

Responsibility and Choice:
An Exegesis of Deuteronomy 30:11-20

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1. Introduction

It is time for a new beginning. The current generation of Israelites has been wandering in the wilderness for forty years as result their parents' unbelief and disobedience. They have seen God's judgment but they have also experienced his provision. They are still eating the manna that appears miraculously every day. By now, nearly all of the previous generation has passed away and the time has come for them enter into the land that was promised to their forebears. Before this can happen, however, God needs to set a few things in order, so he has Moses gather the people together in the plains of Moab. Moses recounts the events of the last forty years and reminds them of the laws and statutes that God has commanded them to observe. The passage of scripture under examination comes near the very end of Moses' address to the people. In these verses Moses will remind the people that God's commandment is within grasp and he will call on them to make a choice that will determine the course of their future.

2. Text and Translation

This particular section of scripture is very similar in the majority of the English versions that were examined. There is one major textual variant in this pericope in v. 16. The ESV and NRSV include the phrase "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God" at the beginning of the verse; however both versions add a footnote indicating that the phrase is omitted in both the Hebrew and the Septuagint. The NASB, KJV, and NIV omit the phrase entirely. The phrase is rather redundant and will not be included in this exegesis.

The English Standard Version (ESV) is the primary text that will be used here. It was chosen for its commitment to literalism, its ease of reading, and its connection to other resources. Other versions may be noted when their translation of a particular word or phrase adds to the

understanding of the pericope.

3. Context

The title “Deuteronomy” comes from a Greek word meaning “second law.” This is likely a mistranslation from the phrase “a copy of this law” in 17:18, although it will be seen that this is not an altogether inappropriate title.¹

A picture of the historical setting comes into focus by examining some of the surrounding context. The Israelites are gathered together in Moab, probably near Shittim which is northeast of the Sea of Arabah (the Dead Sea) and east of the Jordan river,² on the first day of the eleventh month of the fortieth year since the exodus from Egypt (Deut. 1:3).³ Here, in a series of addresses near the end of his life, Moses reminds the Israelites of various aspects of the law that was originally given at Sinai and re-establishes the covenant with this new generation. This is done in anticipation of their moving in to take the land that God had promised long ago. According to Duane Christensen, “Deuteronomy is essentially a national ‘constitution’,”⁴ and Ronald Clements states that “polity” is the best term to describe the overall theme of the book.⁵

Scholarly consensus is that at least part of Deuteronomy existed in written form in the time of King Josiah’s reign,⁶ although there is some disagreement as to how much. Some

¹ J. A. Thompson, “Deuteronomy, Book of.” In *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed., Ed. by J. D. Douglas, N. Hillyer, D. R. W. Wood, I. H. Marshall, A. R. Miller, J. I. Packer, and D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 272.

² Herbert G. May, G. N. S. Hunt, R. W. Hamilton, and John Day, eds., *Oxford Bible Atlas*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 61. See Deuteronomy 29:1, 4:46-48, and Joshua 2-3.

³ See Exodus 12:1-2 where God resets the calendar in preparation for the Passover. Following dates are then recorded in terms of days and months that have passed. The tabernacle was set up in the first month of the second year (Exod. 40:17). A census was taken on the first day of the second month of the second year (Num. 1:1ff).

⁴ Duane L. Christensen, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 6A, *Deuteronomy 1:1-21:9* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), lvii.

⁵ Ronald E. Clements, “The Book of Deuteronomy.” In *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*. Vol. II. (Nashville: Abington, 1998) 272.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 278-280.

scholars hold that the entire book was written by Moses before his death.⁷ The majority of scholars, however, seem to agree that some portion of chapters 12-26 were written before the exile. This was later added to and revised into the current form sometime after the exile in an attempt to preserve a national history and develop a literary bridge between the Torah and the other books of the Deuteronomistic History.⁸ According to Clements, the “high level of consistency and homogeneity of style” indicates that the version of Deuteronomy we now have came from a collaboration of editors who had “very evidently set out to compose a comprehensive guidebook for Israel to live as the very people of the Lord God.”⁹ Those who hold to the latter viewpoint believe that the pericope under examination is a later editorial addition to the text.¹⁰

4. Form and Structure

Deuteronomy is a smorgasbord of genres. The entire book takes the form of a narrative, but within the overall narrative there are rhetorical addresses, law code, covenant language, and even songs and poetry.¹¹ The specific form of the passage at hand is direct address; one commentator refers to the section containing this pericope as “the great farewell address of Moses.”¹² At this point in the narrative Moses is speaking to the people in order to persuade them to obey God’s commandment and choose life thereby. Within this rhetoric is language representative of a covenant or legal agreement. This will be discussed in more depth in the commentary body.

