

Literary Structure and Unbelief: A Study of Deuteronomy 1:6-46

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The theological themes and the literary structure of the Book of Deuteronomy combine to communicate the message of the book: "You shall love the Lord (YHWH) your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart" (Deut. 6:5-6). According to Jesus this is the word of God *par excellence* from the Old Testament. He quotes Deut. 6:5-6 in Matt. 22:37 (cf. Matt. 22:34-40; Mk. 12:28-34; Lk. 10:25-28). He also quotes Lev. 19:18 as its corollary: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

However, Deuteronomy develops the concept and practice of neighbor love fully and more consistently than Leviticus or any other Old Testament book. It illustrates in theory and by concrete cultural scenarios the corollary of the great commandment. Love for God and love for other persons are enjoined concomitantly throughout the book.

The word love ('ah^abâh) is used sixteen times (4:37; 6:5; 7:8, 9, 13; 10:12, 15; 11:1, 13, 22, etc.). Yahweh's love for his people (eleven times) and Israel's love for Yahweh (five times) encompass the past, present and future purview of the writer. The unity of Israel and the solidarity of brotherhood are emphasized¹ throughout the material. In 3:18-20 the point is made that members of the various tribes are brothers. The phrase "all Israel" (kôl yisrâ'el) is employed twelve times and the word for brother(s) ('ah/ 'ahhîm) is found twenty-eight times (cf. 1:16; 3:18, 20; 10:9; 15:3, 7, 9, 11). The use of the term "brother" inspires obedience to commands concerning relationships within Israel; it encourages the hearer to see Israel as the family writ large.² Even the King is chosen from among "your brothers" (17:15).³ In fact, Moses teaches that all Israel's leaders or representatives (judges, kings, levites, prophets) are leaders among brethren (1:18; 17:14-20; 18:1-5, 15-18).

In Israel the concept of "caring for one's brother" influenced all of life. The question of Cain is answered positively in Deuteronomy: Yes, you are your brother's keeper. This motif regulates the suspension of debts, making loans, releasing slaves, dealing with perjury, foregoing interest, kidnapping, slave trading and the avoidance of excessive penalties (15:2, 3, 7, 9, 11, 12; 19:18-19; 23:20-21 [19-20]; 24:7; 25:3). The concern for mutual support and brotherhood among Israelites motivates the command for the Transjordanian tribes to commit themselves to the other tribes to help them receive their inheritance in Canaan (3:18-20). Never was an Israelite to harden their heart or shut their hand to

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withhold what was needed by their poor brother (15:7-8). An Israelite was to let his Hebrew slave go free with joy (15:18), and the King was to see “that his heart may not be lifted up above his brethren” (17:20). Brotherly love was possible only when Israel loved the Lord supremely, as he had loved them: “because he loved your fathers and chose their descendants after them” (4:37); “because the Lord loves you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers” (7:8). The ideal community is presented by the deuteronomic writer in this way.

But what happens to this ideal community that trusts and loves its God, to a community that knows that her God loves her, when an attitude of unbelief and rebellion arises? Deuteronomy 1:6-46 provides insight into what happened in Israel when such a situation arose. Paul reminds us that all of the stories in the Old Testament were written down so that we could learn from those lessons of faith.

The past history of Israel, her responses in thought and acts to Yahweh’s words, is narrated by Moses in Deut. 1:6-3:29.⁴ These chapters present two paradigms (models) of Israel’s responses to Yahweh in the face of his persistent covenant faithfulness. Chapter 1:6-46 is the *locus classicus* in Deuteronomy for Israel’s trajectory of failure, fueled by her incorrigible unbelief and rebellious ways. After Yahweh’s discipline of Israel (2:1, 14-15), verses 2:2-3:11 record a paradigm of Israel’s success as she conquers the Transjordanian lands. As Yahweh led, she followed and was successful. The structure and theology of Deuteronomy in the paradigm of 1:6-46 will be examined in this study.

