

Meet God Again for the First Time (2003)
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Chapter 3

Israel as a Nation

The Deuteronomic History

With the book of Joshua we move from the exodus to Israel's settled experience in the Promised Land. So if you start from the book of Genesis and you work your way through the Pentateuch to the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, you'll find that they are one continuous history, a single continuing story. It is as if a single individual sat down and put the whole story together. While that doesn't seem to be the case, the material from Genesis through II Kings is one continuous story, except perhaps the story of Ruth, which is inserted into that sequence.

The book of Deuteronomy provides the transition between the setting of the Exodus and the settled history in Canaan that follows. Deuteronomy completes the five books of Moses. The name “deuteronomy” means “second law.” What was the first law? The law given at Sinai and recorded in Exodus and Leviticus (and part of Numbers). The purpose of the first law was to regulate Israel’s relationship with God in the desert. Deuteronomy, on the other hand, was not a law for the desert, it was a constitution for when they were settled in the land. So The book of Deuteronomy provides a natural bridge between the Exodus and the history that follows in Canaan.

A number of scholars have seen the unity of the picture running from Genesis through II Kings and come up with the term "Deuteronomic history." From Joshua through II Kings the subsequent history of Israel is assessed in the light of the book of Deuteronomy. History is judged by the laws of Deuteronomy, when a king does the right thing according to Deuteronomy, then he was a good king; when he ignores the law, or does evil, then he is an evil king. Or you could say that the history of Israel from Joshua until the exile to Babylon becomes one long sermon illustration for Deuteronomy, the constitution of ancient Israel.

Why would anybody write such histories? People write histories to teach lessons for the time in which they are writing. The biblical histories are like a call to repentance for those reading at a later time. Histories help us learn from the mistakes of the past. While Israel’s histories are about the mighty actions of God, they are also a history of the actions of His people. And it's a pretty ugly history much of the time. They are consistently unfaithful, constantly stumbling, constantly getting into trouble. Histories are valuable because they help

us learn from our own mistakes and from the mistakes of others. As painful as it may be, most of us learn a lot more from our failures than from our successes.

One thing I see about the Scriptures is that full benefit is gained by the mistakes and failures of its characters. In the Deuteronomic history we see a clear outline of the successes and the failures of the people as well as the actions of God. In rehearsing their history they not only confirmed their understanding of God, they gained a better understanding of themselves as well. We see the Israelites repeating the mistakes of Adam over and over again. It is as if there are two parallel principles, God is always faithful and His people are always unfaithful. In a sense both Israel and God are equally consistent, you can almost predict what both are going to do.

And here's the interesting thing. We saw in the previous chapter the promises to Abraham, it was God's purpose that through Abraham that God would restore the Garden of Eden. The promises to Abraham were built on the curses of Genesis 3 and the covenantal relationships of Genesis 1-2. Through Abraham and his descendants God intended to bring back paradise, to restore the Garden of Eden. And that's what the land of Canaan represents. But as you go through the entire Old Testament what do you discover? It never happened.

What does that say about the Old Testament? That it's an unfinished book. There will never be a religion that is based solely on the Old Testament because it would be a religion that would be incomplete. What about Judaism, you say? Judaism is not a religion of the Old Testament. It is a religion which interprets and expands on the Old Testament. In writings such as the Mishnah and the Talmud, we see witness to an oral tradition that was parallel to

the Old Testament and interacted with it. Christianity, of course, has its New Testament which builds on the same. Islam has the Koran. So you have basically three ways by which the Old Testament can become a living, practical faith in today's world.

This raises the question as to which of these ways would be God's way, the most correct way to approach the Old Testament? I would like to suggest that the correct way to expand on the Old Testament would be the one that the Old Testament itself points forward to. The best way to interpret the Old Testament would be the way that the Old Testament naturally interprets itself. In this book you will see how the Old Testament material develops ideas in relationship to itself and then see how the New Testament takes up the same hermeneutic and works its way through, handling the Old Testament with the same respect. This is significant for a Christian understanding of the Bible.

The Deuteronomic history, then, examines whether Israel has kept its covenant with God, usually coming to a fairly negative conclusion. Its purpose is to call to repentance--a total commitment to God. And the result is a continuous history from creation to exile, with a parallel history to be found in I and II Chronicles.

The History of the Land: A Period of Anarchy

When Israel settles in the promised land, instead of forming a strong central government, we see them fall into a period of anarchy. Judges 17:6: *"In those days Israel had no king: everyone did as he saw fit."* The Hebrew says "everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Instead of a central government there is a sense of chaos, a sense of every man for

himself. The story in the book of Judges is actually a story of cycles of chaos or, to put it another way, a period of anarchy.

This time of anarchy was a time in which the twelve tribes experienced a number of minor “rehearsals” of the Exodus, if you will. God’s mighty act of bringing Israel out of Egypt is repeated over and over again on a smaller scale. Within the book of Judges we discover at least twelve different occasions when a portion of the Israelites became captive to somebody for a time, and God eventually sent a judge to deliver them, just as He had sent Moses to deliver all the tribes out of Egypt. The most famous of these judges were Gideon and Samson.