⁷ Merrill, Eugene H. *The New American Commentary*. Vol. 4, *Deuteronomy*. (Broadman and Holman, 1994), 5-8.

⁸ Clements, 278-280; Mark E. Biddle, *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy*. (Macon: Smyth and Helwys, 2003), 9.

⁹ Clements, 272.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 510.

¹¹ Biddle, 5-8.

¹² Clements, 506.

The passage under consideration can be broken down into two main sections of a well-structured argument. The first main section contains vv. 11-14. In these verses Moses describes the accessibility of the commandment in three main ways: what it is not (too hard), where it is not (in heaven or across the sea), and where it is (within the people themselves).

Having removed all doubt in regard to the accessibility of the commandment, Moses is ready to make his final argument: the Israelites have a choice to make (vv. 16-20). He tells them they only have two options and he details the stipulations and consequences for each option. They can choose to obey God’s command and experience life and blessing or they can choose to turn away from God and experience death and adversity. The pericope can be outlined as follows:

I.	Moses tells Israelites the commandment is accessible.....	11-14
	A. It is not too hard.....	11a
	B. It is not too far away.....	11b-14
	1. It is not in heaven.....	12
	2. It is not beyond the sea.....	13
	3. It is very near you, in your heart and in your mouth.....	14
II.	Moses presents the Israelites with a choice.....	15-20
	A. I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.....	15
	B. Obedience and blessing.....	16
	1. If you obey the commandment.....	16a
	a. By loving the Lord.....	16b
	b. By walking in his ways.....	16c
	c. By observing his commandments.....	16d
	2. Blessing	
	a. Then you shall live.....	16e
	b. And the Lord will bless you.....	16f
	C. Disobedience and consequences.....	17-18
	1. Disobedience.....	17
	a. If your heart turns away and you do not hear.....	17a
	b. But are led away to bow down to other gods.....	17b
	2. Consequences.....	18
	a. You shall perish.....	18a
	b. You shall not live long in the land.	
	D. The choice is restated.....	19-20
	1. The choice is life or death, blessing or cursing.....	19a
	2. Choose life.....	19b

- a. By loving the Lord.....20a
- b. Obeying him.....20b
- c. Holding fast to him.....20c

5. Commentary Body

Deuteronomy 30:11-14 – The accessibility of the commandment

Verse 11 Moses is nearing the end of what will be some of his final words of instruction to the Israelites. He begins this section by assuring his audience that the commandment he has given them is neither too hard nor is it too far away. The word “hard” in the ESV is translated from the Hebrew word *pala’*, which means “beyond one’s power, difficult to do.”¹³ One commentator translates this word as “unintelligible”¹⁴ and another as “wonderful.”¹⁵ In other words, the things that Moses is commanding the Israelites to do are not beyond their ability to understand or accomplish. Moses is not asking them to do the impossible.

Verses 12 and 13 In addition to not being impossible, Moses also tells the Israelites that the commandment is not too far away. In v. 12 Moses tells the Israelites that the commandment is not far away in heaven so that someone would have to ascend into heaven to retrieve it. Perhaps “not in heaven” is a reference to when Moses ascended the mountain to receive the commandments. The word translated “ascend” here in v.12 is also used in Exod. 24:15 when Moses “went up” on the mountain to receive the commandments from God. This is why no one else needed to go up into heaven; the commandment had already been delivered and now it simply needed to be obeyed.

In v. 13 Moses states that the commandment is not beyond the sea so that someone would have to cross to the other side and get it before they could hear it and observe it. According to a

¹³ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. (1906; repr., Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010) s.v. נָזַף

¹⁴ Duane L. Christensen, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 6B, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 742.

¹⁵ Merrill, 391.

couple of commentators this could be a reference to the story of the Epic of Gilgamesh in which the titular character must cross a sea to obtain eternal life.¹⁶ Such is not the case with God's commandment.

Another interpretation could be possible given the Israelites geographic location. If the Israelites are gathered in the Beth-Peor, Heshbon, Shittim area, which seems likely (Deut. 4:46-48; Josh. 2-3), then they are quite close to the Sea of Arabah.¹⁷ Perhaps this is the sea Moses is referring to when he tells them that they did not forget the commandment on the other side. They do not have to turn around and go get it. Like a good salesperson Moses is eliminating objections and excuses before they come up.

Verse 14 Moses states positively what he had just told them negatively. In verses eleven through thirteen Moses tells them where the commandment was not; in verse fourteen he tells them where it is. It is not far away; it is very near, in their mouths, and in their hearts so that they can do it.