STRUCTURE AND THEOLOGY IN 1:6-46

The introductory verses (vv. 1-5) of Deuteronomy can be set out in the form of a palistrophe⁵ to illustrate how their literary structure underlies the theological message of Deuteronomy:

- A. What-Where: Words of Moses; in the Desert (1:1)
- B. When: Fortieth year, first day, eleventh month (1:1-2)
- C. Key theme: ALL THE LORD COMMANDED MOSES (1:3b)
- B’. When: After Og and Sihon were defeated (1:4)
- A’. Where-What: East of the Jordan; this Torah (1:5)

This brief chiasmic structure focuses on the theme of the Book of Deuteronomy. Its major purpose, goal and character is to communicate all the WORDS THAT THE LORD COMMANDED MOSES. The concentric structure places this theme at the center of the outline and highlights it. The words of Moses impart the burden of the Lord, for they are the words that Yahweh commanded to Moses. In a similar manner the literary structure of 1:6-46 serves to pinpoint the theological *leitmotif* of the passage. The devastating factor that destroys Israel’s hope, her theology and corrupts her behavior is the lack of moral fortitude to trust Yahweh, i.e. unbelief.

Our passage (1:6-46) reflects a symmetry that is suggestive of chiasmic or concentric structuring, although the detailed correspondences that would indicate perfect chiasm or a perfect concentric symmetry are lacking.⁶ However, the

general feature of parallelism of thought found in Hebrew poetry and narrative is clearly discernible. Certain key concepts occur in the central section of the passage (vv. 26-28), such as rebelliousness, unbelief, murmuring. These terms indicate the central theme of the passage. Similar ideas continue to be used throughout the second half of the passage (32, 42, 45). Unbelief is the generic term employed, as well as the key theological concept. After verses 26-28, the “hope” and the positive thrust of verses 6-25 are transformed into frustration and failure. A reversal of Israel’s history occurs and thereafter her trajectory is downward.

The following arrangement of some of the parallel thought in the passage helps to illustrate a few of these issues.⁷ The major theological motif of the verses, and its significance for the life and worldview of Israel, stands at the center of the structure:

- A. go in and possess the land (vv. 6-8)
- B. triumphs and multiplication of Israel (vv. 9-12)
- C. wise leaders chosen (vv. 13-18)
- D. go up and possess the land (vv. 19-21a)
- E. do not fear the peoples (v. 21b)
- F. request for spies (vv. 22-24)
- G. good report of spies (v. 25)
- H. BUT, you were *not willing*, you *rebelled*; you did *not believe*
(vv. 26-28)
(v. 26 *welō’ ’abîtem la ’alot wattamrû ’et pî yhw̄h ’elōhêkem*)
- G’. evil report of spies (v. 28)
- F’. rejection of the spies (v. 28)
- E’. expressed fear of the peoples (v. 28)
- D’. land is withheld, and given to others (vv. 34-40)
- C’. foolish choice by the leaders (v. 41)
- B’. defeats and decrease of Israel (vv. 42-44)
- A’. *do not* go in and possess the land (vv. 42, 45, 46)

The value of seeing the literary symmetry of the passage is that one can easily locate the key issue of the passage. And, the character of scripture *as literature*, with carefully constructed patterns to communicate its theological message, is evident. A significant fact in the structure is that the specific parallel elements listed after the crucial verses in 26-28 are *reversals* of the corresponding items in the first half of the passage. The turn from hope, possibility and proffered blessing in the first section to frustration, lost opportunities and cursing in the second half because of Israel’s response *in unbelief* (vv. 26-28) is instructive. Unbelief is such a powerful factor in skewing Israel’s perception of things that both her theology and her behavior are affected. And, as goes theology, so goes behavior. The lens of unbelief through which Israel sees the world clearly focuses both her theology and her lifestyle.

