

Deuteronomy, bi-directional covenant, and bootstrapping Christianity

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Multiple audiences across ages

Deuteronomy 10:10-22 is one of the most important passages in the book, because through this passage the meaning of covenant is unveiled. What does Deuteronomy 10:10-22 mean to ancient Israel? The answer is tied to the historical background and authorship of the book. Current evidence indicates that the text might be targeted for multiple audiences as follows:

1. The Israelites close to the time of Moses,
2. the Israelites in the seventh century going through a reform, and
3. the post-exile Israelites who desperately needed to restore their hope.

Traditionally the authorship of Deuteronomy was attributed to Moses, but there is evidence to counter-argue this view. For example, the end of Deuteronomy mentioned the death of Moses, but needless to say Moses was not able to write about his funeral. In the 19th century Bible scholars suggested that a prophet wrote parts of Deuteronomy prior to Josiah's reform around 622 BC, and later the book was used as a manual to support the reform.¹ But Wright argued that locating the book in the seventh century is nothing more than a habitual convention.² Indeed some contents of the book contain materials much earlier than the seventh century. Specifically, there is a high degree of resemblance between the vassal treaties found in the ANE cultures and Deuteronomy, especially the Hittite treaties. It is probably that the prototype of Deuteronomy had existed earlier and passed down to generations as an oral tradition.³

Some authors speculated that the book is linked to Levites refugees from the North after the fall of the Northern Kingdom whereas some found the resemblance between the Wisdom tradition and Deuteronomy.⁴ However, Wright contended that it is difficult to associate the book with one particular group or one particular goal.⁵ In a similar vein, Woods argued that compilation of Deuteronomy was a lengthy process. During the post-exile era the book was added to Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers to create the current form of Pentateuch.⁶

In summary, the messages embedded into the text might be addressed to at least three audiences: early Israelites, the Israelites in the seventh century, and the exiles. In the following the messages will be unpacked one by one.

¹ Edwards J. Woods, *Deuteronomy (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary)* (Downers, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 27-28.

² C. J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy (Understanding the Bible Commentary Series)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 9-11

³ R. J. Utley, *Old Testament Survey: Genesis–Malachi* (Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International, 2000), 53-54.

⁴ Alexander Rofé, *Deuteronomy: Issues and Interpretation (Old Testament Studies)* (New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 9-10.

⁵ Wright, 1996, 9-11.

⁶ Woods, 2011, 28.

The nature of the Covenant

Based on the notion that Deuteronomy and ANE vassal treaties share a common ground, covenant theology is generally considered one of the core ideas of the book.⁷ Even though the concept of covenant was probably influenced by those vassal treaties, this does not nullify the uniqueness of Israel. Unlike those vassal treaties, the covenant was more than a legal contract or an agreement. It also indicates a one-sided grant, such as the liberation of the people from Egypt and the new loyalty of the Israelites to God. In short, this entails a loving relationship.⁸ In a vassal treaty, when one party breaks the contract, the other party is released from all the obligations. However, in the covenant God manifested His patience and persistent love no matter how rebellious His people was.

The message centered on the covenant is applicable to all three audiences mentioned above. To the Israelites who wandered around the desert and faced an unknown future, the unchanged promise of God provided them with an assurance. After the Northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria in 722BC, the Judah tribe was reminded by Deuteronomy about the urgency of *renewing* their relationship with God, otherwise they might face the same fate as their northern brothers.⁹ And probably in the post-exile period the covenant was invoked as the impetus for seeking hope. Specifically, to the exiles the fall of both Israel and Judah did not signify the end of the world; rather, God still *remembered* the covenant.

