

Parashah One Hundred Twenty-Six

Deuteronomy 1:1–46; Jeremiah 30:4–11; Hebrews 3:7–19

notes by Tim Hegg

“These are the Words...”

In our English bibles, the last book of Moses is called “Deuteronomy,” meaning the “second giving of the Torah” (from Greek δεύτερος *deuteros*, “second” and νόμος *nomos*, “law”). The Hebrew title, דְּבָרִים (*Devarim*) is taken from the first unique word in the text, הַדְּבָרִים meaning “the words” — “These are *the words*...” Before Israel was to enter the Land, they must be reminded of the Torah (the “words” that God had spoken through Moshe) they had received at Sinai some 40 years earlier. Much of the Torah could not be lived out while in the wilderness, travelling as bedouins. Now that the nation was to enter the Land, take up permanent residence there and live in cities, aspects of the Torah that related to the Land would be put into place. Thus, it was appropriate that Moshe give Israel a “refresher course” on the Torah as they prepared finally to take possession of the Promised Land. In a similar manner, we likewise are called to study all of the Torah even though many parts of it (especially those related to the Temple, the priesthood, and the Land) cannot be carried out in the diaspora. In studying the whole Torah, we are constantly reminded that we too will “enter the Land” when Messiah returns to reign from Mt. Zion. This also reminds us that “the words” are of utmost importance to us. It is in the revealed words of God that we gain an understanding of Who He is, and who we are as His people.

It is because of the covenant aspect of the Torah that *Devarim* begins by noting carefully both the location and the time in which Moshe spoke these “words.” The covenant God had made with His people Israel was still in place, and needed to be reaffirmed. In the Ancient Near East, covenant enactments were made official by noting the time and place in which they were established. The same is true even in our day, as any notary public statement gives witness. The place is described first as “across the Jordan in the wilderness,” and then made more specific by noting the surrounding cities and villages (v. 1). “Across the Jordan in the wilderness” alerts us to the fact that the perspective is that of Land. In the same way, the activity of Yochanan HaMatbil (John the Baptizer) is noted to have been “beyond the Jordan” (Matt 4:25; Mk 3:8), and Yeshua Himself entered the Trans-Jordan when tempted by the enemy in the wilderness (cp. Matt 19:1; Mk 10:1; Lk 4:1). In a symbolic fashion, Yochanan and Yeshua re-enact the entrance into the Land as a renewal of the Torah covenant.

The time noted in our text is Rosh Chodesh of the eleventh month (later called Shevat), in the fortieth year after the exodus from Egypt (v. 2). Comparing this with Josh 5:10f, where we learn that Israel entered the Land following the observance of Pesach, we realize that the message of Moshe contained in *Devarim* was given over the span of several months. According to the Sages (*Seder Olam Rabba*), the discourse of Moshe contained in *Devarim* ended on the 6th of Adar (the twelfth month), or 36 days later.

The notice is given that “It is eleven days’ journey from Horeb by the way of Mount Seir to Kadesh-barnea” (v. 2, cf. v. 19). Horeb is another name for Sinai (the name preferred in *Devarim*, cf. 1:6, 19; 4:10, 15; 5:2; 9:8; 18:16; 29:1). The obvious reason for this notice is to emphasize that while the journey should have taken only eleven days, it took forty years because of Israel’s rebellion against God’s command to go up and possess the Land. This points to the main emphasis of Moshe’s first message in *Devarim*, which is the consequences of failing to trust God for those

things He has promised. Thus, the message of Devarim is timeless, for its divine message also calls us to trust in God, to rely upon His promises even in the face of what humanly appears impossible.

As Moshe begins his discourse, the text states “Moshe spoke to the children of Israel, according to all that the LORD had commanded him to give to them” (v. 3). Devarim is a record of God’s word, not merely the thoughts and teachings of Moshe. In this Moshe stands as the paradigm for all subsequent prophets, who did not speak their own words, but presented to the people the very words of the Almighty.

Moshe gives a summary of the divine instructions for the journey from Sinai to the Promised Land (vv. 6–8), and the appointing of leaders and judges to oversee the needs of the people (vv. 9–16). The point is that everything was in place for the implementation of the Torah covenant that God had graciously given. Had the people submitted to the words of the Torah, and acted upon them in faith, then they would have experienced the victory of possessing the Land without having to wander for 40 years in the wilderness.

