

Parashat Devarim דברים

Torah: Deuteronomy 1:1–3:22

Haftarah: Isaiah 1:1–27

The Contents of Parashat D'varim

General Overview

We now begin not only a new parasha, but also a new book. As is the custom in the Torah, the first parasha is also the name of the book; hence, both the book and the parasha are called “D’varim,” which translates into English as “Words.”

Exposition

Deuteronomy is one of the most critical books of the Tanakh and because of its importance and popularity we will devote a good portion of this week’s commentary to introducing it in order to help us gain a better understanding. Accordingly, this week’s study outline is:

- I. The Title of Deuteronomy
- II. The Usage of Deuteronomy
- III. The Structure of Deuteronomy
- IV. The Contents of Deuteronomy
- V. The Contents of Parashat D’varim

In this excerpt from Parashat D’varim, we will focus on section V, The Contents of Parashat D’varim.

V. The Contents of Parashat D’varim

In the opening parashiyot of D’varim we get a beautiful picture of the theology of the Torah. Moshe did not write a systematic book of theology but the first several parashiyot almost read like one! Actually, to be technical, they do not read like a “systematic” theology book, but rather a “biblical” theology book. We are using the term “biblical” not as opposed to non-biblical, but as a technical word in theology to describe a certain way of studying the subject.

Systematic theology is a study of theology by way of arranging theological truth from the Bible in a topical format and seeking to find verses that teach a given theological theme. In contrast to this method, which is not necessarily wrong, is a method of developing a “biblical” theology that is based on the premise of “progressive revelation.” This means that we begin in Genesis and study what Genesis reveals about a given theological theme, as it unfolds. Then, we go to another book to see what that book teaches about a given subject, or how it adds onto the previous ideas gleaned from earlier studies.

A weakness of systematic theology is that it may have a tendency to be somewhat artificial, forcing evidence to fit a foregone conclusion, or a particular theological system. On the other hand, when you study the Scriptures using biblical theology, the aim is to let the Scriptures speak for themselves. Your

conclusions are based totally on what you glean from the Scriptures and you do not usually fall prey to the confines of any particular theological system.

(We know this sounds rather technical to some of you. But you need to remember that there are some students who like this kind of stuff. Teaching about it will help them — and you — to grow in your study of the Bible.)

As we study theology in the book of D'varim, we will attempt to practice a biblical theology, dealing with the facts as they unfold through the study of the parashiyot. In the opening parasha of Deuteronomy, we see three characteristics of God.

A. The God Who Speaks

One of the most important and magnificent truths that lies behind all of the Torah is crystallized for us in 1:6, “The Lord our God said to us at Horeb” There are at least two outstanding features to this truth. One is that God is a God who speaks; and the second is that He is a God who speaks what He wants despite man's reaction to Him. What He speaks is based on His own agenda to fulfill His plan for the universe. God speaks *as God* and not as a man uttering selfish decrees out of his unbridled emotions. In short, the God we believe in is the God who has revealed Himself in His Word. This is the God of Israel.

B. The God Who Judges

The second major theological truth this parasha reveals is that the God of Israel is the God who judges. This is not a new concept to our study in these commentaries; therefore, we do not need to dwell on it.

There is something remarkable, however, about the revelation of this concept in this parasha. The first three chapters of D'varim consist of an historical summary of the things God did for Israel from the time when they left Egypt. It includes many place names and a short synopsis of what the Lord did for Israel at each location. In 1:15–18, Moshe describes what happened when the Lord instructed him to appoint elders over Israel to help him to be a more effective judge. It would have been very natural for the text to continue at that point to describe what happened at the next location but it does not! Instead, verses 16–17 seem to hold their own moment and speak of some of the principles by which those judges were to carry out their functions. Yet, we can easily see that this is not a legislative section, but a historical portion. Why would Moshe include some instructions to the judges at this point? It seems so much out of context.

The only answer we can provide is that we are given another opportunity to see how intensely God is a God of justice. He uses every opportunity to remind the people to practice fair and impartial justice with each other. It is no wonder, therefore, that in Isaiah chapter 11, when the Messiah's arrival is predicted, one of His foremost characteristics is that He will judge all people with fair and impartial justice.

C. The God Who Fights

Does this seem like a strange section heading? Not many people would consider God to be a God of war. They often think of Him as a chubby, lovable, old grandpa who may look stern at times, but who would certainly never think of hurting anyone intentionally. In many ways, that kind of image is correct. God is

the most loving person in the entire universe! If we ever need some tender and comforting arms in which to rest, His are the best! When we sin, He forgives without end!

However, there is more to God than that. The same God who is the source of all love and compassion is also the God who unleashes wrath causing all men to shudder. Thus, it should be of no surprise to us that in 1:29–30, Moshe told Israel that they should not hesitate to conquer the Land as God told them to because, “The Lord your God who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes.”

The Torah provides us with a key to understand how it is that we have a God who makes war and causes blood to be shed. The key is found in Genesis 15 when God promised to give to Abraham the inheritance of the Land. After making that promise, God told Abraham that his people would be slaves in another land before they would inherit the Promised Land. Then God told Abraham that his people would not return to the land until many years later, saying, “And the fourth generation shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite shall not yet be full until then” (Genesis 15:16).

The name “Amorite” was derived from either an ancient Akkadian or Sumerian word. In both languages, the word could designate a region, people, or direction. As a directional indicator, it referred to the “west,” from the direction of Mesopotamia. Thus, the Amorites were simply people who lived west of Mesopotamia. Given the fact that directly west of Mesopotamia was a vast desert; the people west of Mesopotamia would most likely have been people living in or near the Promised Land. The Bible reveals a very close identity between the Amorites and the Canaanites. One place which does make some kind of a distinction is in Numbers 13:29.

Let us now return to our passage in D’varim. The reason why God is depicted as a God who makes war is that His “war” is with those who oppose Him and His holiness. God foresaw a time when the sin of the Amorites would become so detestable that he would have to judge them. Hence, God told Abraham that his descendants would not come back to the land of Canaan until the sin of the Amorites was in its fullest. Why? He said so for one simple reason: God was going to use the children of Israel as an instrument to administer His judgement against the sin of the Canaanites and the Amorites. We will comment on the sin in greater detail further on in our studies of the book of Deuteronomy.