One of the important messages of the text is that God loved the Israelites in spite of their rebellion. Moses told the people that the LORD was unwilling to destroy them after listening to Moses (v.10), and God instructed them to occupy the land that He promised to their ancestors (v.11). Although it is evident that God's action is based on the covenant, it doesn't necessarily imply that the covenant is unconditional; the Israelites could not just sit there to receive the entitlement. Verse 11 says, "The Lord said to me, "Get up, go on your journey at the head of the people." God didn't wipe out the wicked inhabitants and then send them to move in. Rather, God told them that they must go into the land to take over it. The promised land was no doubt a gift to the Israelites, but this promise required a responsive action. As van Wijk-Bos wrote, "possession of the land is conditional in Deuteronomy, dependent on how well the Israelites fulfill the obligations that are laid upon them."¹⁰ The bi-directional nature of the covenant will be further discussed in the next section.

Fear of God

As mentioned before, the relationship bound by the covenant is a two-way street. As McConville said, "a blessing is unthinkable without righteous or obedience, so is obedience unthinkable without

⁷ J. Gordon McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy* (Wiltshire, England: JSOT press, 1984), 4.

⁸ Craige, P. *Deuteronomy (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 22-24.

⁹ Craige argued that *renewing* the relationship between God and His people is one of the key themes of Deuteronomy. The end of Deuteronomy documented the death of Moses, which provided the basis for a renewal. See Craige, 1974, 29-32.

¹⁰ Johanna van Wijk-bos, *Making Wise the Simple: The Torah in Christian Faith and Practice* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 259.

blessing.”¹¹ Interestingly enough, after Moses shared the good news about the covenant and the promised land, he switched gears and talked about God’s requirements as follows:

1. To fear God
2. To walk in all his ways
3. To love him¹²
4. To serve the Lord with all your heart¹³ and with all your soul¹⁴
5. To keep the commandments and his decrees

Fearing God is the first among all the requirements. It was emphasized for a good reason. Given the fact that in the ancient Near East (ANE) cultures many so-called gods could accept bribery and had no moral demands on their worshippers, in Deuteronomy the Israelites were warned that the LORD, unlike the other gods, must be taken seriously.

This message about the Holy characters of God and fear of God is applicable to the Israelites after Moses, too. van Wijk-Bos wrote, “If the words were indeed composed hundreds of years after the events they claim to describe, when loss of land and sanctuary, as well as the endangered covenant bond, were staring people in the face, then a complete reorientation to the God of Israel is demanded.”¹⁵

The attributes of God

The Israelites must fear God due to His Holy characters. Moses said, “the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe” (v. 17). The phrase “God of gods and Lord of lords” is commonly misunderstood as recognition of the existence of other gods. If it is interpreted literally, it seems that the Old Testament endorsed some kind

¹¹ McConville, 1984, 15.

¹² The ANE vassal treaty is partially equivalent to the covenant in the Old Testament. In the Amarna letters from vassal kings of Canaan to their Egyptian master, the word “love” is used to express the vassal’s loyalty to the master and the commitment to the legal agreement between the parties. But in Mesopotamian literature it is very rare for people to love a god. Generally speaking ANE gods neither sought love from their believers nor entered into covenant relationships with them. See V. H. Matthews, M. W. Chavalas, & J. H. Walton. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (electronic ed.) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 11:1.

¹³ In the OT the term “heart” is referred to as the center of things (Dt. 4:11). Usually it is used to represent the whole person, including all one’s physical, intellectual and psychological properties. See Banwell, B. O., “Heart,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 456. In the OT the word is commonly used in a metaphorical fashion. For example, a stubborn mind is compared to an “uncircumcised heart” (Deut 10:16; Jer 9:26). See L. Ryken, J. Wilhoit, T. Longman, C. Duriez, D. Penney, & D. G. Reid, “Heart,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 368.

¹⁴ The Hebrew word *nepesh* occurs 755 times in the OT. As indicated in Genesis 2:7, the primary meaning is “possessing life”. On some occasions it is associated with the blood, which is vital to the physical existence of life (Gn. 9:4; Lv. 17:10–14; Dt. 12:22–24). In many instances the word is generalized to be the principle of life, which is commonly used in Psalms. But other similar connotations can also be found in the OT: state of consciousness (Nu. 21:5; Dt. 12:15, 20–21, 23–24; Jb. 33:20; Pss. 78:18; 107:18; Ec. 2:24; Mi. 7:1), source of emotion (Jb. 30:25; Pss. 86:4; 107:26; Ct. 1:7; Is. 1:14), the will and moral action (Gn. 49:6; Dt. 4:29; Jb. 7:15; Pss. 24:4; 25:1; 119:129, 167). See Cameron, W. J. (1996). “Soul,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 1124.