As noted, the parallel elements in the passage are striking because the parallels

between the first and second parts of the passage are negative (reverse) parallels (i.e. A=-A', etc.). The trajectory of Israel's mindset and hence her behavior is away from blessing to cursing, from hope to frustration, from possession to loss of inheritance, from increase in numbers to decrease in numbers, from being given the land to having it violently withheld from them (D=-D'). The extent to which unbelief in Israel causes a grotesque perversion of her theology and relationship with God is made clear in the central verses of the passage (26-27).

UNBELIEF AND BAD THEOLOGY

Moses charges Israel by asserting "you rebelled, you murmured, you did not trust" (cf. vv. 26-27). And, bad faith produces corrupt theology. Corrupt theology produces scenarios of despair and destructive behavior. The people's grotesque representation of the character and nature of Yahweh in verses 27-28 illustrates the claim. Because of adopting a perspective of unbelief, Israel concocts the following theology about Yahweh.

Verse 27: "The Lord hates us" (b^csinaṭ yhwḥ ôṭānû). This is a charge that our writer will correct shortly. The verse continues, "He brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites so that they could destroy us." According to the people Yahweh's hatred finds its outlet in delivering his people to the Amorites to be slain.

Verse 28: The words of the people in verses 27-28 are in direct speech, a device used by biblical writers to emphasize the major issues in a passage.⁸ This verse completes a hideous transformation of Yahweh's true intentions for bringing his people out of Egypt. This time the issue is the people's charge of maliciousness against their brethren. According to the people, their brothers have "made our hearts melt" (hēmaššû eṭ - l^cḥabēnû) by the reports they have given. They have implied, and even asserted, that the peoples in the land are awesome and are to be feared. They are too mighty for Israel to conquer. But the writer will note three ways in which this charge is false.

Israel has charged Yahweh falsely and maliciously. They have not only forgotten his great words and deeds on their behalf (1:29-33); paradoxically, they have proceeded to misconstrue them. The true intent of Yahweh's actions and words are not discernible to them because they have refused to believe. Unbelief has darkened their understanding. Yahweh's intent is now ambiguous to them. They do not have ears to hear or eyes to see because of their unwillingness to "read" Yahweh's plan correctly (Deut. 28:4). They have mocked him with his own words. Even after a show of repentance (1:41), they do not perceive things correctly because they will not yet seek his will rather than their own (v. 43). They insist upon being hot-headed and stiff-necked (cf. Deut. 10:16). Only one person in Israel is singled out for approval (1:36) and most readers want to identify with him. Caleb is considered a man of faith who will receive his inheritance. His faith produced action; he was ready to take the land.

The result of Israel's failure of faith was forty years of discipline in the desert (2:1, 14-15). Only those could enter the land now who had not taken part in the distrust of and rebellion against Yahweh. As Adam and Eve's rebellion had led to

their violent expulsion from the promised land (Eden), now Israel's rebellion and lack of trust keeps them from entering the promised land (the new Eden). Humankind's "original" perversion of God's ways through unbelief and rebellion is present in Israel. And, the primeval attempt to blame one's brother, or companion, is repeated as well (1:28).

The extent of Israel's failure is revealed when verses 27-28 are analyzed and contrasted with Yahweh's stated goals and purposes for Israel, to say nothing of his character. The rest of the book of Deuteronomy in its present form is an impassioned plea to Israel to establish themselves as God's people. The writer directs and encourages them to think correctly and thereby to live acceptably before Yahweh. Only then could they be God's people and he would be their God (26:16-19).

A comparison of Israel's assertions about Yahweh and Yahweh's own claims shows that the words of the people are a complete reversal of Yahweh's true purposes and character. Chapter four sums up and comments upon the preceding three chapters. The issues raised in 1:26-28 are addressed in 4:37-38. These verses declare that Yahweh does not hate Israel (cf. 1:27); he loves them and their forefathers (4:37). As a result of his love for them he has chosen them (v. 37, wayyibhar). And, the writer drives this point home even more emphatically in Deut. 7:7-8:

"It was not because you were more in number than any people that the Lord set his *love* upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the Lord *loves* you, and is keeping the oath which he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out . . ." (RSV).