He then reiterates the events at Kadesh-Barnea, in which the command of the Lord to “go up and possess the Land” was disregarded by the people because of their fear. It should be noted that Moshe specifically relates the victories over the kings of the Amorites, Sihon and Og, at the opening of our text, and he doubtlessly does so to show the faithfulness of God. When the people were willing to possess the Land as God had instructed, the divine assistance needed to defeat the enemy was forthcoming. Even the disastrous effects of the nation’s rebellion at Kadesh are overcome by a renewed reliance upon God’s promises. What He has promised, He will do.

The heart of rebellion is described more precisely in vv. 26–27, and it is worthy of our attention.

Yet you were not willing to go up, but rebelled against the command of Adonai your God; and you grumbled in your tents and said, ‘Because Adonai hates us, He has brought us out of the land of Egypt to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites to destroy us.

The heart of faithlessness is fostered by fear. The people heard the report of the spies, that “giants were in the Land,” and this fear evidenced itself in their unwillingness to obey the command of God to possess the Land. Once the decision for disobedience had been made, the people sought a rational explanation to warrant their rebellion. They reasoned that God, in fact, is not good, but evil: “Adonai hates us.” This idea, that God Himself is less than good, is always at the heart of rebellion. Was it not the very same thought that the enemy planted in the mind of Adam and Chavah: “Indeed, has God said that you should not eat of any tree of the garden?” (Gen 3:1). It is always the natural response of mortal man to think that God is less than good when he encounters the difficulties of life, and all the more so when such difficulties are severe. But faith lays hold of the truth that God is good—that He is always good, in spite of circumstances that would appear to indicate otherwise. We confess this in our prayers when we say (in the 18th benediction of the *Shemonei Esrei*): “You are good, for Your compassion is never exhausted, and You are compassionate, for Your lovingkindness never ceases. Forever we have hoped in You!” Thus, our growth in faith begins when, in the face of life’s vicissitudes, we refuse to let go of the goodness of God. In doing so we are enabled more and more to cast all of our anxieties upon Him because we firmly believe the words “He cares for you” (1Pet 5:7).

We should also note that grumbling accompanies a heart of rebellion (v. 27). Having reasoned that going up against the formidable enemy in the Land, the people began to grumble. Regularly

engaging in thanksgiving is the antidote to rebellion. Thanking God for all He has given us is, in itself, an expression of our faith that He is good. Grumbling is the leaven that makes rebellion grow. Rather, “in everything give thanks; for this is God’s will for you in Messiah Yeshua” (1Thess 5:18).

Our *parashah* ends with Moshe’s retelling of how the nation, confronted with their faithlessness, rebelled a second time, but in an entirely different fashion. Realizing that they had failed to act upon God’s command to go up and possess the Land, the people were intent upon reversing their actions. At first this appears as proof of true repentance. Hadn’t God said to go up and possess the Land? So they engaged in battle and were thoroughly defeated. God had warned them that because of their sin, He would not fight for them at this time, “but you would not listen. Instead you rebelled against the command of Adonai, and acted presumptuously and went up into the hill country” (v. 43). Sometimes even what appears to be right actions can constitute rebellion. God not only demands that we obey Him, but He also requires that we obey Him by doing *as* He commands. We often think that taking matters into our own hands is sufficient, that the end really does justify the means. But this is not God’s way. The *manner* in which we obey Him is of utmost importance, because the way He commands us to walk is, in itself, a revelation of His character. No one can honor God by disobeying His commandments.

After experiencing utter defeat at the hands of our enemies, we “returned and wept before Adonai; but Adonai did not listen to your voice nor give ear to you” (v. 45). This illustrates a principle of Scripture: “If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (Ps 66:18). Willfully clinging to sin (אָנֹן אֶם־רָאִיתִי בְּלִבִּי, “If I see wickedness in my heart,” where the verb רָאָה “to see” here may have the sense of “choose,” cf. 1Sam 16:1) makes our prayers to HaShem of no avail. Rather, He dwells with the “contrite and lowly of spirit” (Is 57:15), who have humbled themselves under the mighty hand of God. As our Master has taught us: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall *see* God” (Matt 5:8).