¹⁵ van Wijk-Bos, 2005, 260.

of polytheism. Actually the divine titles mentioned in verse 17 simply follow the common religious writing style in ANE. Citing divine names and attributes is a popular way of praise to the divine in ANE. An obvious example is the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, which proclaimed the fifty names of *Marduk*, one of the supreme gods of Babylon.¹⁶

Using multiple titles and contrasting the supremacy of the LORD with “other gods” is nothing more than a rhetorical way of emphasis. Not only did the Biblical author refuse to recognize the legitimacy of other gods, but also the author warned the audience that the true God should never be treated like other gods. In many ANE religions the gods could be manipulated because people believed that they needed something from humans. Sacrifice and other rituals were routinely conducted to appease the gods. By giving what the gods liked, the worshipper could win the favor of the gods. In contrast, Deuteronomy explicitly declared that the LORD is not the same as those other gods.¹⁷

The painful cost of transformation

Why did Moses stress on the attributes of God? If the Israelites had no such problem, then there was no need for Moses to give such a speech. It is likely that the Israelites had mimicked the religious practices of their neighbors. This is implied by what Moses said earlier: “Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer” (v.16). During the OT era circumcision was performed by most ANE nations, including Egypt. In other Semitic groups and Egypt usually circumcision was not done to infants. There were multiple plausible explanations to this custom: an initiation ritual associated with puberty, a symbolic sacrifice of the reproductive powers to the deity, or a token human sacrifice. But in later centuries the custom was inherited devoid of meaning.¹⁸

In Israel it had a clear theological significance. The ritual was intended to submit the individual to his family and the broader community. Before the establishment of a central sanctuary, circumcision functioned as the admission into the membership of the covenant community with God (Gen 17:14).¹⁹ Deuteronomy gave it another spiritual meaning by using it to symbolize humble submission to a painful operation. The Israelites might let obstacles cover their heart and as a result they were blind to God’s requirements. As a remedy, they must go through a painful transformation in order to walk in God’s way.²⁰

As mentioned before, probably parts of Deuteronomy were written during the reform of Judah in the seventh century BC. Needless to say, any reform or change would face resistance. “Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.” This message might also be spoken to those people who wanted to maintain the status quo in the seventh century BC.

¹⁶ Matthews, Chavalas, & Walton, 2000, 10:17.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ D. G. Reid, D. G. “Circumcision.” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 148–149.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ David F. Payne, *Deuteronomy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox press, 1985), 72.

Duties to the weak and the stranger

Previously the five requirements are principles, but Moses gave a concrete example of actualizing God's commandments. Moses contended that God "executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (v.18-19). van Wijk-Bos pointed out that protection of the weak, the poor, and the stranger is a recurring theme in the Torah.²¹ Again, in Deuteronomy 10:18-19 God commanded His people to protect the stranger and the weak. This message is consistent with many other passages of the Old Testament.

Who is the stranger? A stranger is a person who does not have an identity associated with the host community. The theme of stranger or sojourner starts from Genesis: humans lost the paradise and became exiles in the world (Gen. 3:23; 4:12). The story of the Tower of Babel further reinforces the notion that the human race was driven to scatter and wander around the world (Gen. 11:1-9). Later God called Abraham to leave his hometown and became a wanderer (Gen. 12:1), and his descendants, including Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, continued this kind of nomadic journey. Needless to say, Exodus is a story of a massive migration. Strangers and wanderers are characterized by vulnerability. Thus, the Mosaic code explicitly stated: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:21); "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 19:9-10); "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." (Lev. 19:34).²²

Concentric pattern

Near the end of the passage Moses repeated the same points:

- Fear of God: "You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear" (V.20).
- The attributes of God: "He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen" (V.21).
- Relationship with the ancestors: "Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven" (V.22).