The basis of Yahweh's *choice* is *love*, not hate as a disbelieving Israel perceives it. Her perception was wrong.

Moreover, Yahweh did not bring Israel out of Egypt to give them over to the Amorites (1:27); he brought them out *to give the Amorites into the hands of Israel* (4:38), for the iniquity of the Amorites was complete (cf. Gen. 15:16). Chapter 7:17, 23, makes the point clear:

"If you say in your heart, 'These nations are greater than I; How can I dispossess them? . . .'" (v. 17).

"But the Lord your God will give them over to you, and throw them into great confusion, until they are destroyed." (v. 23).

The people in the land are not too strong for Israel (1:28), the Lord will drive them out (4:38).

Our writer instructs Israel not to lose heart because of their brethren (1:28), but to take heart (4:34-35). They should respond to the good report of their brethren. Israel's past already had shown that Yahweh was to be trusted (Exod. 1-15). But following Yahweh demands a moral choice of whether to believe in his goodness or to lose faith because of a negative or ambiguous reading of the evidence.

Our writer records two options that were placed before Israel. Verse 25 records the spies' report as, "It is a good land which the Lord our God gives us." Verse 28

includes another report by other spies: "The people are greater and taller than we . . . moreover, we have seen the sons of the Anakim there" (cf. Num. 13; 14:1-38; 14:39-45). Because of the Exodus and because of Sinai, Israel's decision to refuse to take possession of the land is evaluated by our writer as a moral-religious failure, a failure to believe Yahweh. Under these circumstances, Israel could not inherit the land.

The brotherhood of Israel was to reflect solidarity. They were to be supportive of one another, not against one another. The model of Cain and Abel comes to mind as well as Adam's accusation against Eve. Yahweh's purpose from the time of creation was for the unity of mankind to be expressed by caring for one's brother (Gen. 4:8-10). The new community of God's people, Israel, was to experience that reality. Yahweh's purpose was that they realize that they were one in him, chosen for the same purpose (3:18-30; 4:38), to inherit the land and live in it.

Deuteronomy illustrates theological concepts by projecting them into real social settings. The brothers on one side of the Jordan are, therefore, urged to aid those on the other side until they have received their inheritance (3:18-20). The pattern of the spies who encouraged Israel to take the land is to be followed (1:25), rather than the pattern of the spies who discouraged their brethren (1:28). It is clear that Israel could not know Yahweh's ways and his theology unless they would trust him. They were called to an intimate personal knowledge of God that depended upon a hermeneutics of trust and obedience.⁹ Yahweh was a God who could not be manipulated by magic and put on display. He was a God who could be known intimately and truly only when his people would make a moral commitment to him. Otherwise, even his deeds and words on their behalf would be misinterpreted; he could not be known correctly from a perspective of unbelief. His words and deeds could become a stumbling block rather than a way that would guide them to a fulfilling relationship with their God. For Israel, knowing God and interpreting his words and deeds (hermeneutics) was a community affair that called for a life of obedience. And a hermeneutics of obedience presupposes a commitment of trust, not unbelief (vv. 27-28).

The misinterpretation of Yahweh's words and deeds follows Israel's decision not to obey him. Hermeneutics, from a stance of unbelief and rebellion, cannot discern the significance or the intent of Yahweh's words and deeds. There is, according to this passage, a moral dimension to the knowledge of God; indeed its major aspect is that it is a moral religious response of trust that produces an accurate knowledge of God. And, faith is not merely intellectual assent, it is a moral act. The stance of faith helps produce a meaningful reading of God's words and deeds. It discerns a convincing coherence in disjunctive events, and sees definiteness in what is otherwise ambiguous.