Perhaps the mouth is a reference to the oral tradition, which Christensen explains was the primary educational process of ancient Israel.¹⁸ Almost no one to whom Moses was speaking would have been older than twenty at the time of the Exodus¹⁹ and many of them were likely born in the wilderness. Some of them may have been present the first the time the commandments were given to them and many of the others would have heard of the commandments as their parents and grandparents recounted how YHWH had delivered them

¹⁶ Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12*, 743; Peter C. Craigie *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Deuteronomy*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), 365.

¹⁷ Herbert G. May, G. N. S. Hunt, R. W. Hamilton, and John Day, eds., *Oxford Bible Atlas*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 61.

¹⁸ Christensen, 743.

¹⁹ See Numbers 14:26-32.

from Egypt. Even in the unlikely event that there was someone who had never heard the commandment prior, they were hearing it today as Moses delivered it once again.

The word translated “heart” is the Hebrew word *lebab* and it means “the inner [person], mind, will.”²⁰ In essence, Moses is telling these people, “There is no excuse for you not to observe this commandment. It is not beyond your ability to accomplish. It is not so far away as to be inaccessible to you. On the contrary it is within your very selves.” With this established Moses is ready to give the Israelites full control of and accountability for their destiny.

Vv. 12-14 are referenced in Rom. 10:6-8 at which point Paul is referring to a righteousness that is based on faith. In a very similar fashion Paul admonishes his readers not to ask who will ascend to heaven or descend into the abyss (a change from crossing the sea). In this case a person would not be retrieving the commandment as in Deuteronomy, but Christ himself. In Rom. 10:8 Paul quotes Deut. 30:14 almost verbatim, “The word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart.” He goes on to explain that “the word” is the word of faith that he proclaims. He then takes the idea of the mouth and heart and ties it to Christian salvation in verse nine: “Because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 – The Choice

Verse 15 Moses presents the Israelites with a choice. There are two options: life and good or death and evil. The NRSV uses “prosperity” and “adversity” in place of “life” and “good.” This makes sense in light of the blessings and curses that are described in chapter 28. Material blessing, or prosperity, follows obedience while disobedience leads to great material loss and other hardship.

²⁰ Brown, Driver, and Briggs, s.v. לֵבָב

Verse 16 Loving God and obeying his commandments is the condition for life and prosperity.

Loving God is a matter of the heart. YHWH should have first place in the hearts of the people. In

his book *Old Testament Theology*, John Kessler notes that

[c]ertain scholars argue that the list of stipulations [in treaties from the Ancient Near East] began with one foundational requirement that undergirded the other more detailed ones. This foundational obligation was generally a call to loyalty to the covenant. In some ANE treaties such loyalty is described using the term “to love.”²¹

He later writes, “In this kind of relationship, acts are the external manifestations of inward disposition of the heart.”²² In this particular covenant, love (or loyalty) is manifested by walking in God’s ways and by keeping his commandments, statutes, and rules. Walking in God’s ways denotes a lifestyle of keeping oneself in line with God’s direction for living and it includes observing specific statutes and rules. The one who does these things will experience life and will see his or her family continue to grow as he or she is blessed by YHWH in a new land. This promise is reminiscent of God’s covenant with Abraham in Gen. 17:1-14.

Verses 17 and 18 V. 16 states that loving God leads to life and blessing and in vv.17-18 the opposite is also declared to be true. The opposite of loving God is turning one’s heart away from God and the opposite of serving God is serving other gods. It is interesting that there is no middle ground, no mention of atheism. The Israelites will either serve YHWH or they will serve other gods.

This prohibition of idol worship is a recurring theme in the Pentateuch. In Exod. 20:3-5 the people are forbidden to bow down and serve any other gods beside YHWH because he is a jealous God. In Exod. 32 the Israelites are almost destroyed for doing that very thing. In Lev. 26:1 the practice of idolatry is condemned again. In Deut. 29:16-18 Moses reminds the people

²¹ John Kessler, *Old Testament Theology: Divine Call and Human Response* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 203.

²² *Ibid.*, 210.

that they are surrounded by idolatrous nations with detestable practices and he warns the people to beware of men or women whose hearts have turned from YHWH toward the gods of these surrounding nations. Here in Deut. 30:18 Moses tells them that there will be stark consequences for idolatry: the people will perish and will lose the land that they have been promised.

Verses 19 and 20 In the preceding verses Moses has built a case and he is prepared to bring the people to a point of decision. The terms of the agreement have been thoroughly explained and all potential objections have been addressed. The people know that there is a choice to be made and they know that there are only two choices from which to choose.