This writing style in Deuteronomy is called the concentric literary pattern, which establishes a core idea first and then repeats the main points in a reverse order.²³

²¹ van Wijk-Bos, 2005, 189.

²² Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman, Duriez, Penney & Reid, 2000, 300-301.

²³ Wright, 1996, 5.

Summary

In summary, although this passage might mean different things to different audiences at different times, yet there is a unifying theme: The Holy covenant is bi-directional in essence. Additionally, it is both conditional and unconditional. On one hand God's love to His people is unchangeable, but on the other hand the covenant entails non-negotiable requirements. To be specific, the people of God must fear God because He takes no bribe and cannot be appeased. Further, fear of God must bring about concrete actions, such as taking care of the weak and the stranger.

Applications to today

The central message in Deuteronomy 10:10-22 is still applicable today, especially to the Asian American Evangelical Christians who over-emphasize the personal dimension of the Christian faith (Jesus is my personal Savior), but neglect God's expectations and requirements on us. Traditionally Evangelicals fully embrace the doctrine of justification by faith alone and reject Jewish legalism. But Bruggemann contended that "grace and law" is a false dichotomy. He illustrated a healthy relationship with God by using the relations of husband-wife and parent-child as a metaphor. In both cases it is clear that the relationship is unconditional in the sense that love is ever-lasting. But at the same time there are high and insistent expectations in these conditional relationships.²⁴

By the same token, Chinese American scholar Russell Jeung is also critical of "Biblical individualism." In Jeung's view, today evangelical churches emphasize more the personal gains of Christianity and less the fear of God's judgment. In a conversation with an Asian minister, Jeung learned that the goal of the minister centered on bringing people into a celebrative encounter with God and helping them grow in personal lives. To Jeung these two goals represent contemporary evangelicalism's positive view on personal salvation. To actualize these personal goals, Asian Christian churches provide the audience with worship experiences that are uplifting and intimate, as well as programs to help an individual's own spiritual development. Hence, the Gospel is customized to fit into the postmodern American culture by placing personal autonomy and individual fulfillment before God's demands.²⁵

Actually Biblical individualism has a deeper root beyond post-modernism. Bruggemann asserted that since the Enlightenment the self has become the center of everything. The notion of individual freedom was further reinforced by Descartes's establishment of the human doubter as the norm of epistemology. Later Freudian psychoanalysis promoted removing self-repression as the path of mental health. These cultural trends facilitate a self-centered religion.²⁶

To be fair, Biblical individualism is pervasive throughout many Evangelical churches. If so, why did I focus on Asian American Christians? According to Pew Research Center, in 2010 the Asian American population has the highest rate of receiving college or post-graduate education (49%) than all other ethnic groups in the US (Whites: 31%, US population: 28%), and their median household income is also

²⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "Duty as Delight and Desire," *Journal for Preachers* 18 (1994): 2-14.

²⁵ Russell Jeung. *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 70-73.

²⁶ Brueggemann, 1994, 2-3.

the highest among all racial groups (\$66,000).²⁷ There may be a natural connection between the Asian American culture and Biblical individualism. Based on his observations, Paul Matsushima asserted that Asian American Christians deeply subscribe to the notions of personal religion, also known as bootstraps (one can pull oneself up by personal effort alone), and middle-class ideology, the belief that those who achieve middle class status are hardworking, self-sufficient, and morally superior to those who remain in the lower classes.²⁸ It is not surprising to see that Asian American Christians tend to embrace Biblical individualism because of the link between personal religion and middle class ideology: elevation by bootstrapping.

