

DEEP END - HIGHLIGHTS (text not audio)

DEUTERONOMY 1:31: - LEGAL OR RELATIONAL?

Many people describe Deuteronomy as being structured as a treaty, particularly what is called a vassal treaty. This is a treaty between a powerful nation and a weak insignificant nation. And it is often said that the structure of such a treaty is reflected in the book of Deuteronomy (Israel being the vassal). However, Row Smith demonstrates that Deuteronomy is in fact instruction from a father to his son (Israel). Primarily, it is relational, not legal. He makes his case by examining the father/son passages in Deuteronomy (1:31, 8:5, 14:1,2, 32:18-20). He sees these father/son allusions running through the entire book.

In addition, Row Smith finds some twenty allusions to the fifth commandment (“honor your father and mother...”) in the book of Deuteronomy in such words as “it will be well with you” and you will “live long in the land.” The fifth commandment is all about being obedient to our parents and the fact that this commandment is echoed in Deuteronomy reinforces the fact the Yahweh is Israel’s father, and as Yahweh’s son is receiving instructions from his father. Father and son are walking together, the one learning from the other, much like the beginning chapters of Proverbs.

Of course in Deuteronomy we do have laws, but they are commandments in the context of a father/son relationship, which makes all the difference. In his book on the Trinity, Row Smith argues that all biblical covenants should be conceived of as fundamentally father/son structures rather than master/servant structures.

Therefore, if the suzerainty, or vassal treaty, is used to exegete the “shape” of Deuteronomy we will read it very differently than we would if we read it through the lens of a father/son relationship. God’s relationship to Adam was structured by the Father’s eternal relationship to the Son in the Spirit, and this is what we need to project onto Deuteronomy if we are to read it correctly (and perhaps also explains why it was one of the favorite books of Jesus *the* Son).

This is not to say that there is no structure of a vassal treaty in Deuteronomy, but simply that if this is the prevailing paradigm in the book we will read it very differently than if it is structured as a father/son relationship. It also means that we then we have good reason to conclude that father/son structures are fundamental to all biblical covenants.

In addition, according to the book of Colossians (and other New Testament books) the very reason for creation itself was so that God would have a platform on which he could adopt us into his Trinitarian family. And if so, then what Row Smith is suggesting makes complete sense.

Therefore this Father/son relationship, this adoption into God’s Trinitarian community of love, is the basis of everything. And if we see it as the basis of the covenants, as the basis of law, (understanding that covenants and law are only designed to put a structure around love) then this means the Old Testament, and indeed the whole of scripture, rather than having a legal framework has a relational framework. The law can sound very harsh, brittle, and remote. However, a father walking with his son is an entirely different representation of reality. And for me, that’s good news indeed!

(some of the above is based on the work of Peter Leithart)