Moses, as God's agent, had made this offer before, however, as Merrill puts it, "this time...the offer was couched in the formal terms of a legal setting in which witnesses were invoked to bear testimony in the future to the response of Israel to the Lord's gracious overtures."²³ The language here is similar to that of other suzerain-vassal treaties in the Ancient Near East.²⁴ Merrill goes on to explain that "in similar ancient Near Eastern legal transactions the witnesses were usually the gods of the respective litigants, but the monotheism of Israel's faith dictated that such appeal be to creation, to heaven and earth, for only it would endure into future ages."²⁵ Christensen makes reference to the fact that the heavens and earth were themselves the gods who were called upon as witnesses by other nations.²⁶

The fact that God, via Moses, presents his people with a choice is very significant theologically. God is telling the Israelites that they will be held responsible for their future. "God

²³ Merrill, 392-393.

²⁴ Ibid., 26.

²⁵ Ibid., 393.

²⁶ Christensen, 748.

and his ability were not for one moment in question;” one commentator states, “the responsibility now rested on the people themselves.”²⁷

After restating the choice Moses tells the people what to choose. “Choose life,” he tells them, “so that you and your offspring may live.” The decision that these people made would not only affect themselves but also their offspring, just as their parents’ choice forty years previously had affected them.

Moses goes on to reiterate that choosing life is choosing YHWH,²⁸ choosing to love him and hold to him and obey his voice. By doing this the Israelites will enjoy a blessed life in the land that God had promised to their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

6. Conclusion

After wandering for forty years in the wilderness the time had finally come for the current generation of Israelites to prepare to enter the land that God had promised to them. Moses gathered them together in the plains of Moab and in a series of addresses he reminded them of the things their people had experienced as well as the things that God expected of them as a people of God. Keeping the commandment of God would be of utmost importance if the Israelites wanted to experience the blessing of God in the land that they had been promised. Moses assured them that this commandment was within their grasp. It was not too hard for them to understand and it was not too hard for them to do. The commandment was not in heaven for Moses himself had already “ascended up” and brought it down to the people. It was also not too far away beyond the sea. It was, however, in the people’s hearts and mouths. They had heard these commandments since their youth and they just heard them again from Moses.

²⁷ Craigie, 366.

²⁸ Paul L. Schrieber, "Choose Life and Not Death": Life-and-Death Issues in Light of Deuteronomy 30:15-20." *Concordia Journal* 24, no. 4 (October 1, 1998): 352. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials EBSCOhost* (accessed October 23, 2013).

Having been assured that the commandment was accessible the people were ready to make a choice. Would they choose life and blessing or death and adversity? Choosing life meant choosing YHWH; it meant choosing to obey him. Choosing to turn from God was to choose death.

The time had come to renew the covenant. In a manner consistent with other treaties from the Ancient Near East, Moses called on God's enduring creation to bear witness to the fact that a sovereign and holy God was giving his people the right to be responsible for their own future as well as the future of their loved ones. God's preference was clear. God wanted the people to choose life by choosing God, nevertheless, God allowed them to decide.

After this final presentation to the people, Moses signified the beginning of a new era by appointing Joshua as the new leader of this new generation. Having completed this task it was time for Moses to go the way of all the earth. So concludes final book of the Pentateuch, transitioning from Torah to history.

7. Application

If this pericope represents a true historical account of the words that Moses spoke to a new generation of Israelites preparing to enter into the Promised Land then the application to them is quite clear. They would need to heed and observe the commandments that had been delivered to them if they wanted to experience the life and the blessing that God had promised.

If this section of Deuteronomy was penned in an attempt to develop a coherent national history and identity sometime after God's people had returned from exile then there is another layer of application. This passage would have struck a chord of familiarity with a group of people who had just returned to their ancestral land after having been in exile. They would have had firsthand understanding of the curses mentioned previously in the book of Deuteronomy and

therefore this message of a renewed covenant of obedience to God would have resonated with them and encouraged them to make sure that the mistakes of previous generations were not repeated.²⁹

One author transfers the above application to present day situations by asking how “to avoid a repeat of the earlier devastation and ensure peace, security, and prosperity.”³⁰ He is specifically referring to national tragedies like September 11th, 2001. He goes on to argue that the answer may not be as simple as a renewal of obedience to God but that would not be a bad place to start.³¹

Another author applies the concept of choosing life to the modern-day controversy regarding whether or not a person should be free to end his or her own life. The author believes that it is a misinterpretation of this passage to say that calling people to choose life and death means one should be able to choose to end one’s life.³²

One final application may be appropriate today in light of a movement in the church known as the prosperity gospel. The teachers of this movement would do well to remember blessing is conditional upon obedience. Expecting God’s blessing without obeying God’s commands is as foolish today as it was in the days of Moses.

²⁹ Clements, 510-511.

³⁰ Bruce Wells, "Deuteronomy 30:6-14." *Interpretation* 61, no. 2 (April 1, 2007): *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed October 23, 2013), 199.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

³² Schrieber, 346-356.

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