Goldingay helps us grasp the significance of the experience of the ancient people of God in the past. He observes,

OT theology, then, has to hold together an involvement with the past, with the present, and with the future, and the attitude toward God the OT looks for thus embraces remembrance, faith and hope. The

narrative books major on remembrance, and imply that God's constitutive acts lie in the past; the prophetic books, von Rad suggested, invite Israel to turn from what God has done to what he is going to do; the psalms and the wisdom books express faith in (and uncertainty about) him in the present. But the narratives do not speak of the past out of antiquarian interest, but because of its relevance to the present and future of their readers, a relevance which is written into the story as they tell it; the Bible is a book that¹⁰ "though on a first level narrating the past, on a deeper level was speaking of the future and for the future."¹¹

Notes

1. J. G. McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy* (University of Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), pp. 19-20.
2. John Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 136-137.
3. Note the chiasmic or concentric arrangement of the passages (16:18-18:22) dealing with the leaders of God's people. The central topic narrows to "the King" in Israel:
 - A. Spokesmen for Yahweh's community: judges (16:18-20)
 - B. Things detestable to Yahweh (16:21-17:7)
 - C. Priests and Levites (17:8-13)
 - D. The King (17:14-20)
 - C'. Priests and Levites (18:1-8)
 - B'. Things detestable to Yahweh (18:9-13)
 - A'. Spokesmen for Yahweh's community: prophets (18:14-22)

Source for this observation is an unpublished paper by the author dealing with structure in Deut. 16:18-18:22.

4. It is well known that while M. Noth considers Deut. 1-3 (4) to be the introduction to the Deuteronomistic History, comprising Joshua-2 Kings, Childs stresses the more intimate relationship of these chapters to the preceding pentateuchal books (Gen.-Num.). Two works are especially helpful: Arnold Nicolaas Radjawane, *Israel Zwischen Wüste und Land* (Johannes Gutenberg Universität, Mainz: Offsetdruck: E. Lokay, Dec., 1972), esp. pp. 1-95; Georg Braulik, *Die Mittel Deuteronomischer Rhetorik* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978).
5. A palistrophe is also called chiasm or concentric structure. This literary device has been observed in the Hebrew Bible for centuries. Recent studies, however, are enlarging upon its significance for the literary-theological understanding of Scripture. The structure is documented in the following articles: B. W. Anderson, "From Analysis to Synthesis: The Interpretation of Genesis 1-11," *JBL* 97 (1978): 23-29; Gordon Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," *VI* 28 (1977): 336-348; J. P. Fokelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Amsterdam: van Gorcum, 1975), chap. 1; Y. T. Radday, "Chiasm in Tora," *Linguistica Biblica* 19 (1972): 12-23.
6. What amount of detailed correspondence is needed in order to reflect chiasm *per se* is debatable. The requirements have not been sufficiently delineated. Even Wenham's

identification of chiasmic structure in Gen. 6:10a-9:19 leaves a few items unaccounted for in the passage. It seems that perfect esthetic or structural symmetry should not be expected in the biblical writers (cf. Childs, *An Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, p. 217). The biblical writers were preservers of tradition. They did not have the same amount of creative freedom to form the materials, therefore, that a modern novel writer or short story writer has. They were bound to some extent by the traditions passed on to them.

7. This study works on the basis of the literary unity in these verses (6-46). It is evident that the author used sources, probably both oral and written; but has created a coherent structure to suit his purposes.

8. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, Inc., 1981), pp. 63-68, 182-183. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), pp. 64-72, 96-98, 150-151, 101-110.

9. For a discussion of the significance of "a hermeneutics of obedience," see Ben C. Ollenburger, "The Hermeneutics of Obedience," in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Willard Swartley, Elkhart, Indiana; Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1984, pp. 45-61.

10. Goldingay, *Theological Diversity*, pp. 197-198.

11. James Barr, *The Scope and Authority of the Bible*, Volume 7 of Explorations in Theology (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), pp. 60, 126-127.