So during the time of the judges, you have this sense of a continuous cycle, over and over and over again. As Yogi Berra once said, “It’s *deja vu* all over again.” Who was faithful during this time? God was faithful. He was always there. He was always bringing in a judge when they needed one. The people, on the other hand, were consistently and continuously unfaithful. After several hundred years it became evident that chaos was not working. So, by the time of I Samuel, there is a groundswell among the people saying, “We need more of a centralized leadership; we need something more like the other nations, we need a king.”

The History of the Land: The Role of the Monarchy

But that is not the total answer either. It is very interesting how the book of Samuel relates to the kingship. Samuel the prophet makes several speeches about it. Let’s just look at one of the shorter ones. That is I Samuel 10: 17-25. As you read it, ask yourself the question, “Was kingship the will of God or not?”

1 Samuel 10:17-18: *"Samuel summoned the people of Israel to the LORD at Mizpah and he said to them, 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel says: "I brought Israel up out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the power of Egypt and all the kingdoms that oppressed you."'"*

What was Samuel doing here? He was recounting the history of Israel, he was rehearsing the mighty acts of God. This is, as we have seen, a continuous practice throughout the Old Testament. But after reciting the mighty acts of God, he then recites the other side of the coin:

"But you have now rejected your God, who saves you out of all your calamities and distresses. And you have said, 'No, set a king over us.' So now present yourselves before the Lord by your tribes and clans (1 Sam 10:19)." Here's an interesting thing: Israel is the product of a history in which God has done mighty works for them, but Israel is, at the same time, a rejecter of God's work for them.

According to 1 Sam 10:19, was Israelite kingship God's will or was it not? The answer is "no"--it is a rejection of that. In its portrayal of anarchy the book of Judges seems to be calling for a king. But this is not a contradiction when you look at the whole context of the speech Samuel makes on this occasion.

"When Samuel brought all the tribes of Israel near, the tribe of Benjamin was chosen. Then he brought forward the tribe of Benjamin, clan by clan, and Matri's clan was chosen. Finally Saul son of Kish was chosen. But when they look for him, he was not to be found. So they inquired further of the LORD, 'Has the man come here yet?'"

"And the LORD said, 'Yes, he has hidden himself among the baggage.'"

"They ran and brought him out, and as he stood among the people, he was a head taller than any of the others. Samuel said to the people, 'Do you see the man the LORD has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people.'

"Then the people shouted, 'Long live the king!'

"Samuel explained to the people the regulations of the kingship. He wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the LORD. Then Samuel dismissed the people, each to his own home." 1Sam 10:20-25.

What shall we make of this text? Is the concept of kingship the will of God or is it not? All other things being equal, it would be better to have God as a King than any human being. But as the book of Judges makes clear, things in this life are not always equal. So God adopts the concept of kingship, in spite of its flaws. In one sense, the way the people asked and the purpose of the people, was a rejection of God and his agent Samuel. At the same time, God adopts the idea and instructs them how to make it work. And He chooses who the leader will be.

This raises an interesting question about God. Why does He accept and even take over an institution that He believes to be negative for His people? Does He feel that it is the best thing for them in that particular situation? Or is He letting them have their way, as parents sometimes do, in the hopes that they might learn something? He let them go their own way in the time of the Judges, and that didn't work. Is this a second chance to learn the lesson that living life apart from God doesn't work? Is this a series of lessons in Salvation 101, how to get by successfully in this world (God's way)?

The problem with kingship in the light of Deuteronomy (and Deuteronomy anticipates that they will one day ask for a king—Deut 17:14-20) is that Israel now is represented before God by a king. And however that king behaves, in a sense, stands for the whole people. The people have shifted their corporate responsibility before God to a single person. This is the tragedy of kingship. In the Deuteronomic covenant, the nation's obedience or disobedience is blessed or is cursed. Now suddenly, one person can shift the whole thing.

If that one person decides to be evil, the whole nation suffers. Daniel (Dan 9:1-19) and many other godly Israelites went into exile on account of the mistakes of one king after another. Because the kings were consistently evil through much of Israel and Judah's history, the entire nation went into a downhill spiral that ended up in exile. And throughout this history, the conflict between God and Israel now becomes a conflict between prophet and king. The prophet speaks for God; the king speaks for the people, and the interaction of those two becomes the essence of the matter. Because of Israel's giving up its responsibility and turning it over to a king, the interaction between God and His people now becomes interaction of prophet and king.

You have Samuel and Saul; you have Nathan and David; you have Isaiah and Hezekiah; you have Jeremiah and Zedekiah. In northern Israel you have Elijah and Ahab; followed by Elisha and several kings (he prophesied for a long time). So, in a sense, the judgeship was split. Under the judges, both prophet and king were the same person. The prophet, so to speak, was acting as king. There was unity of action between God and the judge. But when the two roles

were split apart, too often the prophet was listening to God and the king was simply acting as a politician. Most of the time things did not go well.

God is constantly delivering His people from the various captivities they get themselves into. You see the battles between Samson and the Philistines, Saul and the Philistines, and then, later on, David and the Philistines. You have the struggles of Rehoboam and the Egyptians. The stories of Israel in conflict with Assyria and Syria. The stories of Judah in relation to Moab, Ammon, Assyria, and Babylon, etc. Over and over, throughout this history, you have God being faithful and the people being consistent in unfaithfulness. The Exile begins to loom bigger and bigger as the unfaithfulness of the people continues.