This bootstrapping Christianity might confine us into a tunnel vision: We might attribute our “blessed” lives to our personal spirituality, but overlook the social dimension of religiosity. In some sense, Asian Americans are treated as strangers due to language barriers, cultural differences, and sometimes racism. However, I found that many Chinese American Christians do not treat other “strangers” nicely after they “bootstrapped” themselves. For example, many years ago when I was a student, I invited my Black roommate to a Chinese church event. In the meeting a Chinese student asked me, “Why did a black devil come here?” I corrected him, “He is a black man, not a black devil.” He was so upset that he turned his face away.

In addition, personal religion hinders us from seeing God’s demands and requirements: fear of God. According to Luther, our human nature does not lead us to fear God.²⁹ Rudolf Otto went further to write, “the natural man is quite unable even to shudder (*grauen*) or feel horror in the real sense of the word. For shuddering is something more than ‘natural’, ordinary fear. It implies that the mysterious is already beginning to loom before the mind, to touch the feeling.”³⁰ Unfortunately, the element of holy (mysterious) fear is not on the radar screen of present Christianity.

If the audiences of Deuteronomy are the Israelites around the time of Moses, the reformists in the seventh century BC, and the exiles after the fall of Judah, is Deuteronomy obsolete and irrelevant to us? Did the New Testament supersede the Old Testament? Nonetheless, according to Lim, “the importance of Deuteronomy for the study of Israel’s Scriptures in the New Testament can hardly be exaggerated. As is recognized, the fifth book of the Pentateuch, along with the Psalms and the prophecy of Isaiah, is the most quoted of Old Testament books in the New Testament.”³¹

²⁷ Pew Research Center, “The Rise of Asian Americans,” 19 June 2012 [cited 28 April 2013]. Online: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/06/19/the-rise-of-asian-americans/>

²⁸ Paul Matsushima, “The Struggles of Discussing Race in the Asian American Evangelical Church,” 7 Feb. 2012 [cited 28 April 2013] Online: <http://eesahmu.wordpress.com/2012/02/07/the-struggles-of-discussing-race-in-the-asian-american-evangelical-church/>

²⁹ J. D. Douglas, “Fear,” *New Bible Dictionary* (3rd ed.) 365.

³⁰ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of Divine* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1926), 15.

³¹ Timothy Lim, “Deuteronomy in the Judaism of the Second Temple Period,” in *Deuteronomy in the New Testament: The New Testament and the Scriptures of Israel* (ed. Steve Moyise & J. Maarten; London: Continuum International Publishing, 2007), 1-26.

Listen to what Jesus said. According to Matthew 22:34-40, when the Pharisees tested Jesus by asking which commandment in the law is the greatest, Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment.” Interestingly enough, Jesus did not say, “Just have faith on God. God is your personal savior.” Although the exact wording of Jesus’s quotation in Matthew 22 can be traced back to Deuteronomy 6:5, what Jesus said there is also linked to Deuteronomy 10:12-13. For a long time Judaism has been perceived as a religion of obeying laws and rituals in a legalistic fashion. But the preceding verses show that having a covenant-based relationship with God is what God asks for. van Wijk-Bos went even further to say that no new perspective on a faithful life offered by Jesus could not be found in the Torah.³² In short, what Jesus said in Matthew 22 and what Moses told his people in Deuteronomy 10:12-13 indicate a common thread between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

There is a second part in Jesus’s answer to Pharisees: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (v.40). Does this sound familiar? Let’s revisit Deuteronomy 10:18-19: “(God is the one) who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” The wordings of Jesus and Moses are different, but their meanings are the same. The Israelites should love the strangers because they were strangers in Egypt. In a similar vein, we should love our neighbors as ourselves. Simply put, we should put ourselves into other people’s shoes. Further, although James 1:27 did not mention “stranger,” it still echoes Deuteronomy 10:18-19 to some extent: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” Once again, there is a tight integration of the Old Testament and the New Testament. God expects us to do justice to the weak because He executes justice to the same group. In summary, the covenants, including the old and new ones, are bi-directional. They are both conditional and unconditional. In addition to enjoying grace, Christians are accountable to God and also responsible for our neighbors.

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³² van Wijk-Bos, 2005, 267.

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