call in the sight of all Israel. In verses 26-28 of chapter three we read, *“But the Lord was wroth with me for your sakes, and would not hear me: and the Lord said unto me, Let it satisfy you, speak not more unto me of this matter. Get up into the top of Pisgah, and lift up your eyes westward, northward, southward and eastward, and behold it with your eyes: for you shall not go over this Jordan. But charge Joshua, and encourage him, and strengthen him: for he shall go over before this, and shall cause them to inherit the land which you shall see.”* Thus begins the oral memoirs and exhortations of the prophet Moses. To understand the chapters that follow, we must place them in the context of the last words of a faithful servant of God who is commissioning both Joshua as well as the people of God to remain faithful to the covenant.

Conclusion: Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, the various themes woven throughout the rest of the Pentateuch: city, land, seed and promise, are materialized. The people of God have come of age in a sense. They have experienced the love and care of their Redeemer; all their needs have been provided; they have faced their idols and the sinfulness of their rebellion and have started drinking the refreshing waters of the land of promise. Some of the tribes have even taken possession of their portion of the land, but are waiting on the doorsteps of the Promised Land to accompany their brethren in the battles of conquest. The central thrust of the Pentateuch and the overarching narrative (mega-narrative) of scripture has become the *raison d’être* (reason for being) of a community: God dwelling among a people, being their God and they his people. This central purpose resurfaces throughout redemptive history as the Pentateuch comes to an end and the historical books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth follow.